

NOTE.

In this book are presented the lives of four notable saints that have sprung from what are called the "untouchable" classes of India. These saints appeared in different parts of the country: Nanda in South India, Ravi Das in Oudh, Chokamela in Maharashtra, and Hari Das Thakur in Bengal. The piety, the devotion and the meekness of these saints have won for them a place in the hearts of the people and their names are household words in the respective provinces. The classes, however, from which these saints came have long been shut out from the religious and social life of the country. But nothing can bring home to us the injustice of the same more vividly than the lives and character of these great souls. It is hoped, therefore, that these lives will be welcomed not only by lovers of religion but also by those who are interested in the cause of these—"untouchables."



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INTRODUCTION.

In all the annals of our religion, there are really few more interesting personages than those saints and holy men that have sprung from the "untouchable" classes. Long have these classes been kept in bondage and in darkness. They have long been denied the privileges of learning and worship. They have been shut out from love and social intercourse. They have been despised, ill-treated and kept low. But still, amidst their misery and degradation, some of them have struggled on towards Light and won a place for themselves in the annals of our country. The memory of these untouchable saints is still held in reverence and in affection all over India. They are few in number but their national importance is great.

The lives of these saints as they have come down to us, are embellished with a few legends and miracles. These legendary

anecdotes may sound a little strange in modern ears. We are indeed far removed from that credulous and child-like atmosphere of thought in which these legends took their rise. But beneath these legends, we can easily discern the plain human story of exceeding piety and devotion and unmerited persecution. In the lives of the two saints, Nanda and Chokamela, left us by their poet-biographers, the story of their struggle and piety is delineated with such simplicity and pathos that we can hardly doubt its truth. A few miracles adorn the tale of Ravi Das; but the main story is characteristic. The credulous piety of biographers has little interfered with the story of the Bengali saint. There, in the midst of the great contemporary saints whose stories tradition has richly adorned with miracle and legend, he stands a humble devotee with his eyes lifted up to God. We may add that the stories of these saints are attested by other evidences, historical and literary.

The rise of these saints in the Middle Ages appears to us to be fraught with a great

significance. Towards the close of the Hindu Period, strange and warlike races had rudely entered into India and settled in the midst of the ancient and well-ordered society of the Aryans. The result was a clash and confusion of races. But early in the Middle Ages the re-arrangement had begun. The manifold elements reconstituted themselves on the basis of provincial nationalities. The vernaculars, the language of the new peoples, began to grow. Over and above the old divisions of caste and race, the newer principle of nationality asserted itself. But these new nationalities consisted not only of the old civilised races and the war-like tribes but also of the aborigines and the primitive tribes that had been conquered in the distant past and set in the lowest scale of society. The right of the latter to the new life, to participate in the religion and worship of the new peoples, was not better demonstrated than by the lives of these saints.

NANDA



THE AGE OF TEMPLES

ONE of the greatest periods in the history of South India was certainly the Middle Ages. Then it was that the cultured Cholas, and the pious Pandyas and later the devout Naicks held prosperous sway over the several parts of the land. Enjoying a large revenue, ruling over a pious and imaginative people, these noble kings were filled with a devout ambition to rear huge temples of art and grandeur. The great Chola, after he had subdued the kingdoms of the north, set himself to the task of building the great temple at Tanjore. Through twenty years he watched the progress of the temple. In the huge majestic Nandi, which stands in front of the shrine, we seem to see the great Chola monarch himself kneeling for ever before the God whom he adored. The pious

worshipper-king of Madura, caring not for expense or sacrifice, gathered all the skilled sculptors and artists of the land and reared those mighty edifices which adorn the illustrious city of the Pandyas. It was really an age of temples. Kings freely gave their wealth and peasants their labour, to rear those mighty edifices to the gods whom they adored. The large shrine, with its rising *sikhara*, surrounded by its double or treble rows of towers, attracted and filled the heart of the people. It was the joy of saint and layman, of peasant and war-like chief, alike.

