

Note on the religion of Hemp

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To the Hindu the hemp plant is holy. A guardian lives in the bhang leaf. As the wife of Vishnu, the preserver, lives in the hysteria-curing tulsi, or Holy Basil, and as Shiva dwells in the dysentery-scaring bel, *Ægle marmelos*, so the properties of the bhang plant, its power to suppress the appetites, its virtue as a febrifuge, and its thought-bracing qualities show that the bhang leaf is the home of the great Yogi or brooding ascetic Mahadev.

So holy a plant should have special rearing. Shiva explains to his wife, Parvati, how, in sowing hemp seed, you should keep repeating the spell 'Bhangi,' 'Bhangi,' apparently that the sound of that guardian name may scare the evil tare-sowing influences. Again, when the seedlings are planted the same holy name must be repeated, and also at the watering which, for the space of a year, the young plants must daily receive. When the flowers appear the flowers and leaves should be stripped from the plant and kept for a day in warm water. Next day, with one hundred repetitions of the holy name Bhangi, the leaves and flowers should be washed in a river and dried in an open shed. When they are dry some of the leaves should be burnt with due repeating of the holy name as a jap or muttered charm. Then, bearing in mind Vagdevata, or the goddess of speech, and offering a prayer, the dried leaves should be laid in a pure and sanctified place. Bhang so prepared, especially if prayers are said over it, will gratify the wishes and desires of its owner. Taken in the early morning such bhang cleanses the user from sin, frees him from the punishment of crores [sic, scores] of sins, and entitles him to reap the fruits of a thousand horse-sacrifices. Such sanctified bhang taken at day break or noon destroys disease. Before the religious user of bhang stand the Ashtadevata or Eight Guardians with clasped hands ready to obey him and perform his orders. The wish of him who with pure mind pours bhang with due reverence over the Ling of Mahadev will be fulfilled.

Such holiness and such evil-scaring powers must give bhang a high place among lucky objects. That a day may be fortunate the careful man should on waking look into liquid bhang. So any nightmares or evil spirits that may have entered into him during the ghost-haunted hours of night will flee from him at the sight of the bhang and free him from their blinding influences during the day. So too when a journey has to be begun or a fresh duty or business undertaken it is well to look at bhang. To meet some one carrying bhang is a sure omen of success. To see in a dream the leaves, plant, or water of bhang is lucky; it brings the goddess of wealth into the dreamer's power. To see his parents worship the bhang-plant and pour bhang over Shiva's Ling will cure the dreamer of fever. A longing for bhang foretells happiness: to see bhang drunk increases riches. No good thing can come to the man who treads under foot the holy bhang leaf.

So evil-scaring and therefore luck-bringing a plant must play an important part in the rites required to clear away evil influences. During the great spirit time of marriage in Bombay among almost all the higher classes of Gujarat Hindus, of the Jam as well as of the Brahmanic sects, the supplies sent by the family of the bride to the bridegroom's party during their seven days' sojourn includes a supply of bhang. The name of the father who neglects to send bhang is held in contempt. Again, after the wedding, when the bridegroom and his friends are entertained at the house of the bride,

richly-spiced bhang is drunk. by the guests. The Gujarat Musalman bride before and after marriage drinks a preparation of bhang. Among the Pardeshi or North Indian Hindus of Bombay bhang is given not only at weddings, but the Pardeshi who fails to give his visitor bhang is despised by his caste as mean and miserly. Another great spirit time during which bhang plays an important part is the time of war. Before the outbreak of a war and during its progress the Ling of Mahadev should be bathed with bhang. Its power of driving panic influences from near the god has gained for bhang the name of Vijaya, the unbeaten. So a drink of bhang drives from the fighting Hindu the haunting spirits of fear and weariness, so the beleaguered Rajput, when nothing is left but to die, after loosing his hair that the bhang spirit may have free entrance, drinks the sacramental bhang and rushing on the enemy completes his juhár or self-sacrifice. It is this quality of panic-scaring that makes bhang, the Vijaya or Victorious, specially dear to Mahadev in his character of Tripur, the slayer of the demon Tripurasur. As Shiva is fond of bel leaves, as Vishnu is fond of tulsi leaves, so is Tripuresvar fond of bhang leaves. He who wishes to obtain his desires must constantly offer bhang to Tripuresvar.

