

# ECHOES FROM THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

A GLIMPSE AT THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

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[Continued from our last.]

## INDIA'S SOCIAL AND NATIONAL CURSE

„It is an unmitigated evil and the veriest social and national curse. Much of our national and domestic degradation is due to this pernicious caste system. Young India has been fully convinced that if the Hindoo nation is once more to rise to its former glory and greatness this dogma of caste must be put down. The artificial restrictions and the unjust—nay, in many cases, inhuman and unhuman—distinctions of caste must be abolished. Therefore, the first item on the programme of social reform in India is the abolition of caste and the furtherance of free and brotherly intercourse between class and class as also between individual and individual, irrespective of the accident of his birth and parentage, but mainly on the recognition of his moral worth and goodness of heart.

„Freedom of intermarriage. Intermarriage, that is marriage between the members of two different castes, is not allowed in India. The code of caste rules does not sanction any such unions under any circumstances. Necessarily, therefore, they have been marrying and marrying for hundreds of years within the pale of their own caste. Now, many castes and their subsections are so small that they are no larger than mere handfuls of families. These marriages within such narrow circles not only prevent the natural and healthy flow of fellow-feeling between the members of different classes, but, according to the law of evolution, as now fully demonstrated, bring on the degeneration of the race. The progeny of such parents go on degenerating physically and mentally; and, therefore, there should be a certain amount of freedom for intermarriage. It is evident that this question of intermarriage is easily solved by the abolition of caste.

„Prevention of infant marriage. Among the higher castes of Hindoos it is quite customary to have their children married when they are as young as seven or eight, in cases not very infrequent as young as four and five.

## CHILD MARRIAGE AS PRACTICED

„Evidently these marriages are not real marriages—they are mere betrothals; but, so far as inviolability is concerned, they are no less binding upon the innocent parties than actual consummation of marriage. Parties thus wedded together at an age when they are utterly incapable of understanding the relations between man and woman, and without their consent, are united with each other lifelong, and cannot at any time be separated from each other even by law; for the Hindoo law does not admit of any divorce. This is hard and cruel. It often happens that infants that are thus married together do not grow in love. When they come of age they come to dislike each other, and then begins the misery of their existence. They perhaps hate each other, and yet they are expected to live together by law, by usage and by social sentiment. You can picture to yourselves the untold misery of such unhappy pairs. Happily, man is a creature of habits; and providence has so arranged that, generally speaking, we come to tolerate, if not to like, whatever our lot is cast in with. But even if it were only a question of likes and dislikes, there is a large number of young couples in India that happen to draw nothing but blanks in this lottery of infant marriage. In addition to this serious evil there are other

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evils more pernicious in their effects connected with infant marriage. They are physical and

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intellectual decay and degeneracy of the individual and the race, loss of individual independence at a very early period of life when youths of either sex should be free to acquire knowledge and work out their own place and position in the world, consequent penury and poverty of the race, and latterly the utterly hollow and unmeaning character imposed upon the sacred sacrament of marriage. These constitute only a few of the glaring evils of Hindoo infant marriage. On the score of all these the system of Hindoo infant marriage stands condemned, and it is the aim of every social reformer in India to suppress this degrading system. Along with the spread of education the public opinion of the country is being steadily educated; and, at least among the enlightened classes, infant marriages at the age of four and five are simply held up to ridicule. The age on an average is being raised to twelve and fourteen; but nothing short of sixteen as the minimum for girls and eighteen for boys would satisfy the requirements of the case. Our highest ideal is to secure the best measure possible; but where the peculiar traditions, customs and sentiments of the people cannot give us the best, we have for the time being to be satisfied with the next best and then keep on demanding a higher standard.

## **MARRIAGE LAWS IN GENERAL**

„The Hindoo marriage laws and customs were formulated and systematized in the most ancient

times; and, viewed under the light of modern times and western thought, they would require in many a considerable radical reform and reasoning. For instance, why should women in India be compelled to marry? Why should they not be allowed to choose or refuse matrimony just as women in western countries are? Why should bigamy or polygamy be allowed by Hindoo law? Is it not the highest piece of injustice that, while woman is allowed to marry but once, man is allowed (by law) to marry two or more than two wives at one and the same time? Why should the law in India not allow divorce under any circumstances? Why should a woman not be allowed to have (within the lifetime of her husband) her own personal property over which he should have no right or control? These, and similar to these, are the problems that relate to a thorough reform of the marriage laws in India. But, situated as we are at present, society is not ripe even for a calm and dispassionate discussion on these—much less than for any acceptance of them, even in a qualified or modified form. However, in the no distant future people in India will have to face these problems. They cannot avoid them forever. But, as my time is extremely limited, you will pardon me if I avoid them on this occasion.

„Widow marriage. You will be surprised to hear that Hindoo widows from among the higher castes are not allowed to marry again. I can understand this restriction in the case of women who have reached a certain limit of advanced age, though in this country it is considered to be in perfect accord with social usage even for a widow of three score and five to be on the lookout for a husband, especially if he can be a man of substance. But certainly you can never comprehend what diabolical offense a child widow of the tender age of ten or twelve can have committed that she should be cut away from all marital ties and be compelled to pass the remaining days of her life, however long they may be, in perfect loneliness and seclusion. Even the very idea is sheer barbarism and inhumanity. Far be it from me to convey to you, even by implication, that the Hindoo home is necessarily a place of misery and discord, or that true happiness is a thing never to be found there. Banish all such idea if it should have unwittingly taken possession of your minds.

**[Continued in our next.]**

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