From this age comes to us the story of a great and ardent temple-worshipper who, though born in the lowest of castes, has yet impressed himself on the heart of South India by his immense devotion and piety. The story is still sung in the villages of South India by every wandering beggar. The piety and devotion of Nanda, his child-like simplicity and love, and the great faith with which he bore his trials are a source of solace and inspiration to the Tamil peasantry. Whether

tilling the fields in his native land or working in the farm in far-off Natal or Transvaal, the Tamil labourer is cheered and sustained by the story of the trials and misfortune and the piety of this medieval low-caste saint. We give below the story as told by a modern poet.

Nanda was born in the village of Adanur, in the Tanjore District, a few miles south of the river Coleroon. He was born in the pariah caste which, if ever caste it is, is the lowest of the low. The duty of these pariahs was to till the land, to drag the bodies of dead cattle away from the vicinity of the village, and to look after the burning corpses. Apart from the wages they got as labourers, they made a little profit out of the hide of dead cattle. The dwelling of these men, as is usually the case, was in the *cheri*, far away from the village. It consists of a few straggling, thatched houses built on low and swampy ground in the midst of wet fields. Nanda's *cheri* therefore presented the meanest appearance. Small and stag-

nant pools lay in and around the cheri wherein dirty fish and fowl squatted. Dogs kept up a continuous bark. Vultures flew about for bits of flesh or fish. Everywhere, before and behind the houses, lay pieces of skin and hide, rotten or rotting.

PIOUS-NANDA

Though Nanda was born amidst such surroundings, his eye of faith early opened. He would gather his play-mates round him in the muddy sward, and with them sing, dance and pray. With a loud and devout voice, he would ask them all to repeat the name of Siva. His one joy was to visit the sacred temples in the proximity and there, laying his little but devout offerings, worship and return. What could he, a poor pariah, offer? There were those little products of his cheri, cattle and *gorochan*. Nanda would take them to the temple and, laying them at the outer gate, say: "Here is *gorochan* for *abishak* and hide for the temple's drum." Returning from his pilgrimage, he would sow and reap with joy. He would tell his mates and castemen of the

joy of temples, of the happiness beyond words that waited the worshipper. He would clap his hands and cry: "O come, let us go, dance and pray, and drag the car." Or when in a higher mood, he would cry: "We pursue fleeting pleasures. The feet of the Lord we have forgotten."

NANDA AND HIS CASTEMEN

The piety and ecstatic devotion of Nanda only roused the stupidity and the fears of his castemen. They were filled with fear for their village gods. Tenants of a Brahmin master, they were seized with alarm for the safety of the *cheri*. They set their old men to talk Nanda out of his ways. But he listened not. Finding him obdurate, they began to scorn him, to chide and rebuke him. The old and the thoughtless called him the corrupter of the *cheri*. Nanda was only moved to pity. At last his preaching won a few converts, eleven in number all told.

PILGRIMAGE TO TIRUPPUNGUR.

With them he started on pilgrimage to the Siva's shrine at Tiruppungur. Long and

joyous was the journey. There was loud clapping of hands and shouting of Siva's name all the way. At last they reached the village and, standing there at the eastern end, saw the gleaming tower and the shrine. Nanda and his followers prostrated themselves on the ground with joy and, then rising, they folded their hands on their breasts and prayed. Nanda however wept. The huge *nandi* in the front of the temple obstructed the sight of the distant image. "O God, though come to Thy shrine, shall I go without seeing Thee? Methinks all my sins have taken shape as *nandi* and stand between Thee and me." With flowing tears he prayed for the holy sight. Tradition loves to assert that God, seeing the saint's devotion, bade the *nandi* move a little. And to this day, it is said, the *nandi* stands a little away from the front of the shrine. Nanda was rejoiced beyond measure and with tears of joy spent the livelong day in hymn and prayer. Then giving in his little offerings of cattle's hide and *gorochan* he returned.

On the way his eyes fell on a small pond in front of the temple. His pious mind at once conceived of converting it into a large and beautiful tank wherein worshippers may bathe and birds and beasts may slake their thirst. Calling to his followers, he took up the spade and set out to dig. God, so runs the story, however, finding the task was too hard for his *bhaktas*, sent his own heavenly servants by whom the work was finished. Nanda, overjoyed, gave away the little grain he had brought to the divine diggers and, once more offering his prayers at the gate of the temple, returned home with his followers.

