

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ACTIVITY ONE: ACCOUNT OF A SIKH BURIAL

Many Indian soldiers who were wounded ended up being treated in Brighton. Some died there in one of the makeshift hospitals. Manta Singh, a Sikh soldier, was one of them.

On 16 October 1915, The Times published a long and detailed account of a cremation at the burning ghat by an anonymous correspondent:

‘Before the body was put into the big black motor-hearse a photographer was allowed to come and take a picture of the dead man’s features, to be sent to his relatives in far India. The bier lay in a small court among the hospital buildings, where a little crowd of the personnel had gathered to watch. Over the body was stretched a pall of printed cretonne, bright flowers on a dark ground; and white chrysanthemums were strewn lavishly upon it... The photographing done, the face was covered, the bier was put into the hearse, the crowd clambered into the big motor-ambulances, and we set forth upon the long drive.

‘Through the pretty village of Patcham, intensely English with its church and its duck pond, this strange funeral procession went, till the road changed to a steep track; and before long the motors left the track and took their heavy way over the soft turf in a fold of the down. Soon there came into sight a very ugly little screen and shelter of corrugated iron... there is no English word for it: and but a short time ago to find its parallel one must have journeyed thousands of miles. For this was the burning ghat of our Hindu troops.

‘At the foot of the hill on which it stood the vehicles stopped: the mourners clambered out of the ambulances, and with much chattering and gesticulating began to take the body from the hearse. In time (for all the ceremony was conducted with an odd mixture of cheerful disorder, strict ritual and absorbed devotion) the procession began to climb the hill, the mourners chanting as they went... the sun came through the fog and round us lay the Sussex Downs in characteristically English weather... we passed inside a little enclosure, where stood three platforms of cement. One of these was carefully swept and sprinkled with water; and when thus purified for the reception of the dead, it was heaped with wood blocks for the burning. The body, under its bright pall and the chrysanthemums, lay outside on the grassy slope; when the preparations had been made the mourners gathered round it. It was sprinkled with cleansing water: the face was exposed again, and honey and ghee, and minute portions of the eight metals, and other ritual things were passed between the pale lips. Then the mourners gathered round in a semi-circle; and squatting on their haunches with their hands folded and their eyes downcast, chanted their sing-song chants, now shrill, now soft, now a murmur and then a shout.

‘At last came the time of the burning... When all was ready the body was laid on the pyre and over it and around it were heaped more and more blocks of wood and much straw. Then crystals of camphor were lighted in a spoon on the end of a long pole; and when they were flaming well were poured on the centre of the fire. A flame leapt up. A torch made of straw and camphor was lighted at this flame, and applied to the four corners: melted ghee was poured here and there, and soon the whole pyre was ablaze. And while it burned the mourners kept tossing upon it little pinches of ghee mixed with grains and fruit, scent, saffron, and spices.

‘It will burn for long; and today when the friends of the dead man go back: they will find nothing but perhaps a few fragments...’

It is thought that the ashes of the cremated men were scattered in the sea by their comrades.”