

KHATKHATE BABA
(THE SAVIOUR OF ETAWAH)

G. K. Gurtu

Blessed by the gods and goddesses India became home to our revered *Rishis* and *Munis* of yore who enlightened us with their presence as well as their *Vedic* knowledge they gave us. Saints, sages and seers, monks and mystics, *Yogis* and *Yoginis* frequented our land to guide the mankind. These spiritually evolved souls who were the storehouse of eternal wisdom appeared among us as ordinary mortals, lived a pious and dedicated life, preached love, compassion and kindness towards all as proclaimed in the *Vedic* prayer:

Sarve Bhawanti Sukhinah Sarve Santu Niramayah
Sarve Bhadrani Pashyanyu Ma Kashchid Dukh Bhag Bhavet.

They blessed all, prayed for all and embraced all within their fold irrespective of caste, creed, colour, religion, status or sex. To them everyone belonged to *Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam*. They consoled the distressed, guided the seekers of The Truth and spread the message of God i.e. of universal love, brotherhood, harmony and unity of the all-pervading cosmic energy. They laid stress on practicing detachment towards worldly possessions while enjoying the material goods. They cautioned us that these sense-gratifying objects made us earth-bound which acted us a great deterrent towards spiritual progress. Hence the advice that creature comforts should be shunned. They prioritized the duty over the rights. They exhorted us to cast off and not to entertain any desire of expectation of any return in lieu of any favour done to anyone to avoid pain, heartbreak and frustration in the future because it created bondage. On the other hand, they emphasized that discarding of this vain desire becomes instrumental in reducing the number of unnecessary, monotonous and avoidable cycle of births and deaths and accelerates the process of salvation i.e. merger with the godhead which is our ultimate aim and goal in this world whether we know it or not and like it or not. It has truly been said that we are not earthly beings aspiring for spiritual experience but spiritual beings who have come for earthly experience.

The advent of saints is a continuous occurrence and is not confined to any time-period or any specific region either. It is spread all over our motherland. The highly evolved souls come down on the earth to help and guide, the less evolved souls.

We have Shri Aurobindo Ghosh from Pondicherry, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramkrishna Paramhans, Swami Vivekanand and Ma Anandmoyee from West Bengal, Sai Baba and Avatar Mehar Baba from Maharashtra, Deoraha Baba, Neemkaroli Baba, Baba Kali Kamli Wale and the great theosophist Mrs. Annie Besant from U.P., Sant Tukaram and Swami Dayanand Saraswati from (Kathiawar) Gujarat, Saint Thayumanavar and Ramana Maharshi from Tamil Nadu and Guru Nanak Dev from Punjab to name a few. We have 14th century Shaiva Yogini and Saint Lal Ded, Laleshwari, Nand Rishi and Bhagwan Gopinath Ji from Kashmir. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that a branch of Bhagwan Gopinath Trust (Kashmir) was established by a great *Tantric* Bhagwan Ram in *Keenaram Baba Ki Bari*, Varanasi, under the presidentship of Pt. Shiv Nath Katju on 25-04-1978. All of them were the lighthouse of the spiritualism that showed the mankind the path of spiritual light and awakening through their divine presence and inspiring teachings. The spiritual heritage of our country is so rich and profound that it is no wonder that people crave to be reborn in India to inhale the pervading fragrance of spiritualism. Kashmiri Pandits, although uprooted from their verdant valley due to the unashamed tyranny of the Muslim rulers, did not lose courage. Centuries have passed but the ethnic cleansing of this peaceful and peace-loving community is continuing while the Indian Neros are fiddling. However, once the migrant Kashmiri Pandits found a peaceful environ and the congenial atmosphere, their creative urge burst forth and found expression in multi-direction and blossomed into every field, including religion, bringing name and fame to themselves and glory to the community. The deeply religious and spiritually progressive Kashmiri Pandit community brought forth a number of saintly souls. However, two great saints within the last century need special mention here as both of them made a lasting impact on the contemporary society during their lifespan. Karunamayee Ma of Gurgaon (Haryana) is one of them and the other is *Khatkhate Baba* of Etawah (U.P.).

