

THE BHAGATS¹ OF THE GRANTH SAHIB

THERE have lived in India from time immemorial saints and thinkers who were dissatisfied with the superstitions and religious vagaries of the Hindus. They gradually evolved a belief in one God and preceded Guru Nanak as the dawn before sunrise. Abrupt indigenous alterations of religion have rarely, if ever, been presented to human experience. Some of the writings of the Guru's immediate precursors called Bhagats, or saints, are preserved in the Granth Sahib compiled by Guru Arjan. He selected for inclusion therein, with equal impartiality the writings of both Hindus and Musalmans, as they suited his purpose, and contributed to the great cause of religious reformation. We find in the sacred volume compositions of Jaidev, Namdev, Trilochan, Parmanand, Sadhna, Beni, Ramanand, Dhanna, Pipa, Sain, Kabir, Rav Das, Sur Das, verses of at least two Musalman saints, Farid and Bhikan; and one recension of the sacred volume called Banno's Granth, preserved at Mangat in the Gujrat district of the Panjab, contains a hymn composed by Mira Bai, Queen of Chitaur. It is believed that Guru Arjan did not give it a place in his collection because the lady lived and died an idolater.

The Hindu Bhagats for the most part began life as worshippers of idols, but by study and contemplation arrived at a system of monotheism which was appreciated by Guru Arjan. The Muhammadan Bhagats lived in Hindu centres, and became largely imbued with Hindu modes of thought, while they

¹ The word *Bhagat* comes from the Sanskrit *bhakti*, which means devotion, love, &c.

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at the same time retained their traditional belief in the Divine unity. There is no account given of these saints in any of the classical Sikh writings; but we have to the best of our power collected materials for the lives of most of them in the various places where they were born or where they flourished in India. Some civil officers have kindly made inquiries and furnished us with details from their districts, and political officers have also assisted in procuring information from the annals of native states.

The writings of Nabhaji, Uddava Chidghan, Mahipati, Ganesh Dattatre, Maharaja Raghuraj Sinha, Dahyabhai Ghelabhai pandit, and others in different Indian languages, on the mediaeval saints of India have also been consulted.

Nabhaji, the author of the *Bhagat Mal*, was born in the state of Gualiar. His original name is said to have been Narain Das. Everything relating to him is as wonderful as the legends he himself relates of his Vaishnav saints. He was born blind. When he was about five years of age there was a great famine in the land, and he was deserted by his parents in a forest, owing to their inability to maintain him. He was found by Agar Das and Kil, two Hindu pilgrims, who were on their way to the Ganges. He told them his history, and they adopted him. Kil sprinkled some holy water from his gourd on the child's eyes, and he received his sight. He was employed to wait on the holy men, and in this capacity heard many legends of Indian saints of all epochs. These legends he recorded at the suggestion of Agar Das in a work called *Sant Charitra*, which formed the basis of his *Bhagat Mal*, a series of metrical chronicles in the Gualiar dialect, written about A. D. 1578. He was a contemporary of Raja Man Singh of Jaipur, and consequently lived during the reign of the Emperor Akbar. It is recorded that he had an interview with Tulsi Das, the famous

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Hindu poet, who flourished in the reign of Shah Jahan. If so he must have lived to a very advanced age. Several additions and amplifications were made to Nabhaji's work by Priya Das and Pandit Lal Ji of Bindraban. It was subsequently written out in Hindu prose and translated into Urdu by different hands. Other writers in most of the great Indian dialects have written lives of the Vaishnav saints, but almost all are avowedly based on the work of Nabhaji.

Nabhaji's *Bhagat Mal* is in all versions painfully disappointing. It may be compared to the mediaeval legends of saints once current in Europe, but it has the additional defect of brevity, and, like Hindu works generally, shows a total contempt for chronology. When one great man is but an incarnation of another who lived hundreds or thousands of years before, it seems superfluous to the Hindu biographer to consider such a trifle as the date of his successive appearances upon earth. Even the pious Hindus who at different times expounded and translated Nabhaji's work, each and all pass by the dates of the Bhagats without a word of apology to the reader. We are therefore generally left to shreds of extraneous evidence for the epochs of the Bhagats whose writings are contained in the Bible of the Sikhs.

