

ECHOES FROM THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS.

A GLIMPSE AT THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA.

IN the hope of deepening the sympathy of God's consecrated people for the whole world which "God so loved," even while they were yet sinners, and which Christ shed his blood to redeem, and which he comes again to restore and bless, and in which mission of his Millennial reign we are called to be workers together with him, we publish the following interesting paper on "*The Work of Social Reform in India*," by B. Nagarkar, a native representative at the World's Parliament of Religions. We publish the address in full, both for the information it contains, and also as an illustration of the indirect influence of the Bible upon the character and sentiments of at least one of that benighted race – and not only one, but of a considerable class who are feeling after God. Mr. Nagarkar said: –

"Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen: The conquest of India by England is one of the most astonishing marvels of modern history. To those who are not acquainted with the social and religious condition of the diverse races that inhabit the vast India peninsula, it will always be a matter of great wonder as to how a handful of English people were able to bring under their sway such an extensive continent as Hindoostan, separated from England by thousands of miles of the deep ocean and lofty mountains. Whatever the circumstances of this so-called conquest were, they were no more than the longstanding internal feuds and jealousies – the mutual antipathies and race-feelings – between caste and caste, creed and creed, and community and community, that have been thrown together in the land of India.

The victory of the British – if victory it can be called – was mainly due to the internal quarrels and dissensions that had been going on for [R1602 : page 375] ages past between the conflicting and contending elements of the Indian population. Centuries ago, when such a miserable state of local division and alienation did not exist in India, or at any rate had not reached any appreciable degree, the Hindoos did make a brave and successful stand against powerful armies of fierce and warlike tribes that led invasion after invasion against the holy home of the Hindoo nation. Thus it was that from time to time hordes of fierce Bactrians, Greeks, Persians and Afghans were warded off by the united armies of the ancient Hindoos. Time there was when the social, political and religious institutions [R1602 : page 376] of the Aryans in India were in their pristine purity, and when as a result of these noble institutions the people were in the enjoyment of undisturbed unity, and so long as this happy state of things continued the Hindoos enjoyed the blessings of freedom and liberty. But time is the great destroyer of everything. What has withstood the withering influences of that arch-enemy of every earthly glory and greatness? In proportion as the people of India became faithless to their ancestral institutions, they fell in the scale of nations.

DIVISION AND DEPREDATION.

"At first they fell a prey to one foreign power and then to another, and then again to a third, and so on, each time degeneration doing the work of division, and division in its turn doing the ghastly work of further and deeper degeneration. About two hundred years ago this fatal process reached its lowest degree; and India was reduced to a state of deadly division and complete confusion. Internecine wars stormed the country, and the various native and foreign races, then living in India, tried to tear each other to pieces! It was a state of complete anarchy, and

no one could fathom what was to come out of this universal chaos.

"At this critical juncture of time there appeared on the scene a distant power from beyond the ocean! No one had heard or knew anything of it. The white-faced sahib was then a sheer novelty to the people of India. To them in those days a white-faced biped animal was synonymous with a representative of the race of monkeys, and even to this day in such parts of India as have not been penetrated by the rays of education or civilization, ignorant people in a somewhat serious sense do believe that the white-faced European is perhaps a descendant of apes and monkeys! For aught I know the ever-shifting, ever-changing, novelty-hunting philosophies of the occult world and the occult laws, of spirit presence and spirit presentiment in your part of the globe may some day be able to find out that these simple and unsophisticated people had a glimpse of the "Descent of Man" according to Darwin. Whatever it may be, no one could ever have dreamt that the people of England would ever stand a chance of wielding supreme power over the Indian peninsula. At first the English came to India as mere shopkeepers. Not long after they rose to be the keepers of the country, and ultimately they were raised to be the rulers of the Indian empire. In all this there was the hand of God. It was no earthly power that transferred the supreme sovereignty of Hindoostan into the hands of the people of Great Britain. Through the lethargic sleep of centuries the people of India had gone on degenerating. Long and wearisome wars with the surrounding countries had enervated them: the persistent cruelty, relentless tyranny and ceaseless persecution of their fanatic invaders had rendered them weak and feeble, even to subjection, and a strange change had come over the entire face of the nation.

DECAY OF ANCIENT INSTITUTIONS.

"The glory of their ancient religion, the purity of their social institutions and the strength of their political constitution had all been eclipsed for the time being by a thick and heavy cloud of decay and decrepitude. For a long time past the country had been suffering from a number of social evils, such as wicked priestcraft, low superstition, degrading rites and ceremonies, and demoralizing customs and observances. It was indeed a pitiable and pitiful condition to be in. The children of God in the holy Aryavarta, the descendants of the noble Rishis, were in deep travail. Their deep wailing and lamentation had pierced the heavens, and the Lord of love and mercy was moved with compassion for them. He yearned to help them, to raise them, to restore them to their former glory and greatness; but he saw that in the country itself there was no force or power that he could use as an instrument to work out his divine providence. The powers that were and long had been in the country had all grown too weak and effete to achieve the reform and regeneration of India. It was for this purpose that an entirely alien and outside power was brought in. Thus you will perceive that the advent of the British in India was a matter of necessity and, therefore, it may be considered as fully providential.

"It is not to be supposed that this change of sovereignty from the eastern into the western hand was accomplished without any bloodshed or loss of life. Even the very change in its process introduced new elements of discord and disunion; but when the change was completed and the balance of power established, an entirely new era was opened up on the field of Indian social and political life. This transfer of power into the hands of your English cousins has cost us a most heavy and crushing price. In one sense, it took away our liberty; it deprived us, and has been ever since depriving us, of some of our noblest pieces of ancient art and antiquity which have been brought **[R1602 : page**

377] over to England for the purpose of adornment of, and exhibition in, English museums and art galleries.

