WOMEN IN HINDU SOCIETY.

IN approaching this subject, let us first realize that the women of India form part of a community of 300,000,000 people, in a country two-thirds the size of the United States. Here in America you have all grades of society and all conditions of living; in India the same is true on a larger scale. To report the convict camps of Georgia or the Mormon community of Utah as representing the national life here would be narrow and unjust. Still more so is it to base the moral or social state of all India upon the observations of foreigners in a few provinces.

You have heard a great deal of the condition of women in India; you have read many stories regarding these women, some of which are utterly false, some partially true, and others greatly exaggerated. You have learned from various sources that Hindu mothers throw their babies into the Ganges, where they are eaten by crocodiles. *I* did not know of this until I came to this country. I used to bathe in the Ganges almost every day, but never saw such a thing in my life. I have traveled in India from near the mouth of the Ganges to near its source, but never heard of such an act, nor did I meet a single woman who threw a living baby into the river. Those who tell these stories ought to know that crocodiles cannot live in the strong current of a river like the Ganges; they live only in water where the current is slow. Perhaps the stories arose from the fact that, in certain places, poor Hindus place dead bodies on the riverside, because they cannot afford the expense of cremating them; and there the bodies may be attacked by dogs, jackals, vultures, etc., or swept into the river.

You are also familiar with the story of the Juggernaut. I was once at the festival where it is used. It is a huge car made of solid wood, nearly four stories high, and is drawn by hundreds of men and women who become excited with religious enthusiasm. There may be accidents on these occasions, when

some of the multitude are run over and killed by the car. From this it is easy to see how the story may have arisen that the Hindus throw themselves under the car of Juggernaut in order to obtain salvation.

We often hear of the severity of Hindu lawgivers in prescribing the status of women. It is true that there are some passages of Manu and other legislators of ancient India that prescribe the status of women in the same spirit as was expressed by the laws of Moses amongst the ancient Hebrews, or by the mythology of Adam's fall, or by St. Paul, the disciple of Jesus. As the Christian world has held for nearly two thousand years that a woman must "obey" a man and consider him her superior, so in India that idea has been dominant. There are to be found such writings as: "Ordinarily, women are not fit for independence, for they are physically weaker than men and must be protected by friends and relatives;" but there are other passages that describe the extraordinary strength and valor that women have displayed in their lives. Manu says: "A woman in her childhood must be protected and taken care of by her parents, in her youth by her husband, and in old age by her sons and relatives." In the same book you will read a protest against that statement. He says: "Such women are truly secure who are always protected by their good inclinations and virtue. No

walls nor men can protect a woman who is not virtuous. Virtue, chastity, and purity are the only armor that will protect a woman so long as she lives." The wife of Buddha said, "Good women need no veiling more than the sun and moon."

The exclusion of women from the society of men, which we find in some parts of India, is not due to their religion but to other causes. It came into practise merely for self-defense against Mohammedan brutality. The Purda system, *i. e.,* the custom of not allowing women to appear in public, is not of Hindu origin, but was introduced into India by the Mohammedans. There are many parts of India where the Purda system does not exist at all—where men mix freely with women, travel together, and appear in public with the women unveiled. Sir Monier Williams writes: "Moreover, it must be noted that the seclusion and ignorance of women, which were once mainly due to the fear of the Mohammedan conquerors, do not exist to the same degree in provinces unaffected by those conquerors." The women of the upper classes have as much influence in family affairs as have those in Europe. "Indian wives often possess greater influence than the wives of Europeans," says Williams, "and one old grandmother will sometimes rule a whole household with a rod of iron."

The Hindu law allows legal powers to women. If you read "Sakuntala," one of the best dramas ever written in India (dramas always describe the social condition of the people most accurately), you will find that *Sakuntala* was allowed to plead her own cause at the court of the king Dusyanta, and that she boldly rebuked him after pointing out his faults. The Hindu law allows such privileges to women. Manu says that a wife must take part in all social, civil, and religious duties of a husband. Here is the definition of a wife given in "Mahabharata," the great epic:

> "A wife is half the man, his truest friend;
> A loving wife is a perpetual spring
> Of virtue, pleasure, wealth; a faithful wife
> Is his best aid in seeking heavenly bliss;
> A sweetly-speaking wife is a companion
> In solitude, a father in advice,
> A mother in all seasons of distress,
> A rest in passing through life's wilderness."