Karunamayee Ma, before she renounced the world, was known as Vimla Kitchlu (b. 1913- d.2000), the daughter of the migrant Pt. Kishan Prasad Kitchlu (Lucknow), married to Pt. Uttam Narain Channa (Delhi). She was deeply religious from the

beginning. This trait progressed and became pronounced with the passage of time. The family life was no hindrance to her spiritual pursuits. She was fair-complexioned, of medium height with a smiling face and of good health. Her face glowed with spiritual grace. When she attained sainthood and the number of her devotees became large she sat up a well- organized, well-equipped and self- contained *Ashram* somewhere on the Delhi-Alwar Road, with a temple of *Durga Devi* within the *Ashram* compound, for conducting religious discourses, organizing meditation sessions and meeting people. *Jap*, meditation and service to the poor and the needy was her prescription for spiritual progress and development. The number of her devotees is now legion.

The other saint is *Khatkhate Baba* who was known as Pt. Shiv Prasad Chaudhari (b.1859-d.1930) before he renounced the temporal world. The legend has it that Baba's ancestor Pt. Shankar Das Chaudhari nee Razdan was a prosperous and influential man of Rainawari (Kashmir). His son Pt. Mahesh Das Chaudhari was equally rich. The constant harassment and persecution by the Muslim ruler forced the next generation member Pt. Badri Nath Chaudhari to flee his native motherland along with his family and other Kashmiri Pandits in about 1730. They took the then popular Moghul route via Murree, Pathankot and Lahore to reach Delhi. After staying there for some period of time in Bazar Sitaram, which had become by then a mini colony of the migrant Kashmiri Pandits, he shifted to Barielly and was lucky enough to secure an employment in the Court of Rohilla Nawab –Ali Mohammad Khan. Pt. Badri Nath Chaudhari, like his ancestors, had a Midas touch. He became so prosperous that Pt. Shankar Nath Chaudhari and Pt. Ooncha Nath Chaudhari, his son and grandson, respectively, did not have to toil for a living. However, with the change in the fortune of the Rohilla Dynasty, the family came to Kashmiri Mohalla, Lucknow in about 1778.

It was again a play of the heavenly stars that one of the descendants Pt. Thakur Prasad Chaudhari, although born in Lucknow in about 1830 and educated there, shifted to Delhi. He was appointed there as *Sarishtedar* and then became a Tehsildar. His sons Pt. Janki Prasad Chaudhari and Pt. Shiv Prasad Chaudhari were born there in about 1855 and 1859, respectively. It became a case of like father like sons. Both of the sons, after completing their education, joined the civil services and,

as the luck would have it, back in U.P. Whereas Pt. Janki Prasad Chaudhari started as Tehsildar and rose to become a Deputy Collector in Bahraich by 1902, Pt. Shiv Prasad Chaudhari joined as a *Sarishtedar* in Raibarielly in near about 1875. His wife, Sharika Shuri, was the daughter of Pt. Bholā Nath Kaul Nala of Kashmiri Mohalla, Lucknow. Unfortunately, the early and untimely demise of his young, beautiful and loveable wife during the child birth shattered him completely. In utter despair he resigned his job and simply disappeared. Everything about his life and activities during the next decade or so when he remained untraceable is shrouded in a mystery. However, when he resurfaced he had become a saint with great *Yogic* powers and became known as Prasiddh Nath. Incidentally, in the absence of any contradictory evidence it can safely be inferred from the name that he must have come in contact with someone from the famous *Nath Sampradaya* of *Sattwik Shivaita Tantrik* cult of Baba Gorakhnath and Machhendranath who employed their *yogic* powers for the benefit and welfare of society and, who initiated him into the cult and rechristened him as Prasiddh Nath.

Being born, brought and educated at Etawah, where my father Pt. Brij Narain Gurtu (b. 1907—d.1968) Office Superintendent, Office of the Collector & District Magistrate, son of Pt. Ram Narain Gurtu (b.1874—d.1933) of Kalibari (Mutthigunj), Allahabad passed his major service period and held different posts, I was well aware of the lore of Baba. My deeply religious mother, Brij Mohini Gurtu nee Vidyawati Kaul (b.1913—d.1993) daughter of Pt. Iqbal Shankar Kaul (Lucknow), often told us children anecdotes about Baba. As a child I often visited the *Samadhi* of Baba on *Tonga*, the only mode of conveyance up to the 1960s, accompanied by my parents and brothers Dr. Vishnu Kumar Gurtu (b.1939) Retd. Prof.&Head, Department of Mathematics, L.I.T., Nagpur, (who presented a proof of about 370 years old Mathematics problem known as Fermat's last Theorem at the 25th International Congress of Mathematicians held in the last week of August, 2006, at Madrid, Spain) and Pt. Tej Narain Gurtu (b.1948) and sisters Damyanti (b.1945) married to Pt. Vivek Kumar Gurtu (b.1940), son of Pt. Kailash Narain Gurtu (Jaipur), Shobha (b.1950) married to Pt. Kailash Narain Tikku (b.1942), son of Pt. Tej Narain Tikku (Jaipur) and Manju (b.1953) married to Pt. Shashinandan Lal Dar (b.1951), son of Major Prof. Shivnandan Lal Dar (Varanasi). My interest at that time, however, was limited to running around the place and playing and, to wait for a *Tika* of *Bhabhoot* on our