CHIDAMBAR.

Days rolled on but Nanda's heart rested not in his *cheri*. Beyond the Coleroon, on the northern bank, lay Chidambar where Siva's *avatar*, Nataraja, dwells, made glorious by the songs of poets and *bhaktas*. Built ages ago by a pious Pallava king, the shrine had soon attracted to itself the piety and the worship of the Dravidian people. Crowds of pilgrims poured in every year to worship at the shrine

To Nanda, however, it was the very Heaven of Bliss. There Siva dances the Eternal Dance for ever, scattering happiness and joy to all worshippers. Nanda yearned to go, to see, to fall flat on the ground and pray. He went round the village and cried:

“Come, let us leave the *cheri*, go to Chidambar.

“Let us leave misery, seek bliss.

“Let us leave darkness, seek faith.”

A visit to Chidambar now became the sole dream of his heart. While ploughing, he would suddenly throw the plough away and cry: “O Siva, O Lord of the Happy Dance, O Lord of Chidambar.” Or while binding the sheaves with his comrades, he would suddenly burst into tears, no one knew why. Calling to all he would say: “Life runs and waits not. Let us go and fall at the feet of the Lord of Chidambar.” Nanda’s legs tarried not in the farm. The plough lay quiet. He danced and sang, all unconscious of himself. However there stood the Brahmin overlord between him and Chidambar.

NANDA AND THE BRAHMIN MASTER

Filled heart and soul with Chidambar, Nanda went to his master to crave his permission. Prostrating before him at a distance, he prayed thus :

“O Lord, long have I served thee, I would fain crave your permission to go to Chidambar.

“ Learning have I not, nor have I performed any sacrifice or rites. My years have rolled on swiftly and I have been a worlding to the core. Let me go to Chidambar and offer my humble tribute of worship to the God of all the worlds.

“ Grant but this my heart’s wish. Return I will and ever do thy bidding and guard thy lands.”

The Brahmin in terms of swift insult replied :

“ Pariah, what is there for you of salvation or grace? Go, till thy lands. Leave off this foolish madness. If you stay or talk further, thy wages will be taken.”

Nanda’s heart was shaken and with tearful

eyes he made his way back to his *cheri*. There, only scorn and contempt waited him. His fellows laughed at him for his ecstasies and mad chanting of God's name. A few days passed but Nanda could not bear the pangs of his devout heart. He once more approached the Brahmin and implored him. The Brahmin's wrath blazed forth—

“For you, O pariah, to think of Chidambar ?

“Desirest thou to see That which devout Yogis contemplate day and night ? Go thou, wretch, to thy *cheri*, till thy land and worship your stone and devil.

“Meet it is that the pure-born and the devout alone should worship and meditate on God. But what has thou, unclean wretch, to do with the Holy Sight ?

Thus insulted, Nanda once more crept back to his village, weeping within himself. He cast his eyes to the North, to the Heavens, but there was no hope. The Brahmin stood hard and implacable. He came and passed his days in silence and in tears.

The year rolled on and the December

festival came round. Nanda's heart swelled to think of the bright festival at Chidambar, of the pious crowd, of the holy car, of the song and the shout. Though shamed, driven and insulted, he could not restrain himself and made up his mind to see his master once more. He repaired to him and falling at his feet said :

“ O Lord, the holy festival is coming. Without wounding my heart, tell me but once to go and return. Before this life closes, I *should* go and see Him.”

The Brahmin's wrath knew no bounds :

“ You, eater of pig and goat, what is there of holy festival to you ? Do wolves have worship or foxes celebrate marriage rites ? Go, talk not, beware.”

Nanda pleaded his long service but in vain :

“ Before my bones had hardened and my limbs learnt motion, I began to run about for you.

“ O refuse me not my heart's wish. Make me not a sinful prey to Death. Send me to Chidambar, O Lord, with thy, a Brahmin's blessing.”

Nanda was however only rebuked, insulted, beaten and sent back with the order—"Forty *velis* lie idle and untilled. Go and till them." The poor saint's misery was now full to the brim, and it found vent in noble words:

"Alas! that I should be born the slave of this Brahmin; crimes many should I have committed to be born thus.