Bhang the cooler is a febrifuge. Bhang acts on the fever not directly or physically as an ordinary medicine, but indirectly or spiritually by soothing the angry influences to whom the heats of fever are due. According to one account in the Ayurveda, fever is possession by the hot angry breath of the great gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. According to another passage in the Ayurveda, Shankar or Shiva, enraged by a slight from his father-in-law Daksha, breathed from his nostrils the eight fevers that wither mankind. If the fever-stricken performs the Vijaya abhishek, or bhang-pouring on the Ling of Shankar, the god is pleased, his breath cools, and the portion of his breath in the body of the fever-stricken ceases to inflame. The Kashikhanda Purana tells how at Benares, a Brahman, sore-smitten with fever, dreamed that he had poured bhang over the self-sprung Ling and was well. On waking he went to the Ling, worshipped, poured bhang and recovered. The fame of this cure brings to Benares sufferers from fever which no ordinary medicine can cure. The sufferers are laid in the temple and pour bhang over the Ling whose virtue has gained it the name Jvareshwar, the Fever-Lord. In Bombay many people sick of fever vow on recovery to pour bhang over a Ling. Besides as a cure for fever bhang has many medicinal virtues. It cools the heated blood, soothes the over-wakeful to sleep, gives beauty, and secures length of days. It cures dysentery and sunstroke, clears phlegm, quickens digestion, sharpens appetite, makes the tongue of the lisper plain, freshens the intellect, and gives alertness to the body and gaiety to the mind. Such are the useful and needful ends for which in his goodness the Almighty made bhang. In this praise of the hemp the Makhzan or great Greek-Arab work on drugs joins. Ganja in excess causes abscess, even madness. In moderation bhang is the best of gifts. Bhang is a cordial, a bile absorber, an appetiser, a prolonger of life. Bhang quickens fancy, deepens thought, and braces Judgment.

As on other guardian-possessed objects, the cow, the Vedas, or the leaf of the bel tree, oaths are taken on the bhang leaf. Even to a truthful witness an oath on the bhang leaf is dreaded. To one who forswears himself the bhang oath is death.

So holy a plant must play a leading part in temple rites. Shiva on fire with the poison churned from the ocean was cooled by bhang. At another time enraged with family worries the god withdrew to the fields. The cool shade of a plant soothed him. He crushed and ate of the leaves, and the bhang refreshed him. For these two benefits bhang is Shankarpriya, the beloved of Mahadev. So the right user of bhang or of ganja, before beginning to drink or to smoke, offers the drug to Mahadev saying, lena Shankar, lena Babulnath: be pleased to take it Shanker, take it Babulnath. According to the Shiva Purana, from the dark fourteenth of Magh (January-February) to the light fourteenth of Ashadh (June-July), that is, during the three months of the hot weather, bhang should be daily poured over the Ling of Shiva. If not every day, bhang should be poured at least during the first and last days of this period. According to the Meru Tantra on any Monday, especially on Shravan (July-August) Mondays, on all twelfths or pradoshs, and on all dark fourteenths or shivratri, still more on

the Mahashivratri or Shiva's Great Night on the dark fourteenth of Magh (January-February), and at all eclipses of the sun or moon, persons wistful either for this world or for the world to come should offer bhang to Shiva and pour it over the Ling. Not every devotee of Shiva makes offerings of bhang. Such rites in Bomhay are seldom performed except in the Bhuleswar and Babulnath temples and there only on special occasions. The bhang offered to Mahadev is without pepper or other spice. It is mixed with water, water and milk, or milk and sugar. It is poured over the Ling. According to some authorities the offerer should not touch the offered bhang. Temple ministrants Atits, Tapodhans, Bhojaks, Bhopis, Bharadis, Guravas alone should drink it. If there are no ministrants the remains of the offering should be poured into a well or given to cows to drink. Other authorities encourage the offerer to sip the bhang, since by sipping the bhang reaches and soothes the Shiva-Shakti or Shiva-spirit in the sipper. On certain special occasions during failures of rain, during eclipses, and also in times of war libations of bhang are poured over the Ling.

Vaishnavas as well as Shaivas make offerings of bhang. The form of Vishnu or the Guardian to whom bhang is a welcome offering is Baladev, Balaram, or Dauji, the elder brother of Krishna. Baladev was fond of spirits, not of bhang. But Baniyas, Bhatias, and other high class Hindus, not being able to offer spirits, instead of spirits present bhang. In Bombay the offering of bhang to Baladev, unlike the special offerings to Shiva, is a common and everyday rite. Without an offering of bhang no worship of Baladev is complete. Unlike the plain or milk and sugared bhang spilt over the Ling, Baladev's bhang is a richly-spiced liquid which all present, including the offerer, join in drinking. Such social and religious drinking of bhang is common in Bombay in the temple of Dauji in Kalyan Kirpuram lane near Bhuleshwar. As in the higher class worship of Baladev the liquor offering has been refined into an offering of bhang so it is in the worship of Devi, Shiva's early and terrible consort, On any Tuesday or Friday, the two week-days sacred to Devi, still more during the Navratra or Nine Nights in Ashwin or September-October, those whose caste rules forbid liquor make a pleasing spiced bhang. And as in the worship of Baladev all present, worshipper and ministrant alike, join in drinking. Shitaladevi, the Cooler, the dread goddess of small-pox, whose nature, like the nature of bhang, is cooling, takes pleasure in offerings of bhang. During epidemics of small-pox the burning and fever of the disease are soothed by pouring bhang over the image of Shitaladevi. So for the feverishness caused by the heats especially to the old no cure equals the drinking of bhang. Unlike spirits the tempter to flesh bhang the craver for milk is pleasing to the Hindu religion. Even according to the strictest school of the objectors to stimulants, while to a high caste Hindu the penalty for liquor-drinking is death, no penalty attaches to the use of bhang, and a single day's fast is enough to cleanse from the coarser spirit of ganja. Even among these who hold stimulants to be devil-possessed penalty and disfavour attach to the use of hemp drugs only when they are taken with no religious object and without observing the due religious rites.