Uddava Chidghan was born in Dharur in Khandesh. Once when he was celebrating the anniversary of the birth of Rama, and taking an image of that god into his house at Bedar in the Barars, some bigoted Muhammadans stoned the procession. A fight arose between the Hindus and Muhammadans. It is said that Hanuman, the monkey-god, espoused the cause of the Hindus, and fought against the Muhammadans, as he had done thousands of years before against Rawan. By Hanuman's aid Chidghan's party was victorious, and succeeded in burning a mosque in which the Muhammadans had

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concealed themselves. The era in which Chidghan flourished has not been accurately ascertained.

Mahipati was born in A. D. 1715 at Taharabad, in the Rahruri subdivision, about thirty-five miles from Ahmadnagar in the Bombay Presidency. He wrote the lives of saints in the Marathi language. His authorities were principally Nabhaji and Uddava Chidghan. He has himself given the Shaka year 1696 (A. D. 1774) as the date of the completion of his *Bhakta Lilamrita*. He died in A. D. 1790.

Maharaja Raghuraj Sinh, son of Maharaja Vi-swanath Sinh of the Baghel dynasty, chief of the Rewa state, was born in A. D. 1823, and died in 1880. He inherited his literary talents from his father, who wrote a paraphrase of Kabir's *Bijak*, and about fifty tracts on Hindu religion, philosophy, and literature. Maharaja Raghuraj Sinh was one of the most renowned Hindi poets of his time, and he was also a most generous patron of the many Hindi and Sanskrit scholars who flocked to his court. In religion he was a strict adherent of Vaishnav tenets.

We shall attempt to give the Lives and Writings of the Bhagats in chronological order.

JAIDEV

THERE were two distinguished men called Jaidev whose lives and acts are frequently confounded in Indian chronicles and biographies. One was a metaphysician and scholar who is said to have lived at the court of Vikramaditya. It is related of him that when a boy at school he was able to learn in a day as much as his schoolfellows could in a fortnight. Hence he was called Pakshadhar Misra. It is not with him we are at present concerned.

The Jaidev whose hymns are found in the Granth Sahib is the celebrated Sanskrit poet who wrote

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the *Gitgovind*. His father was Bhoidev, a Brahman of Kanauj, and his mother Bamdevi. He was born at Kenduli, about twenty miles from Suri, in the modern district of Birbhum in Lower Bengal. He became the most famous of the five distinguished poets who lived at the court of Lakshman Sen, king of Bengal, who dates from the year 1170 of the Christian era. The five poets were called the five jewels of Lakshman Sen's court, and so proud was the monarch of them that he erected a monument to preserve their names to succeeding ages. The specialities of the five poets are thus described by Jaidev himself :—

Umapatidhara excelleth in word painting ;

Jayadeva alone knoweth purity of style ;

Sarana is praised for extempore rendering of difficult passages ;

Govardhana surpasseth in description of love ;

No one is so famed as the king of poets Dhoyi for remembering what he hath once heard.

Very little is known of Jaidev's early life. It is certain that from his youth he was a diligent student of Sanskrit literature, and developed rare poetical talents. He is described by the author of the *Bhagat Mal* as an incarnation and treasury of melody, on which, however, he, owing to his ascetic habits, long preferred to feast his own soul rather than communicate to the world the splendid gifts he possessed. He wandered in several countries, provided with only a water-pot and dressed in the patched coat of a mendicant. Even pens, ink, and paper, generally so indispensable to literary men, were luxuries which he did not allow himself. Such was his determination to love nothing but God, that he would not sleep for two nights in succession under the same tree, lest he should conceive an undue preference for it and forget his Creator.

