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ECHOES FROM THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS.

A GLIMPSE AT THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA.

[Continued from our last]

HAPPY HINDOO MARRIAGES.

"Happiness is not to be confounded with palatial dwellings, gorgeously fitted with soft seats and yielding sofas, with magnificent costumes, with gay balls or giddy dancing parties, nor with noisy revelries or drinking bouts and card tables; and as often, if not oftener, in that distant lotus land, as in your own beloved land of liberty, you will come across a young and blooming wife in the first flush of impetuous youth who, when suddenly smitten with the death of the lord of her life, at once takes [R1612 : page 26] to the pure and spotless garb of a poor widow, [R1613 : page 26] and with devout resignation awaits for the call from above to pass into the land which knows no parting or separation. But these are cases of those who are capable of thought and feeling. What sentiment of devoted love can you expect from a girl of twelve or fourteen whose ideas are so simple and artless and whose mind still lingers at skipping and dollmaking? What sense and reason is there in expecting her to remain in that condition of forced, artificial, lifelong widowhood? Oh, the lot of such child-widows! How shall I depict their mental misery and sufferings? Language fails and imagination is baffled at the task. Cruel fate – if there be any such power – has already reduced them to the condition of widows, and the heartless, pitiless customs of the country barbarously shave them of their beautiful hair, divest them of every ornament or adornment, confine them to loneliness and seclusion – nay, teach people to hate and avoid them as objects indicating something supremely ominous and inauspicious. Like bats and owls, on all occasions of mirth and merriment they must confine themselves to their dark cells and close chambers. The unfortunate Hindoo widow

is often the drudge in the family; every worry and all work that no one in the family will ever do is heaped on her head; and yet the terrible mother-in-law will almost four times in the hour visit her with cutting taunts and sweeping curses. No wonder that these poor forlorn and persecuted widows often drown themselves in an adjoining pool or a well, or make a quietus to their life by draining the poison-cup. After this I need hardly say that the much-needed reform in this matter is the introduction of widow marriages.

SOME HINDOO REFORMERS.

"The Hindoo social reformer seeks to introduce the practice of allowing such widows to marry again. As long ago as fifty years one of our great pundits, the late pundit V.S. of Bombay, raised this question and fought it out in central and northern India with the orthodox Brahmans. The same work, and in a similar spirit, was carried out in Bengal and Northern India, by the late Ishwar Ch. V. Sagar of Calcutta, who died only two years ago. These two brave souls were the Luther and Knox of India. Their cause has been espoused by many others, and until to-day perhaps about two hundred widow marriages have been celebrated in India. The orthodox Hindoos as yet have not begun to entertain this branch of reform with any degree of favor, and so anyone who marries a widow is put under a social ban. He is excommunicated; that is, no one would dine with him, or entertain any idea of intermarriage with his children or descendants. In spite of these difficulties the cause of widow marriage is daily gaining strength both in opinion and adherence.

"The position of woman. A great many reforms in the Hindoo social and domestic life cannot be effected until and unless the question as to what position does a woman occupy with reference to man is solved and settled. Is she to be recognized as man's superior, his equal, or his inferior? The entire problem of Hindoo reform hinges on the position that people in India will eventually ascribe to their women. The question of her position is yet a vexed question in such

advanced countries as England and Scotland. Here in your own country of the States you have, I presume to think, given her a superior place in what you call the social circle and a place of full equality in the paths and provinces of ordinary life. Thus my American sisters are free to compete with man in the race for life. Both enjoy the same, or nearly the same, rights and privileges. In India it is entirely different. The Hindoo lawgivers were all men, and, whatever others may say about them, I must say that in this one particular respect, viz., that of giving woman her own place in society, they were very partial and short-sighted men. They have given her quite a secondary place. In Indian dramas, poems and romances you may in many places find woman spoken of as the 'goddess' of the house and the 'deity of the palace,' but that is no more than a poet's conceit, and indicates a state of things that long, long ago used to be rather than at present is.

WOMEN'S BATTLE FROM BIRTH.

"For every such passage you will find the other passages in which the readers are treated with terse dissertations and scattering lampoons on the so-called innate dark character of women. The entire thought of the country one finds saturated with this idea. The Hindoo hails the birth of a son with noisy demonstrations of joy and feasting; that of a female child as the advent of something that he would most gladly avoid if he could. The bias begins here at her very birth. Whatever may be the rationale of this state of things, no part of the programme of Hindoo social reform can ever be successfully carried out until woman is recognized as man's equal, his companion and co-worker in every part of life; not his handmaid, a tool or an instrument in his hand, a puppet or a plaything, fit only for the hours of amusement and recreation. To me the work [R1613 : page 27] of social reform in India means a full recognition of woman's position. The education and enlightenment of women, granting to them liberty and freedom to move about freely, to think and act for themselves, liberating them from the prisons of long-locked zenana, extending to them the same rights and privileges, are some of the grandest problems of Hindoo

social reform. All these depend on the solution of the above mentioned problem of the position of woman in India.

EDUCATION OF THE MASSES.

"The masses or the common people in India are very ignorant and quite uneducated. The farmer, the laborer, the workman and the artisan do not know how to read or write. They are not able to sign their own names. They do not understand their own rights. They are custom bound and priest-ridden. From times past the priestly class has been the keeper and the custodian of the temple of knowledge, and they have sedulously kept the lower class in ignorance and intellectual slavery. Social reform does not mean the education and elevation of the upper few only: it means inspiring the whole country, men and women, high and low, from every creed and class, with right motives to live and act. The work classes need to be taught in many cases the very rudiments of knowledge. Night schools for them and day schools for their children are badly wanted.