"When with tearful eyes and distressed heart I ask, he calls me a hypocrite.

"He has beaten me to death. My limbs bleed; move them I cannot.

"Will not this Brahmin's heart melt for me? Ah! my life trembles at the core.

"If I but see the temple-tower, the sins of lives will be washed away. But to the sinful is not vouchsafed the sight.

"Hast thou, Merciful God of Chidambar, really turned to stone in this, Thy poor pariah's, behalf?

"O God, denied Thy worship, shall I still be bound to the wheel of birth and misery?

"O God, my father and mother Thou art.

Thou art the soul of my soul. O, let me but see Thee."

None can read the story of this struggle without a tremor. There is, indeed, no tragedy more heart-melting, more harrowing than this of the outcaste saint. Day after day he repairs to the Brahmin master, falls at his feet and with tears entreats him to grant him leave to go but once to Chidambar and return. But in reply he is only jeered, insulted, beaten. The saint pleads his long service. He pleads his devotion. But the Brahmin feels not. The misery of the saint becomes uncontrollable and he cries: "Art Thou, God of the Helpless, really turned to stone in thy poor pariah's behalf." History of religion furnishes few parallels to this. Sankara with a trumpet voice proclaiming a forgotten faith, Ramanuja preaching, amidst tears, of love and devout worship—all fade by the side of the struggles of this pious, melting soul.

Nanda came back to the *cheri*, overcome with sorrow. He wept, sang and prayed. The order of his master came to his mind, but

it stirred him not. The plough and the field disgusted him. Sore with grief, he began to torture himself. He eschewed food and drink. He wept, prayed and sang without intermission. His face and limbs grew pale.

THE VISION.

But his deliverance came at last. One day when, after long prayer and meditation, he laid himself to rest, the God of Chidambar appeared in a vision and said: "Go to thy master and tell him that all the forty *velis* lie ready for harvest. He will grant thy wish and thou wilt come to My temple." Nanda suddenly woke and ran to the farm; and there with joyous bewildered eyes he saw the fields, which only the previous day lay dry and unploughed, one miraculous green wave. Beside himself with joy, from there he ran to his master and falling at his feet, said: "Come, O lord and see thy lands. They have all been tilled and sown and now lie ready for harvest. Send me to Chidambar with thy blessing." The Brahmin saw and was deeply surprised but soon guessed that

it should be the work of God ; and falling at the feet of Nanda implored his pardon : “ Long did I scorn and hate thee. Long I impeded thee ; I knew thee not. Help me O Nanda and save me from punishment.” Nanda was however grieved at the Brahmin’s words of repentance and supplication and implored him, saying : “ Cease thy words. Thou art my master.” But the Brahmin ceased not and said : “ Cattle, wealth and land make not a man great. He alone is great on whom God’s grace dwells. What availeth learning or birth ?”

PILGRIMAGE TO CHIDAMBAR

Nanda at last started on pilgrimage to Chidambar. With joyous steps, he walked to the bank of the Coleroon and there got into the ferry-boat. The wide-flowing river was crossed and Nanda rejoiced as though “ he had crossed the river of birth and misery.” He alighted on the northern bank and his heart was filled with rapture at the sight that spread before him. The sight was indeed beautiful. On both sides of him rose large

mango trees whose new sprouts gave the air the scent of spring. Small crystal pools lay among the trees and shone with newly blossomed lotuses. The cuckoo warbled greetingly. Far beyond the thickly crowded trees, the temple-tower gleamed and smiled in the morning sun. Nanda's heart was overcome with joy. He cried: "This the joyous land—the sacred shrine—which beckons from afar the distressed, doubting soul and gives it bliss." Afar he heard the chime of temple-bells ringing in the distance. It threw Nanda into ecstasies.

With quick steps he walked to the southern gate and, there prostrating before the shrine, danced and sang. He went round the shrine, came to the eastern gate and fell flat on the ground and prayed. He rose up and, again, with song and prayer he went round and round the sacred shrine. He chose his resting place on the banks of a tank lying near the southern gate. There he would sit and meditate long; and, then, start to his feet and go round the temple again. Many days

he thus passed in prayer and devout *pradakshina* round the loved temple.

