

ANNIE BESANT ON THE HINDU WOMEN OF INDIA.

The Theosophist Leader Writes of Family and Social Relations in the Land of the Mahatmas.

THE first point to grasp in seeking to understand the complicated problems connected with Indian womanhood is that "Indian woman" is a label that is attached to a large number of very varied classes. First, we have the Hindu women of the four great castes, with their hundreds of sub-divisions. These again vary according to localities, the Hindu women of the North and the South differing widely in their ways of life and social customs. Next come the Mohammedan women, belonging to what is really a different world of thought, habits and family life. Then the Zoroastrian, or Parsi, women, a comparatively small but influential class. There remains a mass of unclassifiable women of the lowest working types, of mixed races, poor, ignorant, with little religion of any definite kind, often gentle and dutiful, though degraded, and with possibilities of future growth. These I will leave on one side, as they need to be taught the very elements of religion and morality; these are the "Indian women" that are reached by the Christian missionaries, and who figure as "converts" in missionary returns; they and the men of the same class have been neglected by their own countrymen, to the shame of the great and lofty Indian civilization.

An idea prevails largely in the West that Hindus are polygamists. Nothing can be further from the truth. Among all my Indian friends and acquaintances I do not know one, nor know of any one connected with them, who has more than one wife. I am told that here and there a prince may be found who is dissolute, and therefore is a polygamist; and that in rare cases a second wife is taken by a commoner, with the consent of the first, where, after years of married life no child has been born to the home.

To die childless is a horror to the orthodox Hindu. That difficulty is more often avoided by the adoption of a near relative as a son than by the taking of a second wife while the first is living.

The ideal of marriage among Hindus is of the loftiest character; the union is regarded as that of two souls, suited to mate with each other, for the attainment of a spiritual end; the physical union being a subordinate consideration and existing for the maintenance of the family. Hence marriage in extreme youth has been favored, and the boy and girl are taught to love each other and think of none other in this relation for years ere they come together as man and wife.

Another thing that has to be considered in this relation is that the Hindu custom is "the joint family system." A man, when he marries, does not leave the family house and make a new home for himself and his wife; such a course, from the Hindu standpoint, destroys family life. He brings his wife home to his parents and grandparents (if living), to his as yet unmarried sisters, his brothers and their wives and families, his uncles and grand-uncles, with theirs, all live under the one roof, with their private rooms and common rooms, the heads of the household being the grandparents, if both are living, or the eldest son (among the next generation) and his wife after the grandfather has passed away. In such a case the widowed grandmother remains a power in the house, and nothing important is done without her consent. Very beautiful is such a family life, all the children growing up together as one huge family, and the women held in the tenderest affection and respect; the elder women are the virtual rulers of the household life.

The younger women—wives or unmarried daughters—are trained by the elders, and in due time take their places, the "mother" being the central figure of the Hindu twine. Disobedience to parents is one of the worst of sins, and lack of reverence to the mother is well nigh unknown. Reverence to the gods,

to the spiritual teacher, to the parents, is impressed from infancy on all, and "where the women are not honored" no divine blessing rests. Such is the immemorial custom, and though Western ideas of "Independence" are beginning to mar the noble ideal of a perfect family life, myriads of happy homes remain where the old love and dutifulness are found. "The wife is subordinate to the husband?" Yes. He is her head, her beloved lord, cherished and served with untiring devotion, and the Hindu ideal wife is a model of love, fidelity and tender obedience. She lives for him and for her children, serving also his parents, until the time comes for her to rule the household. And she is repaid by a wealth of love, of tenderness, of which the Western world has no idea.

Few households are without a widow, and her position has been roughly commented on by Western writers. The Hindu widow does not re-marry, for death does not break the marriage bond. She leads the life most honored in India—that of the religious ascetic. Apart from all question of religion, much nonsense is talked about widow re-marriage. The number of men and women is about equal, and if one woman is to marry three or four times an equivalent number of women must remain unmarried altogether. This is what happens in the West, whereas in India all women marry.

Hindu women of two generations back were well educated for their work in life; they were trained from childhood in a knowledge of the noble Indian literature, and knew by heart whole books of ethical teachings in story, parable or lofty verse. They were taught domestic management as a science, medicine, the value of food stuffs, herbs, etc. But chief of all was the training by precept and example in a spiritual view of human life, the subordination of the physical to the spiritual, the perfect discharge of duty. And we find in Hindu homes a rare type of most gracious womanhood, divinely patient, gentle and unselfish, refined and sweet, with a delicate purity of thought and intuition, breathing out so pure an influence that the whole atmosphere grows fragrant with breaths of a more heavenly air than ours.

The younger Hindu women, unhappily, have not received this education of their elders, owing to the unconsciously experienced influence of Western ways, and are too often somewhat trivial and childish, though fair and sweet and lovable. Attempts are being made to introduce an education based on English models, and many schools are being opened with this end in view. But an education suited for a wholly different civilization—in which an ever-increasing number of women are thrown on their own exertions for a livelihood, and, competing with man in professions and trades, require an education like that of their male competitors—is entirely unsuitable for girls whose destiny is the home and not the market place.

I had the pleasure last December in Mysore of placing before the Maharani-Regent (the Queen Regent), and her Ministers a carefully thought-out view of the female education, which I believe to be needed for Hindu girls, and at the request of the Prime Minister I afterward prepared a paper, which he is having translated into the Southern vernaculars and widely circulated.

Certain it is that the matter is of the deepest importance for the future, for if Western influences triumph we shall only get bad replicas of an alien type, while the unique type of Hindu womanhood will be lost to the world, save in literature. Such loss may the gods avert.

Annie Besant

MARRIAGEABLE AGE.

In Austria a "man" and "woman" are supposed to be able to be capable of conducting a home of their own from the age of fourteen.

In Germany the man must be at least eighteen years of age.

In France the man must be eighteen and the woman fifteen; in Belgium the same.

In Spain the intended husband must have passed his fourteenth year and the woman her twelfth.

In Hungary, for Roman Catholics, the man must be fourteen years old and the woman twelve; for Protestants, the man must be eighteen and the woman fifteen.

In Greece the man must have seen at least fourteen Summers and the woman twelve.

In Portugal a boy of fourteen is considered marriageable, and a woman of twelve.

In Russia and Saxony they are a little more sensible, and a youth must refrain from entering into matrimony till he can count eighteen years, and the woman till she can count sixteen.

In Switzerland the men from the age of fourteen and the women from the age of twelve are allowed to marry.

In Turkey any youth and maiden who can walk properly, and can understand the necessary religious service, are allowed to be united for life.



ANNIE BESANT IN HER EASTERN ROBES AT THE GREAT MEETING OF THE THEOSOPHIST DELEGATES IN INDIA---FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.