A wife does not adopt her husband's name in India, as European wives do. She does not merge her individuality in that of her husband, but retains it. Hindu law allows women a larger share in the management of property than the statutes of most Christian nations. In family affairs (secular and religious), in business transactions, and in trade, a husband can do nothing without permission of the privy council of the female members of the family. Unmarried daughters inherit, equally with the sons, their mother's estate. The special property that a woman gets as a dowry at her marriage cannot be

used by the husband. A wife cannot be held responsible for the debts of her husband or her sons. She must be supported by her husband so long as he lives, even if he goes abroad.

In ancient times, when the country was governed by Hindu kings, the Swayambara system of marriage was very common. It is the system of free choice by the maiden of a husband. When the Hindus lost their freedom they would have been unable to prevent the intermixture of races had such liberty been continued, so they abandoned that system of marriage and adopted that of betrothing their sons and daughters in their youth. The betrothal system, however, is not practised in all parts of India. Where it prevails it is the outcome of a long period of social and political discord. The Hindu religion has *never* sanctioned Hindu girls' assuming the responsibilities of marriage before attaining womanhood. The law of heredity is strictly observed by parents in choosing the husbands and wives of their children—according to their parentage, birth, social position, caste, and personal qualifications. Burnouf says, "Marriage in India was never a state of servitude for women." In Manu we find eight kinds of marriage described and discussed. Among them the contract by courtship is considered not to be the highest and best, because it generally proceeds from the idea of selfish desire and the gratification of the lower nature. Marriage must be based, not on sense pleasures, but on the higher ideal of spiritual union: it must be a sacred bond. The wife is called in Sanskrit *Sahadharmini; i. e.,* a partner in spiritual life. This word shows that marriage is a holy bond. God cannot be worshiped and prayers will not be heard if the wife does not join the husband. For this reason we have no divorce in India. Marriage, when based upon spiritual union, needs no divorce law, but always leads to a happy home life. The first duty of a husband, according to Manu, is to adore his wife; to give her everything she needs or desires—as clothes, ornaments, jewels, etc.—and to make her happy. "When women are honored the *devas* are pleased; but all virtue and all goodness leave the family where women are dishonored." Monier Williams says:

"They [wives] are generally loved, and cruel treatment by brutal husbands is unknown." A woman's body must not be struck, even with a flower, because it is sacred. For this reason Hindu law does not allow capital punishment for women.

Another mistaken idea is that Hindu women are never allowed to read or write. Of course, in many cases reading and writing are very limited in extent. They can read in their own vernacular the translations of the epics, and so forth, and they can write letters. There are hymns in the Rig-Veda composed by women *rishis,* or seers of Truth. Malaber boasts of seven ancient sages, and four of them were women. The moral sentences uttered by one of them (Avyar) are taught in the schools as the golden rules of life. The writings of Lilavati, a great female mathematician, are still read in native schools. The higher-class Hindu women always learn to read and write in their own vernacular; but they do not generally pass public examinations.

People in the West are generally mistaken when they say that Christianity has elevated the position of women. To social and physical science and to intellectual culture it is due that the eyes of men have been opened, and they have become more humane and just toward women. The more a nation has shaken off the thraldom of the Church, viewed in the light of theological creedalism, the freer and better have become the women of that nation. Compare the American woman with the Spanish.

To-day fault is found with the Hindus because they do not allow women to read certain portions of the Vedas; yet the Christian councils and popes, echoing the great apostle to the Gentiles, have prevented women not only from becoming priests but also from speaking in religious assemblies or administering baptism. Why is it that to-day only a few women are ministers, and that there is still a prejudice on the part of many against investing them with these rights? On similar points Hindu women are much freer. All wisdom, according to the Hindus, has come from Saraswati, a woman whom every Hindu must revere. The idea of the Motherhood of God is found in India alone; although in America Theodore Parker expressed the same idea, viewing the Personal side of the Deity as Maternal. Ecclesiastical and canon laws have been the source of woman's disabili-

ties. It was Roman law and Roman jurisprudence that gave woman a place far more elevated than that given to her by Christianity. The Christian learned to honor woman from the pagan. The Teutonic tribes, who were barbarians in the eyes of the Christians, held that a queen was as good as a king, and recognized a perfect equality of sex in all domestic and social relations.

