

Dadaji Dhuniwala

Shri Gurudev Mahendranath

About forty to fifty years ago there were two great saints and spiritual giants who completely dominated the Indian scene. There were other figures who later became known as a result of latent propaganda but were little known in their own lifetimes.

The two great figures of whom we speak saw a rise which was spontaneous and not induced by publicity. They both stood supreme as towering figures and were popular to a degree which none else could approach.

As a warning to all, their very acceptance by the Hindu community was a clear and indisputable indication that this was a land beyond any fixed patterns. It forms such a contrast with the more backward Western world where holy men of the Christian communities not only appear as if they were all dressed by the same tailor, stamped out by the same machine in a factory, but even speak like echoes coming from each other's throats.

In India the contrast is so pronounced and sadhus or holy men, dress or undress to produce countless unique characters, that it is rare to see a counterpart. They speak, behave and teach with such differences and variety and present all and everything.

The unwary must be very selective if he wishes to make a choice. Between the two spiritual giants who are presented here, there was such a wide gulf and contrast that no outside observer could possibly imagine that both belonged to the same religion. Nor would it be supposed that devotees who sought the feet of one were equally happy to seek the feet of the other.

One of these great figures was a saint who lived at Hubli in Mysore State. Externally and internally he was as conventional as convention could command. In dress and appearance, clean, tidy and decorous, while his teachings conformed only to true orthodox Hinduism of scriptural origin.

In this he was regarded as the greatest living spokesman. He could quote vast lengths of scripture from memory, though many of the deeper gems evaded him. Sometimes, when asked a question, he would take half an hour to reply.

In this way he filled the time-gap between sunrise and sunset. Disciples, many of them women, sat at his feet all day. Beating disciples on the head with a stick was not part of his tactics and he never imagined long speeches could be just as painful.

Talk, explanation, exposition and the Word of Authority to silence opposition, lasted from morning to night.

This saint, erudite to the last degree, spoke many Indian dialects and Sanskrit as if they were his mother tongue. Today the saint and his name are forgotten.

North of Hubli and almost dead-centre of India, on the bank of the great Narmada Ever, thirteen miles from Jabalpur, a very different spiritual drama was being acted. Here lived a saint, originally a sannyasin of the very conventional Dasnami Order, named Keshwaranand, who renounced and managed to disentangle himself, even from renunciation.

Once there was the delusion that I had Renounced the world, as much as I could see; Now I have renounced renunciation, For now I know I always have been free.

He lived naked as the day he was born, one with his environment and in harmony with the Absolute. His original sadhu name became almost forgotten and he became known as Dhuniwala Dadaji – the Patriarch who Kept the Dhuni.

The dhuni is the sacred fire of non-Vedic origin, usually circular (yoni) in shape and tended by sadhus in their place of residence. Generally it would be about ten to twelve inches in diameter but Dhuniwala maintained one which was sufficiently large to consume a blanket. The dhuni should not be confused with the Vedic agni-hotra of the Brahmins. The agni-hotra is always a square, while the dhuni is round. Whereas time is essential to the agni-hotra, and oil is constantly added to keep the time alive, the fuel in the dhuni (either wood or cow dung) only smoulders. A little smoke but no time.

Dhuni, in fact, comes from a Sanskrit word meaning smoke. The agni-hotra was only lit for periods of rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices and only by members of the Brahmin caste. Once lit, the dhuni fire was left to smoulder and burn for extensive periods and could be lit or tended by anyone.

The original dhuni lit by Dhuniwala at Kandwar has never been extinguished since his death. Dhunis burned in India for thousands of years before the Aryans came and to the non-Vedic or Tantrik people were held as sacred, though they themselves did not worship fire or have a fire deity.

Their dhunis were kept burning at all places sacred to Shiva and his Goddess. Even today there are places in India where one will find Bhasmagiris or Hills of Bhasma, vast mounds which analysis has proved to be the pure ash of burnt wood.

Fires must have burned for hundreds and even thousands of years to produce Bhasmagiris of such tremendous size. One of them is seen only a stone's throw from the spot where grew the Avadumbar Tree under which Shri Bhagavan Dattatreya attained his enlightenment; something like the story of the Buddha but one which took place about two thousand years earlier.

This sacred fire at Gangapur has long burned cold but thousands of people still visit the spot to venerate Dattatreya and carry away some sacred ashes. If the tradition of ashes is so ancient and enduring there must ever be a place in our hearts for the man who spent most of his lifetime making them.

Dhuniwala's world was not a world of love one another. He held most people in contempt. Nobody loved him and he returned no love. He was mostly feared and respected in the same way men fear and respect God.

Sometimes his visitors became angry, as did a wealthy merchant who made the difficult journey to present him with a costly embroidered shawl in which he hoped Dadaji would sleep. Instead, Dadaji took the shawl and threw it into the fire. The man grew angry at such wanton waste and expressed his feelings. Dadaji took a handful of ashes from the fire and handed them to the man, saying "Here, take your shawl back."

Dhuniwala neither preached, quoted or betrayed any hint that he had ever read any scriptures. He only tried to teach the simple truth that all men and women were free and immortal if they could overcome their ignorance and delusions, for this was the bondage which kept them from liberation. His life demonstrated, though not always by “respectable” standards, that the mind and body had to be free of its conditioning and concepts before there could be true moksha.

Yet, it was not wisdom which made Dhuniwala popular. Wisdom seldom has a great following and wisdom alone generally left a saint unwanted by the world. Though never sought by him, he secured a widespread reputation for good luck, the delusion which wears many disguises and manifests itself on the weirdest levels. Though he himself did not perform miracles, his Ashirwad or blessings could cause miracles to occur.