NANDA, A STRANGER AT THE GATE.

One day, impelled by curiosity, he ascended the rampart walls and saw. A noble sight met his eyes. He saw crowds of white-clad Brahmins moving to and fro in the sacred streets, he saw their stately houses and the noble rising *sikhara* of the shrine. A feeling of indescribable bliss thrilled through his veins. But suddenly his thoughts changed: "Alas, I cannot enter the sacred temple nor go into the shrine and pray." The thought was too great for the devout Nanda and he wept— "Good acts many I have not done. I walk the earth a despised pariah. How shall I stand before Thee and sing and pray? O God, Thou art the Treasure-House of Mercy. Take me in. I have given up the world. All ties I have broken. I am at Thy gate. Take me in. Let me sing and pray and cleanse myself in Thy Holy Presence."

His thoughts fled back to the dream in which the God had appeared, and, filling the

untilled fields with harvest, had directed him to His temple :

“ I am come, O God : Take me into Thy temple.

“ Thou appearedst in my dream, O Lord, sowed the fields and bade me come to Thee. I am come, O Lord ; take me in.

“ With sure faith and devout heart I call on Thee. My abode is in the wood beyond Thy shrine. I am a stranger at Thy gate. O come and take me into Thy temple.”

Long he cried thinking on his stain of birth which made him a stranger at the gate of his Lord. The grievous bar broke his heart :

“ O God, better it is to be a beast or stone than a pariah.

“ When I go out into the streets, people cry, ‘ O wretch, keep away.’ It breaks my heart.

“ I cannot stand in the midst of Thy temple and, with rapturous heart, sing hymns and pray. O God, better to be a beast or stone than a pariah.”

After months of trial and sorrow, the Brahmin's ‘ Yea ’ did come. But now though close

to his loved shrine, he could not enter. The poor saint's heart was indeed deeply shaken. The trial was too heavy. But though he was torn in heart, he failed not in his daily devotions. He went on his daily rounds round the temple with song and prayer. He unswervingly adored his God:

"Thou art One and Omnipotent. Other than Thee none have I worshipped even in thought. Many are my sins. Forgive them all and save me." The days rolled on and Nanda resigned himself to fasting and prayer.

THE MANDATE TO THE BRAHMINS

One day to his joyous surprise, God himself appeared in his dreams and the words fell from the divine lips: "O Nanda, the Brahmins of My shrine will come and purify thee. Thou wilt enter My temple," Nanda woke but could not believe himself: "Is this truth or fantasy; Can I, the despised of the world, enter Thy temple and pray?" Nanda stood, half doubting, half joyous on the side of the pool. By this time God had appeared in dream to all the three thousand Brahmins of Chidambar

and bidden them to go to Nanda, standing at the southern gate, purify him and admit him into His temple. The Brahmins all suddenly awoke and ran into the streets. Each stared at the other. But true all had dreamt. The cry arose: "Our God's will be done. Let us go, purify the saint and admit him into the temple." So saying they all marched to the southern tower. And passing through the tower they saw Nanda, standing by the side of the pool with bare form and devout mien. Nanda too saw them from the distance. He was joyed, yet humbled—"O Brahmins, approach me not. I am a pariah who eats pig and goat, who drags dead cattle and carries their bones and hide, who looks after the burning corpses."—But the Brahmins replied: "What! though thou art low in birth, thou art high in God's grace. Come, purify thyself in the sacred fire and enter the temple."

THE PURIFICATION CEREMONY.

There itself near the southern tower, below the ramparts, the Brahmins lit the sacred fire.

Nanda went through the ordeal and came out, they say, a Brahmin clad in sacred thread and robe. With the Brahmins, he then went through the tower, passed along the streets, up the steps, into the temple. And thereafter, sayeth the medieval chronicle, none saw him. What this cryptic sentence means, perhaps we shall never know. But sure it is that long and joyously should Nanda have prayed and danced that day and that thereafter he lived in blessed joy and peace. Far from the *cheri*, far from the scorn and contempt of the world, he was now at the feet of the Lord himself, whom he adored night and day.