It pleased God, with the object, it is stated, of

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saving the human race, to withdraw Jaidev from his ascetic life. For this purpose, the chronicler relates, God devised the following expedient. An Agnihotri Brahman of Jagannath, to whom a beautiful daughter named Padamavati had been born as the result of many offerings and prayers, brought her up with the object of dedicating her as a dancing girl to the local idol. Her father duly conducted her to the idol and was ordered to take her away and bestow her on the great saint Jaidev. On this she was taken to him, and he was informed of the divine decision in his favour. Jaidev reasoned with the Brahman, and told him he ought to give his daughter to some more wealthy man, who would be more suitable for her than a homeless ascetic like himself. The Brahman replied that he could not disobey God's order. Jaidev rejoined, 'God is master and omnipotent. He may have thousands and tens of thousands of wives, but one for me is the same as a hundred thousand;' that is, he had no more need or ability to maintain one than he had a hundred thousand. After further discussion, in which the Brahman failed, notwithstanding the exercise of all his powers of persuasion, he left his daughter with Jaidev. Before his departure he told her it was impious to act in opposition to the will of God. She was to remain with Jaidev, and obey him according to the instructions laid down for wives in the Hindu sacred writings.

The tender girl remained with Jaidev and attended on him like his shadow. He is said to have represented to her the futility of living with him: 'Thou art wise,' he said; 'endeavour to do something to improve thy position; I have no power to maintain and cherish thee.' She replied, 'What power hath this poor creature? Thou canst do as thou pleasest. I am a sacrifice unto thee and shall never leave thee.' On this Jaidev believed that God was forcing him into the alliance, and he recon-

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ciled himself to the situation. As the first preparation for domestic life he built a hut for his spouse, set up an idol in it, and applied himself to its worship. He then began the composition of the celebrated poem the *Gitgovind*. This is believed to have been his second composition, his first being a drama called *Rasana Raghava*. A third work attributed to him is *Chandralok*, an essay on the graces of style.

The fact appears to be that the mantling fire of Jaidev's genius sought for an outlet, that with experience of life a change came over his religious opinions, that he resolved no longer to play the hermit, but accept the wife offered him, distinguish himself, and seek for worldly fame and its pleasures. God has been introduced *ex machinâ* into the narrative to save Jaidev from the charges of inconsistency and submission to human passion.

The *Gitgovind* is well known in both hemispheres. It has been translated into English prose and paraphrased in English verse.¹ It is perhaps a solitary instance of a great popular poem composed in a dead language. In the twelfth century of the Christian era Sanskrit was, it is true, used as Latin was at the same time in Europe, but the great age had passed away when Sanskrit was a living language—the only recognized Indian vehicle of men's thoughts and aspirations. The *Gitgovind* is still not only remembered, but nightly chanted in the Karnatik countries and other parts of India, because it is ostensibly a love song and its strains are sweet and find a responsive echo in the human heart.²

During the composition of the *Gitgovind* Jaidev

¹ Into prose by Sir William Jones and into exquisite verse by the late Sir Edwin Arnold.

² Jaidev has been more fortunate than Petrarch, the mediaeval Italian poet, in composing in a dead language. Petrarch composed a Latin poem entitled 'Africa', which is now never read, while his love sonnets are the delight of many cultivated minds.

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represented Radhika the heroine as pouting because Krishan the hero had followed other loves. Krishan alters his ways, and applies himself to the task of appeasing her and apologizing for his conduct. The poet was preparing to make Krishan address his lady love. 'Adorn my head by putting on it the lotus leaves of thy feet, which are an antidote to the poison of Cupid,' when he reflected that it would be a dishonour to his god if any woman were to put her feet on his head. While thus reflecting the poet ceased to write, and went to bathe, intending subsequently to alter the sentence into more conformity with the relative positions of the hero and heroine.

What was Jaidev's surprise when on returning from his bath he found the verse completed exactly as he had subsequently intended! He asked his wife how it had occurred. She told him he had returned himself, and having written the verse gone away again. Upon this Jaidev knew that Krishan himself had written the verse, and thus hallowed the composition. The fame of the event and of the poem spread far and wide, and Jaidev obtained the high renown he had so earnestly sought.