"At one time it took away from the country untold amounts of wealth and jewelry, and since then a constant, ceaseless stream of money has been flowing from India into England. The cost, indeed, has been heavy, far too heavy, but the return, too, has been inestimable. We have paid in gold and silver, but we received in exchange what gold and silver can never give or take away – for the English rule has bestowed upon us the inestimable boon of knowledge and enlightenment. And knowledge is power. It is with this power that we shall measure the motives of the English rule. The time will come, as it must come, when, if our English rulers should happen to rule India in a selfish, unjust and partial manner, with this same weapon of knowledge we shall compel them to withhold their power over us. But I must say that the educated natives of India have too great a confidence in the good sense and honesty of our rulers ever to apprehend any such calamity.

"Our Anglo-Saxon rulers brought with them their high civilization, their improved methods of education and their general enlightenment. We had been in darkness and had well nigh forgotten our bright and glorious past. But a new era dawned upon us. New thoughts, new ideas, new notions began to flash upon us one after another. We were rudely roused from our long sleep of ignorance and self-forgetfulness. The old and the new met face to face. We felt that the old could not stand in the presence of the new. The old we began to see in the light of the new; and we soon learned to feel that our country and society had been for a long time suffering from a number of social evils, from the errors of ignorance and from the evils of superstition. Thus we began to bestir ourselves in the way of remedying our social organization. Such, then, were the occasion and the origin of the work of social reform in India.

SOCIAL REFORM NEEDED.

"Before I proceed further, I must tell you that the work of reform in India has a two-fold aspect. In the first place we have to revive many of our ancient religious and social institutions. Through ages of ignorance they have been lost to us, and what we need to do in regard to these institutions is to bring them to life again.

"So far as religious progress and spiritual culture are concerned, we have little or nothing to learn from the west – beyond your compact and advanced methods of combination, co-operation and organization. This branch of reform I style as reform by revisal. In the second place, we have to receive some of your western institutions. These are mostly political, industrial and educational; a few social. But in every case the process is a composite one. For what we are to revive we have often to remodel, and what we have to receive we have often to recast. Hence our motto in every department of reform is, 'Adapt before you adopt.' I shall now proceed to indicate to you some of the social reforms that we have been trying to effect in our country.

"The abolition of caste – what is this Hindoo institution of caste? In the social dictionary of India, 'caste' is a most difficult word for you to understand. Caste may be defined as the classification of a society on the basis of birth and parentage. For example, the son or daughter of a priest must always belong to the caste of priests or Brahmans, even though he or she may never choose to follow the ancestral occupation. Those who are born in the family of soldiers belong to the soldier caste, though they may never prefer to go on butchering men. Thus the son of a grocer is born to be called a grocer; and the son of a shoemaker is fated to be called a shoemaker. Originally there were only four castes – the Brahman, or the priest; Kihateiya, or the soldier; Vaishya, or the merchant; and Shudra, or the serf. And these four ancient

castes were not based on birth, but on occupation or profession. In ancient India, the children of Brahman parents often took to a martial [R1603 : page 377] occupation, while the sons of a soldier were quite free to choose a peaceful occupation if they liked. But in modern India, by a strange process, the original four castes have been multiplied to no end, and have been fixed most hard and fast. Now you find, perhaps, as many castes as there are occupations. There is a regular scale and a grade. You have the tailor caste and the tinker caste, the blacksmith caste and the goldsmith caste, the milkman caste and the carpenter caste, the groom caste and the sweeper caste. The operation of caste may be said to be confined principally to matters of (1) food and drink, (2) matrimony and adoption, (3) the performance of certain religious rites and ceremonies.

CASTE DEFINED AND EXPLAINED.

"Each caste has its own code of laws and its own system of observances. They will eat with some, but not with others. The higher [R1603 : page 378] ones will not so much as touch the lower ones. Intermarriages are strictly prohibited. Why, the proud and haughty Brahman will not deign to bear the shadow of a Shudra or low caste. In the west you have social classes; we in India have 'castes.' But remember that 'classes' with you are a purely social institution, having no religious sanction. 'Castes' with us are essentially a religious institution, based on the accident of birth and parentage. With a view to illustrate the difference between 'classes' and 'castes,' I may say that in western countries the lines of social division are parallel, but horizontal; and, therefore, ranging in the social strata one above another. In India these lines are perpendicular; and, therefore, running from the top to the bottom of the body social, dividing and separating one social strata from every other. The former arrangement is a source of strength and support, and the later a source of alienation and weakness. Perhaps at one time in the history of India, when

the condition of things was entirely different, and when the number of these castes was not so large, nor their nature so rigid as now, the institution of caste did serve a high purpose; but now it is long, too long, since that social condition underwent a change. Under those ancient social and political environments of India, the institution of caste was greatly helpful in centralizing and transmitting professional knowledge of arts and occupations, as also in grouping, binding together and preserving intact the various guilds and artisan communities. But centuries ago that social and political environment ceased to exist, while the mischievous machinery of caste continues in full swing up to this day. Caste in India has divided the mass of Hindoo society into innumerable classes and cliques. It has created a spirit of extreme exclusiveness. It has crowded and killed legitimate ambition, healthy enterprise and combined adventure. It has fostered envy and jealousy between class and class, and set one community against another.

[Concluded in our next.]
