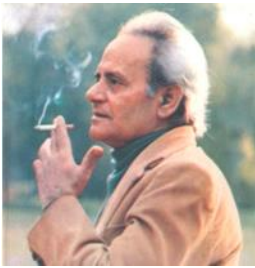


## Hindu yogis and sadhus in pre-1947 Lahore



**Abdul Hameed**

Hameed was born in 1928 in Amritsar. He migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India. After working at Radio Pakistan for several years, he joined the Voice of America. He wrote novels, short stories, columns for national newspapers, and programmes for radio and television. He passed away in Lahore in 2011.

*Editor's note: This story originally appeared at <http://www.apnaorg.com/columns/ahameed/column-40.html>*

The present generation has not seen Lahore's Hindu yogis and sadhus because when the non-Muslim population of the city departed in 1947, so did they. They used to come gather in large numbers at the time of the Dussehra festival that used to be held over a large area, stretching from Badami Bagh to Minto Park. Two days before the festival, yogis and sadhus from different parts of India would pitch their makeshift tents over these green open spaces. They would light fires in front of their dwellings, which they would not allow to go out as long as the festival lasted. They would cover their bodies with ash from these fires, acquiring a ghostlike look.

The sadhus had their own clans and orders. The Jatadhari sadhus would light their fire or *samadhi*, stick a trident in front of it and sit next to it in a classic contemplative posture. Some yogis were no more than a bunch of bones, their bodies coated with ash, as were their heads. Their nails would be long, and in some cases, frighteningly so. You could not see their mouths because they were covered by their unkempt facial hair.

Hindu and Sikh devotees, both men and women, would sit in front of them with joined hands. They would touch their feet and ask them for the grant of a wish. Some sadhus would throw their long hair over a branch of a tree like a rope and start swinging like monkeys. Some would lie on a bed of nails. There were yogis who would be a hundred years old, their thick, snow-white eyebrows hanging down over their eyes. Hindu women would touch their feet and then touch their eyes with their hands. They believed that a blessing from these sages would free them from all their worries.

Some sadhus could be seen with pendants threaded through their skin. They belonged to an order which believed that salvation can only be achieved by punishing the body. Others would seal their mouths with mud. They belonged to the order which practised breath control. The accomplished ones would have themselves buried in the ground and emerge alive and well hours later.

There were sadhus who would go about stark naked, their bodies besmeared with ash. They belonged to the Jain religion and were a rare sight in the Punjab, but you did see them off and on. They would make their camp in an out-of-the-way place where they would receive their special devotees. These naked sadhus belonged mostly to Gujarat Kathiawar, where they went about openly on the streets without let or hindrance. Hindu women would stand on their doorsteps holding clay saucers of sweetmeats and yogurt for them. Any house in front of which they stopped and accepted the offering was considered an auspicious dwelling. It was believed that before long the goddess of riches, Laxmi, would smile on the residents.

When the naked Jain sadhus came to Lahore for the Dussehra festival, they were not allowed to go into the city. One order of sadhus followed the seer Valmiki. They always wore yellow and walked in wooden sandals, never begging for alms. They shaved their heads and all facial hair.

Some sadhus stayed away from intoxicants while others smoked hashish incessantly. One order of sadhus was called Jaldhari yogis because they believed in the sanctity of water, since all life began with water. Twice a day, they would drink a large quantity of water, keep it inside their stomachs for a while and then expel it, their mouths turning into gushing fountains. They would prepare their own food and give out some as *prashad* or sanctified victuals. Jain sadhus believed in all life being sacred and considered it a sin to cause harm or injury to any living thing, including insects. Since they did not even want to inhale any living organisms, they would wear a gauze mask over their mouths.

The yogis and sadhus came in hundreds during the Dussehra celebrations in Lahore, but *sanyasis* were never to be seen at this great festive gathering. Sanyasis are men who have turned their back on the world for a life of contemplation of the Absolute.

In my childhood I heard stories of sanyasis who had taught those on whom they chose to bestow a favour the secrets of alchemy, of turning dross materials into gold. An uncle of mine, who lived on Mohni Road, was obsessed with alchemy. One day he ran into a sanyasi on the banks of the Ravi whom he induced to come home with him. He made him stay for several days during which he served him like a slave.

When the sanyasi was leaving, he asked my uncle, "Shah Ji, tell me what you want." "I want to know how to make gold," my uncle replied. Since the sanyasi was pleased with the care and hospitality he had received, he asked my uncle to bring him a copper paisa with an image of Edward VIII on it. My uncle produced the coin. The sanyasi asked for twenty seers (ten kilos) of dried cow dung cakes. Then the sanyasi placed a piece of clay on the ground, on which he put the Edward VIII paisa. Then he buried both under the cow dung cakes which he set on fire.

When the entire pile had burnt out – it took almost the entire night – the sanyasi produced a little green bottle with a liquid, two drops of which he put on the coin. Then he picked up the coin, dusted it and handed it to my uncle. It had turned into gold.

"Shah Ji," the sanyasi said, "keep this bottle with you, for it will stand you in good stead all your life." My uncle was the curious type, so he couldn't let go. "But let me know the secret of preparing this liquid which can turn base metal into gold." The sanyasi replied, "There are still a couple of hours before sunrise, so let me get some sleep and I will share the secret with you in the morning." Next morning, when my uncle woke up, the sanyasi was gone, never to be seen again. With him had also gone the green bottle and the copper coin which had turned into gold.

---

© Abdul Hameed 2007