foreheads and to receive a few almonds, walnuts etc. as *Prasad*. To the best of my recollection, except for dry fruits, other items like sweets, green fruits, coins etc. were not offered by the devotees. As a grownup also I used to go there to enjoy the peace and the serenity of the place and to seek Baba's blessings for all of us. Shri Mangal, the caretaker, who knew me very well, would unlock the outer door to let me in. There we would sit under the shade of the *Neem* tree and I would listen to him talk about baba and his miracles.

It is said that when Baba reappeared in about 1886 he first came to Jaswant Nagar, a town about twenty kms. in the west of Etawah. He stayed there for some months. Then he opted for Etawah and finally settled down near the river *Yamuna*. He got his hermitage built and remained there till he merged with the Eternal in about 1930 on *Budh Purnima* day. A *Samadhi* was built to commemorate his memory and to remind the visitors of the divine light that was once a part of our life and is now shining and guiding us as a bright star of the firmament in the company of divine souls.

Baba had a pleasant personality. He was tall, slim, fair-complexioned with a clear cut and sharp features and a clean-shaven head and face. An aura of divine grace adored his face. An unstitched cloth wrapped around his body was his dress. He wore the customary wooden sandals on his feet and carried a long and thick wooden stick which he used to strike very often on the ground while on the move. Both the sandals and the stick not only produced a typical *Khatkhat* sound but also announced his presence in the vicinity which made people rush towards him to pay their obeisance and seek his blessings. It is because of this sound that, although he was ceremonially addressed as *Shri 108 Prasiddh Nath*, he was more popular as *Khatkhate Baba* among the masses.

Baba was a many-sided person. One side of was that, being a *Yogi* of a very high order, he was known to possess great supernatural powers, like walking on the water, floating in the air, turning water into purified butter (*Ghee*), materialising solid things out of nothing by a gesture of his hand, turning pebbles into precious stones, appearing simultaneously at two places, registering his presence in the dreams of his earnest devotees, curing the incurables and bringing to life the dead, which he demonstrated sometimes. Incidentally, it may be of interest to know that, while we

may marvel at this phenomenon, it was like a child's play for a *Yogi* like him. Mrs. Annie Besant has shed light on this phenomenon in her lecture "*Bhuvanlok (Astral Plane)*".

However, after he performed two great miracles which saved the city populace from death, destruction and disease he became their saviour. The first one was to check, with a motion of his stick like Moses, the surging waters of the flooded *Yamuna* from entering into his abode and submerging the city. The second one was to contain the spread of and finally, the eradication of the raging epidemic cholera in 1918 simply by striking his stick on the ground while patrolling the city and calling out "*Chet ! Chet ! Khatkhata Aaya*" as if addressing a warning to the evil and dark forces of Nature, besides exhorting the people to make as many bonfires as possible in and around the city as is done during *Holi* festival. The relieved people expressed their gratitude by venerating him like a god. His name and fame spread far and wide like a wildfire. People thronged to have a glimpse of him, to touch his feet and to seek his blessings.

His other side was the usual sessions he used to have with the people who approached him for various reasons. While some came to him to seek solutions to their various worldly problems others came for religious discussions and guidance. And both went satisfied and with a smile on their faces. His advice to the latter was *Jap*, meditation, a simple and pious way of life and a little charity. Being an ardent believer in the *Guru- Shishya Parampara* (teacher disciple tradition) of bygone era he advocated the need and importance of having a *Guru* – a true *Guru* – as a guide to steer the boat of spiritual journey because, according to him, only a true and evolved *Guru* can take the disciple through spiritual evolution and that, without his active support, help and guidance, the seeker is likely to go astray. He used to hint that dark days are ahead and that only those who came under the protective umbrella of the *Guru* will tide over the crisis. This traditional approach was the bedrock of his philosophy.