Thus people came to him to secure his grace which would give them success at law, prop up a tottering business, bring harmony into a discordant marriage and to line with gold those empty pockets which are only filled with space. People did not tell him their troubles or express their hopes. Dhuniwala was not interested in either. Once having his blessing the rest was automatic. In a country which has always been overcrowded with people, there have always been the numerous couples desiring offspring and male progeny in families over-cluttered with females. People would go to Dadaji, secure permission, and perform the lingam puja (worship).

This custom, as old as the hills and still far from extinct, requires the couple to wash the saint’s penis with water, milk, curds, honey, sugar, etc., as well as the anointing with other sacred substances such as kum kum, sandalwood, sindu and other powders generally used in worship. The act is also accompanied with burning lights and incense as well as appropriate prayers and scriptural texts. The custom still seems to be confined to naked saints. In the mysterious ways of the Absolute most couples have their wish fulfilled. Modesty and shame had no place with Dadaji.

A Sadhu, who had not yet found his guru, had wandered extensively in India to find one. The young man had very fixed ideas of what his guru must look like and the pattern to which he would need to conform. When he did find his guru – Dadaji – all these concepts crumbled to the dust. Dadaji was the opposite to all the ideas and ideals which had formed in his mind.

When he arrived at Dadaji’s riverside tree, he saw him like a new modern Diogenes of Sinope, masturbating in the presence of several people. At first shocked, even disgusted, something compelled him to remain. He became one of Dadaji’s three naked sadhu disciples. Dhuniwala had thousands of disciples and devotees but only three went so far as to follow his way of life.

The first of these was a unique character who defied all conventions in more ways than one. Born in the Muslim caste, where nudity was so distasteful, he ran away at an early age and traveled among the Hindu places of pilgrimage. When he stumbled upon the sacred but insane residence of Dhuniwala, he knew he had found his master. He threw the clothes he had been wearing into the dhuni and served the guru as his first naked disciple.

Nobody ever knew or learned his real name and probably he was never asked. With the typical spontaneity of Indian life people began to call him Chhota Dadaji, or Little Dadaji, and this became the only name by which he was ever known. Though above

normal height, he looked like a naked boy who had never grown up and he himself seemed to enjoy the blissful happiness of childhood.

Some doctors visiting the scene suggested that Chhota was in fact an example of one of those people where the gonads do not descend at puberty and never develop into full manhood. Though nature had been liberal to Dadaji, Chhota never outgrew the mini-sized lingam of boyhood. A waggish yogi composed a verse to express this, which ran:

Dadaji's lingam often rises; God endowed the best of sizes; A lingam never seen erect, But Dadaji's takes all the prizes!

Chhota was neither fool nor idiot in his basic make-up. When once asked if he did not feel ashamed of appearing naked in the presence of so many women, he replied, "If I did that it would be that I were ashamed of God and what he had seen fit to create." Is this not a record of many contrasts? Dadaji was the greatest. He was as different from his contemporary at Hubli as a tiger is different from a jackal. As the Hubli saint grew rich, Dhuniwala grew poorer. One lived in a nice ashram but Dadaji had only a tree. One sought fame and the other obscurity. One was polite and warmly welcomed visitors, while Dadaji insulted them or struck them with a stick. While ~ were being piled up at Hubli, like treasure, Dhuniwala was throwing them in the fire. When the Hubli throng sprang to life at the visit of some VIP, Dhuniwala would fall asleep.

Another disciple had toured India and visited Hubli. In the ashram he had sat and listened to a wonderful lecture on "Celibacy." When he returned to the Narmada location he saw Dhuniwala playing with his penis while another naked sadhu was rubbing his feet and legs. Once he had secured Dadaji's attention he told him about the lecture and the subject. "What was it called?" asked Dadaji. "Celibacy," was the reply. Dadaji smiled and suggested, "Probably some new medicine, but we don't have any here."

Dhuniwala's place near Jabalpur was not easy to reach. Dadaji lived there for that very reason. There were difficulties in building a residence as the Narmada enjoys a human sacrifice or two when she is in spate and the land was not available for purchase anyway. As a compromise, the wealthier disciples purchased a piece of land at Kandwar which was also a convenient rail junction. Premises were built and a huge dhuni was constructed.

Dhuniwala might change his residence but he would not change his customs. In some mysterious way he was induced to move to the new quarters, but although he took up residence there he always longed for the simple riverside retreat. But the signs of old age were approaching and Dadaji settled down to silently endure. His Mahasamadhi (tomb) and those of his three naked disciples are all at Kandwar and are still visited by thousands of devotees who still seek his spiritual grace and the material gold it might bring. Although there is no longer the lingam available for worship, huge painted banners show Dhuniwala in all his naked glory and tell their own story of great things that were.

Where freedom freely flew, trustees now tread, and the naked flame has been replaced by a well-dressed management. The new masters have made a rule and prohibit naked sadhus from entering the ashram. A good business cannot tolerate any possible competition. There is also the danger that a naked sadhu might be invited to live there to continue the old tradition and the rule of the trustees might end.

Dhuniwala maintained his independence to the very last. Having kept away from

doctors he enjoyed good health, but when the last moments came and death was obviously so near, the disciples wanted to bring a doctor. But Dadaji only responded “Don’t bother him. I can die without his help,” and he did.

Most dropouts are considered as being non-productive. Dhuniwala was different and he spent most of his life producing ashes, not only from the material things which most people treasure, but even the very ideas and delusions which they cherished.

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