Satvika, King of Urisa (Orissa) at the time, was also a poet and learned man. He had accidentally selected for a poem the same subject as Jaidev, and he appears to have produced a work of respectable merit, which he directed his Brahmans to copy and circulate. In reply they showed him the composition of Jaidev. They meant by this that the Raja's poem was as nothing in comparison with Jaidev's. As well compare a lamp with the sun. The Raja in his pride could not accept the Brahmans' criticism, but caused both poems to be placed in the temple of his capital, and promised to abide by the decision of the idol as to which was superior.

The idol rejected the king's *Gitgovind* and took to his heart that of Jaidev. Upon this the Raja thinking himself greatly dishonoured was overcome

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by shame and jealousy, and set out to drown himself. Krishan is said to have taken pity on him. He appeared to him and told him it would be a vain and foolish act to put an end to his life. It was very clear that his poetical merit did not equal that of Jaidev, but, to compensate him for his disappointment, Krishan ordered that one of the Raja's verses should be inserted in each of the twelve cantos of Jaidev's poem, and both compositions should thus go forth to the world and down to distant ages. This was accordingly done.

The estimation in which the *Gitgovind* was held may be gathered from the following anecdote. A gardener's daughter while one day gathering egg-plants was singing with great zest the following verse from the fifth canto of the poem :—

The zephyr gently bloweth on the banks of the Yamuna
while Krishan tarrieth in the grove.

On this, it is said, the idol of Jagannath followed her wherever she went, with the object of feasting his heart on the dulcet strains. The idol wore only a thin jacket which was torn by the brambles. When the king went to worship and saw the condition of the idol's dress, he in astonishment asked the priests the cause. When the Raja learned what had occurred, he was perfectly satisfied of the superiority of the product of Jaidev's genius, and issued a proclamation that the *Gitgovind* should only be read in a clean and purified place, as Jagannath, the lord of the world, himself was in the habit of going to listen to it.

Not only Hindus, but men of all creeds were enchanted with the composition. It is related that a Mughal, on hearing of the divine honours paid to the work, used to peruse it with the greatest delight. One day while riding he was singing its verses, when he fell into an ecstasy of pleasure, and thought that, though a Moslem, he felt communion with Krishan.

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Oriental chroniclers are enthusiastic in their praises of Jaidev. All other poets are compared to petty kings while he is the great chakrawarti or poetical monarch of the world. As the moon cannot be concealed by the stars, as the eagle cannot be surpassed by any bird in flight, as Indar attracts notice in the midst of the gods, so is Jaidev's fame conspicuous in the world. It may be added that Jaidev himself does not appear to have been insensible of his own merits. At the conclusion of the *Gitgovind* he writes, 'Whatever is delightful in the modes of music, whatever is exquisite in the sweet art of love let the happy and wise learn from the song of Jaidev.'¹

Notwithstanding the lusciousness and sensuous beauty of several parts of the *Gitgovind*, there can be no doubt that Jaidev intended the poem as an elaborate religious allegory. This, too, is insisted on by the author of the *Bhagat Mal*, who states that the love scenes and rhetorical graces of the poet are not to be understood in the sense that persons of evil minds and dispositions attach to them. Radhika the heroine is heavenly wisdom. The milkmaids who divert Krishan from his allegiance to her, are the senses of smell, sight, touch, taste, and hearing. Krishan represented as pursuing them is the human soul, which attaches itself to earthly pleasures. The return of Krishan to his first love is the return of the repentant sinner to God, which gives joy in heaven.

After the completion of the poem Jaidev went to travel and visited Bindraban and Jaipur. To the latter place its king had given him a pressing invitation. While on those travels it is related that he met a party of thags. He knew what they were from their ready offer to accompany him on his journey. Without more ado he pulled out his purse and gave

¹ The reader will remember the exultations of Horace, Ovid, Moore, Poushkin, and others, on the completion of their immortal poems.