His yet another side, but least exposed to the public gaze was that, despite being a saint of a high order with supernatural powers in the eyes of the masses, he was still

a practising *Yogi* aspiring for and in search of the Ultimate Truth. The clue to this is perceptible in his long spells of deep mediation.

Khatkhate Baba had many devotees but only a few disciples. Baba Brahma Nath was one of them. Unfortunately, not much is known about him except that, prior to his renouncing the comforts of the material world and embracing the harsh world of *Sanyas*, after coming under the powerful influence of Baba, he was known as Pt. Brahma Nath Sapru and held the post of a Deputy Collector. He resigned his job to serve Baba by becoming his disciple in order to delve deep into the secret world of occult and spiritualism. Baba Brahma Nath was of medium height, of lean and thin physique, had matted hairs and spotted an untrimmed beard. He was a quiet and self-effacing disciple who did not demonstrate his achievements. He was, however, very close to Baba and enjoyed his love and confidence.

The *Samadhi* of *khatkhate Baba* has now become a centre of cultural heritage and in order to reach there the visitor has to cover a distance of about six kms. in the south direction of the city on the Gwalior Road up to a crossing near an ancient *Shiv Mandir*, locally famous as *Tiksi Mahadev*. There is a temple of *Kali Mata* also within this temple complex. The temple is at a great height and commands a panoramic view of vicinity. A left hand turn from the aforesaid crossing for about half a km. and then a right hand turn for a short distance will take the visitor to the *Samadhi* situated on the left side of the road almost parallel to the *Yamuna* on the right hand side of the road. The visitor, after taking the left hand turn from the Tiksi Mahadev Mandir crossing, will notice on the right hand side of the road a sight which is of a great historical importance i.e. very large and high mound of earth, both long and wide, spread over almost parallel to the road and going almost up to the riverside. This was once the fort of Raja Jaichand of Kanauj, brother of the famous Raja Prithviraj Chauhan and situated as it is, overlooking the river, reportedly served as a military outpost. Sadly except for a small *baradari*, it is in total ruins.

The *Samadhi* is a whitewashed *pucca* structure. The *Yamuna* at that place, flows in the shape of a crescent moon and, with nearby bathing *ghats*, and far-off riverside high earthen walls appearing golden in the evening sunlight, offer a spectacular panorama. Inside the *Samadhi* enclosure is a square-shaped raised platform with a

narrow passage running around it and a huge *neem* tree at the centre. A covered verandah with three arches stands on the northern side. There is a small room on the eastern side of the verandah and an iron-grilled enclosure at the central arch. A large earthen urn containing the *Bhabhoot* is kept, among other things, inside that enclosure. The things once used by Baba like his wooden sandals, stick, rosary, deer skin, tiger skin seat are kept in that room. About half a km. from the *Samadhi*, on the eastern side, is a cremation ground.

Adjacent to the *Samadhi* compound and in-between the untarred road on the western side is a large open ground with a few *pucca* structures and a big iron gate enclosing the entire complex. This is the place where Baba Brahma Nath established a *Sanskrit Vidyapeeth* in about 1903 along with a library with a large collection of good and rare books. The plan was to develop this institution into a *Vedic* university. Alas ! The plan could not come to fruition. Baba Brahma Nath, the leading light, faded from the scene suddenly in 1925 after a fatal fall from the open balcony while asleep. A few years later *Khatkhate Baba* also joined the celestial world. Although there was a large concentration of Kashmiri Pandits at that time but the shock was too much for them. They became like a rudderless boat on the high sea of spiritual journey in the absence of the guiding stars. Their number began to dwindle with the passage of time. Ours was the last Kashmiri Pandit family to leave Etawah in May, 1981. The control over the Shrine as well as its assets, in the meantime, slipped into the hands of the local people. The management is now run by them under a Trust which looks after the *Samadhi*, manages its affairs, controls its assets, organizes periodical gatherings and fairs and arranges *Bhandara*. The Kashmiri Pandits still cherish the memory. They invariably and nostalgically enquire about *Khatkhate Baba's Samadhi* whenever they meet someone from Etawah.

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