FAILURE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS.

"Government is doing much; but how much can you expect from government, especially when that government is a foreign one, and therefore has every time to think of maintaining itself and keeping its prestige among foreign people? It is here that the active benevolence of such free people as yourselves is needed. In educating our masses and in extending enlightenment to our women you can do much. Every year you are lavishing – I shall not say wasting – mints of money on your so-called foreign missions and missionaries sent out, as you think, to carry the Bible and its salvation to the 'heathen Hindoo,' and thus to save him! Aye, to save him! Your poor peasants, your earnest women and your generous millionaires raise millions of dollars every year to be spent on foreign missions. Little, how little do you ever dream that your money is expended in spreading abroad nothing but Christian dogmatism and Christian bigotry, Christian pride and Christian exclusiveness. I entreat you to expend at least one-tenth of

all this vast fortune on sending out to our country unsectarian, broad learned missionaries that will spend their efforts and energies in educating our women, our men and our masses. Educate. Educate them first, and they will understand Christ much better than they would do by being 'converted' to the narrow creeds of canting Christendom.

"The difficulties of social reformers in India are manifold. Their work is most arduous. The work of engrafting on the rising Hindoo mind the ideals of a material civilization, such as yours, without taking in its agnostic or atheistic tendencies, is a task peculiarly difficult to accomplish. Reforms based on utilitarian and purely secular principles can never take a permanent hold on the mind of a race that has been essentially spiritual in all its career and history. Those who have tried to do so have failed. The Brahma-Somaj, or the church of Indian Theism, has always advocated the cause of reform, and has always been the pioneer in every reform movement. In laying the foundations of a new and reformed society the Brahma-Somaj has established every reform as a fundamental principle which must be accepted before any one can consistently belong to its organization.

"Acting on the model of ancient Hindoo society, we have so proceeded that our social institutions may secure our religious principles, while those principles regulate and establish every reform on a safe and permanent footing.

PLAN OF BRAHMO-SOMAJ.

"Social reform merely as such has no vitality in our land. It may influence here and there an individual; it cannot rear a society or sway a community. Recognizing this secret, the religion of the Brahma-Somaj has from its very birth been the foremost to proclaim a crusade against every social evil in our country. The ruthless, heartless practice of suttee, or the burning of Hindoo widows on the funeral pile of their husbands, was abolished through the instrumentality of the great Raja Ram Rohan Roy. His successors have all been earnest social reformers

as much as religious reformers. In the heart of Brahma-Somaj you find no caste, no image worship. We have abolished early marriage, and helped the cause of widow marriage. We have promoted intermarriage; we fought for and obtained a law from the British government to legalize marriage between the representatives of any castes and any creeds. The Brahmans have been great educationists. They have started schools and colleges, societies and seminaries, not only for [R1614 : page 27] young men, but for girls and young women. In the Brahma community you will find hundreds [R1614 : page 28] of young ladies who combine in their education the acquirements of the east and the west; oriental reserve and modesty with occidental culture and refinement. Many of our ladies have taken degrees in arts and sciences in Indian universities. The religion of the Brahma-Somaj is essentially a religion of life – the living and life-giving religion of love to God and love to man. Its corner-stones are the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man and the sisterhood of woman. We uphold reform in religion and religion in reform. While we advocate that every religion needs to be reformed, we also most firmly hold that every reform, in order that it may be a living and lasting power, needs to be based on religion.

"These are the lines of our work: we have been working out the most intricate problems of Hindoo social reform on these lines. We know our work is hard, but at the same time we know that the Almighty God, the father of nations, will not forsake us; only we must be faithful to his guiding spirit. And now, my brethren and sisters in America, God has made you a free people. Liberty, equality and fraternity are the guiding words that you have pinned on your banner of progress and advancement. In the name of that liberty of thought and action, for the sake of which your noble forefathers forsook their ancestral homes in far-off Europe, in the name of that equality of peace and position which you so much prize and which you so nobly exemplify in all your social and national institutions, I entreat you, my beloved American brothers and sisters, to grant us your blessings and good wishes, to give us your earnest advice and active cooperation in

the realization of the social, political and religious aspirations of young India. God has given you a mission. Even now he is enacting, through your instrumentality, most marvelous events. Read his holy will through these events, and extend to young India the right hand of holy fellowship and universal brotherhood."

Would that America, with all its advantages of the gospel, were able to give the needed help; but no, in common with all "Christendom," she has fallen short of her privileges, and is unable to save India from the ditch toward which she herself is blindly drifting. But, thank God! help is coming, and that right speedily, in the glorious establishment of the Kingdom of God over all the earth; and our blessed Christ, the Prince of peace, shall himself "speak peace unto the heathen; and his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." – Zech. 9:10.

A HEATHEN POEM.

[The following lines, from a recent journal of Madras, India, show what some of the best Hindoo minds are thinking at the present time.]

"Weary are we of empty creeds,
Of deafening calls to fruitless deeds;
Weary of priests who cannot pray,
Of guides who show no man the way;
Weary of rites wise men condemn,
Of worship linked with lust and shame;
Weary of custom, blind, enthroned,
Of conscience trampled, God disowned;
Weary of men in sections cleft,
And Hindoo life of love bereft,
Woman debased, no more a queen,
Nor knowing what she once hath been;
Weary of babbling about birth,
And of the mockery men call mirth;

Weary of life not understood,
A battle, not a brotherhood;
Weary of *Kali yuga* years,
Freighted with chaos, darkness, fears;
Life is an ill, the sea of births is wide,
And we are *weary*; who shall be our guide?"