At the other extreme of Hindu thought from the foes to stimulants, to the worshippers of the influences that, raising man out at himself and above mean individual worries, make him one with the divine force of nature, it is inevitable that temperaments should be found to whom the quickening spirit of bhang is the spirit of freedom and knowledge. In the ecstasy of bhang the spark of the Eternal in man turns into light the murkiness of matter or illusion and self is lost in the central soul-fire. The Hindu poet of Shiva; the Great Spirit that living in bhang passes into the drinker, sings of bhang as the clearer of ignorance, the giver of knowledge. No gem or jewel can touch in value bhang taken truly and reverently. He who dunks bhang drinks Shiva. The soul in whom the spirit of bhang finds a home glides into the ocean of Being freed from the weary round of matter-blinded self. To the meaner man, still under the glamour of matter or maya, bhang taken religiously is kindly thwarting the wiles of his foes and giving the drinker wealth and promptness of mind.

In this devotion to bhang, with reverence, not with the worship, which is due to Allah alone, the North Indian Mussalman joins hymning the praises of bhang. To the follower of the later religion of Islam the holy spirit in bhang is not the spirit of the Almighty. It is the spirit of the great prophet

Khizir or Elijah. That bhang should be sacred to Khizr is natural. Khizr is the patron saint of water. Still more Khizr means green, the revered colour of the cooling water of bhang. So the Urdu poet sings 'When I quaff fresh bhang I liken its colour to the fresh light down of thy youthful beard.' The prophet Khizr or the Green prophet cries 'May the drink be pleasing to thee.' Nasir, the great North Indian Urdu poet of the beginning of the present century, is loud in the praises of his beloved Sabzi, the Green one. 'Compared with bhang spirits are naught. Leave all things thou fool, drink bhang.' From its quickening the imagination Musalman poets honour bhang with the title Warak al Kkiyall, Fancy's Leaf. And the Makhzan or great Arab-Greek drug book records many other fond names for the drug. Bhang is the Joy-giver, the Sky-flier, the Heavenly-guide, the Poor Man's Heaven, the Soother of Grief.

Much of the holiness of bhang is due to its virtue of clearing the head and stimulating the brain to thought. Among ascetics the sect known as Atits are specially devoted to hemp. No social or religious gathering of Atits is complete without the use of the hemp plant smoked in ganja or drunk in bhang. To its devotee bhang is no ordinary plant that became holy from its guardian and healing qualities. According to one account, when nectar was produced from the churning of the ocean, something was wanted to purify the nectar. The deity supplied the want of a nectar-cleanser by creating bhang. This bhang Mahadev made from his own body, and so it is called angaj or body-born. According to another account some nectar dropped to the ground and from the ground the bhang plant sprang. It was because they used this child of nectar or of Mahadev in agreement with religious forms that the seers or Rishis became Siddha or one with the deity. He who, despite the example of the Rishis, uses no bhang shall lose his happiness in this life and in the life to come. In the end lie shall be cast into hell. The mere sight of bhang cleanses from as much sin as a thousand horse-sacrifices or a thousand pilgrimages. He who scandalises the user of bhang shall suffer the torments of hell so long as the sun endures. He who drinks bhang foolishly or for pleasure without religious rites is as guilty as the sinner of lakhs of sins. He who drinks wisely and according to rule, be lie ever so low, even though his body is smeared with human ordure and urine, is Shiva. No god or man is as good as the religious drinker of bhang. The students of the scriptures at Benares are given bhang before they sit to study. At Benares, Ujjain, and other holy places yogis, bviragis and sanyasis take deep draughts of bhang that they may centre their thoughts on the Eternal. To bring back to reason an unhinged mind the best and cleanest bhang leaves should be boiled in milk and turned to clarified butter. Salamisri, saffron, and sugar should be added and the whole eaten. Besides over the demon of Madness bhang is Vijaya or victorious over the demons of hunger and thirst. By the help of bhang ascetics pass days without food or drink. The supporting power of bhang has brought many a Hindu family safe through the miseries of famine. To forbid or even seriously to restrict the use of so holy and gracious a herb as the hemp would cause widespread suffering and annoyance and to the large bands of worshipped ascetics deep-seated anger. It would rob the people of a solace in discomfort, of a cure in sickness, of a guardian whose gracious protection saves them from the attacks of evil influences, and whose mighty power makes the devotee of the Victorious, overcoming the demons of hunger and thirst, of panic fear, of the glamour of Maya or matter, and of madness, able in rest to brood on the Eternal, till the Eternal, possessing him body and soul, frees him from the haunting of self and receives him into the ocean of Being. These beliefs the Musalman devotee shares to the full. Like his Hindu brother the Musalman fakir reveres bhang as the lengthener of life, the freer from the bonds of self. Bhang brings union with the Divine Spirit. 'We drank bhang and the mystery I am He grew plain. So grand a result, so tiny a sin.'