Self-burning of widows was a great social evil in India. It was not sanctioned by the Hindu religion, but was due to other causes. It is often said that the "Christian government" has suppressed it; but the fact is, when the Mohammedans conquered India they treated the widows of the soldiers so brutally that the women preferred death to such inhuman treatment. As the Hindus do not bury, but cremate, their dead, when the funeral pyre was lighted it often happened that the poor and unprotected widow threw herself in despair into the fire—committed suicide, in the hope that she would join her husband after death. Some of the priests supported this by perverting the meaning of some spiritual passages. The educated classes strongly protested against the priests who supported this custom (which prevailed only in certain parts of India), and efforts were made to suppress the evil by force; but, as they could not do it without official help, they appealed to the ruling government, raised a large sum, gave it to the officers, and asked the Viceroy, Lord Bentinck, to pass a law against *suttee,* which he did. Thus the evil was practically suppressed by the Hindus themselves, through the help of the British government.

Mrs. F. A. Steele, the author of "On the Face of the Waters," who lived in India for nearly twenty-five years, mixing freely with the Hindus as inspectress of girls' schools in the Punjab, says: "Our standard of civilization is personal comfort—luxury—a thing absolutely unknown in native India. There is scarcely any difference there in the mode of living between the rich and poor. A man may spend wealth on jewels for

his wife, but not on pleasure or personal comfort." "In regard to the general position of women in India, I think it rather better than our own—certainly better than our own used to be. Women in India can hold property, and a widow always gets a fixed portion of her husband's estate. During the twenty-five years I lived in India I never came into personal contact with but one case of a girl going, as the phrase runs, wrong." Mrs. Steele says in regard to child marriages and child widows: "In my opinion child marriages are contrary to the Hindu religion, which teaches that a girl should be of marriageable age before she takes a husband. In the part of India with which I am acquainted—the Punjab—a girl is not married until she is thirteen or even older, and in that country she is a young woman at that age. The result of my personal observation is that marriages in India are singularly happy. There are fewer cases of unkindness and violence than in this country." Mrs. Steele further says: "Education is spreading amongst the women of the lower class in India." This is equally true in the case of the men of the lower classes; there is a general movement at present for the education of the masses. Miss Carpenter, after visiting India, said that the intelligent Hindus were earnest and extremely interested in the question of female education; but that at the same time she was convinced that such a movement must rise from the native Hindu community in order to have success.

The school already started by a native woman has done good; but it is hampered, and will be in its results, by the introduction of sectarian methods into secular education. The Hindus believe in absolute freedom of religious thought; so that anything contrary to this, especially from one of their own people, cannot fail to rouse antagonism to all such methods. In India we do not have the public school system, as in America. We have no free education in India. Eighty per cent. of the people, both men and women, are illiterate and utterly ignorant of material progress, but not of religion and morality. In these they are far ahead of the ignorant masses of America and Europe. They need secular education—in art, science, chemistry, physics, and their practical application to every-day life.

For want of such an education the masses in India do not know how to better their social condition, how to reform social evils, or how to be free from superstition and prejudice of all kinds.

Ardent efforts to convert the Hindu to Christianity have been great obstacles in the way of educational work for Hindu women. They have prevented the orthodox Hindu community from sending their girls to mission schools, or from allowing the women missionaries to enter families, because by their methods they bring discord. The system of education adopted by these workers resembles this: I start a school in New York for the education of your girls and boys, and teach them day by day this lesson: "Whatever your religion teaches is superstitious and false. If you worship or believe in Jesus you will not be saved from eternal punishment. What the Bible teaches is all nonsense; your God is a dead God. This is the only way to heaven, and your forefathers are all gone to hell," etc. How would you like such teachings? Would you send your boys and girls to my school? No; you would not. For the same reason Hindu parents do not like to send their children to the mission schools. Seeing the failure of such methods, the Hindus have now determined to start schools in different parts of India for the education of women, and for giving them secular education, which they actually need, without attacking their religious ideas or destroying their faith. Swami Vivekananda, who is well known in both England and America, has already started such a school in Calcutta, under the superintendence and direction of Miss Margaret Noble, who has gone to India from England for the purpose of helping such a movement. Miss Noble is a highly educated woman, and was an experienced teacher in London. At present she has charge of a kindergarten school for Hindu girls. It is on a small scale for want of funds; but we trust it will gradually grow into a large free school, where women of all ages will obtain free instruction in every branch of learning—thereby enabling them to better their present condition and to enjoy a broader and more useful life. SWAMI ABHEDANANDA.

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