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II RAVI DAS

THE REFORMATION IN HINDUSTHAN

MEDIAEVAL Hindusthan witnessed one of the greatest religious movements India has ever known. The times were indeed fit enough for a great change. Kings sat on the throne who were strong to oppress, but not to protect, the people. Anarchy and tyranny cast dark shadows on man's existence. But greater than this was the darkness that had settled on men's souls. Formality and superstition reigned supreme. Faith had grown dim and uncertain. As with one mighty effort India bestirred herself, rallied her strength, and nobly attempted to conquer the realms of faith and freedom.

THE REFORMERS.

This mighty movement of reform and worship was inaugurated in Hindusthan by

Ramanand and, latter, carried to its fullest by his renowned disciple, Kabir Das. Ramanand, a keen-minded, religious man, early discerned the injustice and the formality that characterised the social and religious institutions of his day. Common tradition gives a story which, if true, shows that the sect he founded originated in a spirit of protest. Ramanand belonged to one of the ordinary orders of monks. He went on pilgrimage to the several parts of India. On his return to the *mutt*, his brethren objected to him saying that in the course of his pilgrimage he might have broken the rules of caste and orthodoxy. Ramanand was therefore condemned to live apart from the other monks. He was highly incensed at this order, retired from the society itself, and started a new sect of his own. The movement which was thus started by Ramanand was taken up and spread far and wide by the great and intrepid reformer, Kabir Das. He denounced all images and with a trumpet-like voice called on all, Hindus and Moslems alike, to worship the "One, True,

and Living God." The movement spread North, East, and West. Nanak sowed the seeds of a new religion which helped to unite the peasants of the Punjab into a new and vigorous people. Chaitanya in the east taught of a merciful God and the path of devotion and roused Bengal from its slumber. In Central India itself, the reforms of Kabir and Ramanand inaugurated an era of saints and poets who by their lives and by their songs attested the nobility and value of the new movement. The movement, however, accomplished its supreme achievement when in the beginning of the fifteenth century, it gave birth to a Chamar saint whose memory is still cherished by the masses of Hindusthan.

RAVI DAS.

The story, as it is found in tradition and popular poetry, is embellished with many legends and miracles. But one may infer that the saint should have enjoyed great celebrity in his time; for some of his works are included in the *Adi Granth* and his hymns are in use in Benares. It is also said that Ravi Das

founded a sect confined to his own caste, the Chamars. In the *Bhaktha Mala* Ravi Das makes a very important figure. We give below the story as we find it in the authorities.

HIS BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE

Ravi Das was born in the lowest of Hindu castes, one of the mixed tribes of India, the *Chamars* or workers in hide and leather. Born to poor parents, he was trained by them to the caste-trade. Ravi Das was from his boyhood of a very devout disposition. While tanning the hide, he would repeat Vishnu's name and pray. The little profits of his trade he divided among the devout.

MISFORTUNE AND POVERTY

But suddenly a season of scarcity intervened and the poor Chamar was reduced to great distress. When Vishnu in the guise of an ordinary Vaishnava brought him a philosopher's stone and made a present of it to him, Ravi Das heeded it not and sang— (It has since been versified by Sur Das thus) :—

“ A great treasure is the name of Hari to

me. It multiplieth day by day, nor doth spending diminish it.

“ It abideth securely in the mansion and no thief can steal it.

“ The Lord is the wealth of Sur Das ; what need hath he of the philosopher’s stone ? ”

So saying he threw away the miraculous stone ; but still the kind-hearted Vishnu, lover of *bhaktas*, pressed him with gifts of gold till at last the devout and humble Chamar was filled with fear and spiritual alarm. He was at last directed by a voice from above to apply the wealth to the building of a temple. He did so, made himself the priest thereof and acquired great fame.

PERSECUTION AND TRIUMPH.

This, however, made him the object of persecution. The Brahmins of the place approached the king and, with uplifted arms, they cried :

“ Where sacred things are profanely administered, there three calamities will fall, death, famine, and fear.

“ A Chamar, O King, ministers to Vishnu and distributes *prasad* to the people. Banish

him, O King, to preserve the honour and religion of thy people."

The king accordingly sent for the daring Chamar and asked him to give away the sacred image and temple to the Brahmins. Ravi Das humbly submitted. But by a miracle his worthiness to minister to his God was proved and he was allowed to go in peace. Another victory is recorded of him. The incident is somewhat curious but throws great light on another side of the movement that was now spreading in the land. Among his disciples, Ravi Das numbered Jhali, Rani of Chitor. This, her discipleship to a Chamar, excited a great commotion among the Brahmins of her state. But they were cowed and surprised when, invited to a public feast, they sat down to meal and, between every pair of them, there appeared a Chamar—Ravi Das himself.

Such are the legends which tradition has left us. But as H. H. Wilson says: "Whatever we may think of their (legends') veracity, their subject-matter and tenor, representing an

individual of the most abject class—an absolute out-caste in Hindu estimation—as a teacher and saint, is not without interest and instruction.”

III

CHOKAMELA

THE great mediæval reformation in Hindusthan had its counterpart in Maharashtra also where it took a most vigorous and magnificent shape. The movement was begun by Dnyandev who, outcasted at Alandi, boldly proclaimed at Pandharpur that faith was better than sacrifice and rite and attacked the supremacy of the Brahmins by translating the **Bhagavad-Gita** into Marathi. The movement gathered force and produced saints and poets in ever growing number. The movement was fraught with great importance to Maharashtra. It brought about the social and religious emancipation of the Maratha people. The saints of this movement were many—Brahmins, Sudras tailors, peasants, and potters. But the most remarkable personage of them all was a Mahar by name Chokamela.

PANDHARPUR

The centre of this movement was a small town on the banks of the Bhima river. Probably an ancient shrine, it did not become famous till the beginning of the 13th century. But during the succeeding centuries it exercised the profoundest influence on the piety and devotion of Maharashtra. To see and worship the beautiful image of Vithoba, standing arms akimbo on its brick-pedestal in the shrine of Pandharpur, became the dream and joy of every Maratha, saint or layman. Many and wonderful are the stories that have come down to us of the devotion and piety which the God of Pandharpur evoked in the hearts of the people. A most thrilling story is of that lame saint who crept all the way from Pitan to Pandharpur in order to have a sight of the loved image. The temple itself is not perhaps architecturally great or imposing; but surely every stone of that sacred edifice is fraught with the devotion and piety of thousands upon thousands of Maratha saints and bhakthas.

CHOKAMELA.

One of the earliest and noblest of Vithoba's worshippers was this Mahar, Chokamela. His parents were Sudama and Muktabai who lived at Anagod near Pandharpur. Although they owned more than half the village *vatan* lands, they were childless and unhappy. In order to obtain offspring, Sudama made many pilgrimages to Pandharpur. One day in his absence it fell to Muktabai to convey two hundred mangoes from the Mahar lands to the Mussalman governor of Bedar to be divided by him. As she walked, a starving Brahmin met her and asked her for some mangoes. Muktabai finding him hungry gave him five mangoes. The Brahmin ate them all and blessed her : " You gave me five mangoes. You shall, therefore, have five children. Call the eldest ' Choka ' because I have sucked (*choknen*) the mangoes." With these words he vanished.

BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE

In due course a son was born to Muktabai and Sudama and received the name of Choka

or Chokamela. Trained by pious parents, he grew up to be a saintly boy. And it seems his saintliness brought him a rich reward. As a Mahar it was his duty to drag the bodies of dead cattle from the vicinity of the village. One day he happened to be the only Mahar present at Anagod, and he was ordered to drag away the body of a large cow that had just died. The task was too great for the half-grown lad. But Vitoba came to his help and with the divine assistance the task was easily performed. When the work was finished, a high-born maiden, who had been permitted to see the God, fell at Chokamela's feet and implored him to accept her as his bride. Soon Chokamela abandoned his home at Anagod and took up his residence at Pandharpur in order to be nearer to the God of his worship. As a Mahar, he could not enter the temple. But he prayed continuously to Vithoba from the outer gate. Denied the privilege of entering the temple, he took on the name of Chokamela, a bhaktha ;



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