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SUPERSTITIOUS EXPOSURE OF INFANTS IN INDIA.

INFANTICIDE IN INDIA.

[VIGNETTE.]

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THERE cannot be any subject more interesting to a contemplative and philanthropic mind than the recent indications of the decline of some of the most dreadful superstitions which ever debased the human race. Though the symptoms of the approaching fall of paganism in India may be few and faint, little doubt can exist upon the minds of those persons who have lately visited that interesting portion of the Eastern world, that the unceasing labours of zealous Christians, aided by the spread of intellectual acquirements, will, in a comparatively short period, overthrow this monstrous system of religious error, which has so long and so fatally enthralled the minds of the followers of Brahma.

Hitherto the unceasing efforts of Missionaries, who have struggled against the most formidable difficulties, only to meet with the bitterest disappointment, have appeared to be nearly wholly unsuccessful; but though the fruits of their exertions seem to be scanty, and of little account, their efforts have not been made in vain, and we may justly attribute the falling off of religious enthusiasm to the new ideas engendered by the dissemination of the Scriptures through Hindostan. It is impossible not to experience the deepest and most heartfelt regret, at the moral and religious condition of a people who are so vividly impressed with a feeling of veneration, that they could not exist without a god. The same strong reverence for the Creator of all good, and the dispenser of every blessing, which leads them to prostrate them-

selves before stocks and stones, representations of the attributes of the Deity, would, if properly directed, render them far more zealous in the discharge of their duties than the less imaginative natives of colder climes, whom it is so difficult to warm, even though the light of truth beams upon them with its brightest ray.

It would not be possible, in the limits prescribed to the present volume, to give the slightest sketch of the fearful horrors which have sprung from a religion which sanctions every crime, and we must therefore confine ourselves to a few observations upon a barbarous practice, which prevails to an unlimited extent,—that of infanticide. Women ought to be the strongest and most zealous supporters of Christianity, for they owe every blessing they possess to those divine precepts of the gospel which make no distinction of sex, and which inculcate the support and protection of the weak against the strong. Amongst Hindoos, females are of no account, and any pretext is sufficient to occasion the destruction of infants who, coming in the shape of daughters, promise to entail expense and vexation upon their parents. The difficulty of procuring fitting marriages for the daughters of men of rank, and the large sums which it is considered to be essential to spend at weddings in India, are among the chief causes of the commission of a crime which is justified upon the score of expedience. Human life, especially that of females, is nothing when compared to family honours; and though parental affection may be very strong towards those daughters who have been permitted to grow up to a marriageable age, there is little hesitation in any sacrifice which a mistaken sense of dignity seems to demand. When it was found impossible, from political reasons, to fulfil the bridal contract of the princess Kishen Kowen, (a princess of one of the Rajpoot states,) the most beautiful, amiable, and accomplished woman of her day, her death alone would satisfy the jealous feelings of her relatives, impatient of the disgrace of having an unmarried daughter in their house. Obedient to their com-

mands, she swallowed poison; but the effect not being speedy enough, an uncle rushed into her chamber, and strangled her with his own hands. Many tribes of Rajpoots prevent the occurrence of such tragedies, by destroying female infants at their birth; and the ease with which this crime is committed, and the strong motives of parents to rid themselves of worse than useless offspring, render it impossible to say to how great an extent the practice is carried by people who do not attach any sin to the action. The British authorities have endeavoured to put a stop to this dreadful custom, but their efforts have only been partially successful; and it will not be possible wholly to prevent it, until a change shall take place in the moral feelings of the people, and they can be taught to comprehend the heinous nature of the offence, and its dreadful enormity in the sight of God.

Even in Bengal, which has for so many years been subjected to British control, infanticide is practised to a shocking extent. An opinion prevalent amongst all ignorant people, is sometimes the cause of the exposure of an unhappy babe, supposed to be under the influence of an evil spirit: we have heard of cruel experiments tried upon changelings, in former times, amongst superstitious people in Europe; and in India, to this day, a child imagined to be possessed by some malignant demon, is hung up on the boughs of a tree in a basket, to take its chance of surviving the attacks of armies of insects, and of rapacious birds. Should the helpless creature struggle with its misery during three days, the mother will receive it again; but this can seldom happen under the frightful circumstances of its situation; and we should look upon the parents who could abandon their offspring to the chances of so cruel a fate, as little less than fiends, were it not for our consideration of the causes which lead to this barbarous and unnatural conduct. Although the Hindoo shastras not only do not countenance infanticide, but denounce it as a crime of the

greatest magnitude, there is nothing in the religion which tends to soften and ennoble the heart ; and the opinions of a spiritual adviser are always sufficient to induce the commission of the most atrocious acts. Under better guidance, the Hindoo character would be one of the most amiable in the world, since, in despite of the general demoralization produced by the worst species of fatalism, and the worship of deities supposed to delight in scenes of blood and horror, in no place do we find more faithful servants, or more humane, kind, and gentle dispositions. The strange anomalies produced every day—the union of the most appalling vices with virtues of no common order—are wholly attributable to the fallacies of a religion the most dreadful which man has ever invented. In his worst acts, the follower of Brahma believes that he is propitiating the deity, in one of the numerous forms under which the sovereign power is worshipped in India. Paying homage to a plurality of attributes, though not to a plurality of gods, (for some of the least enlightened will declare that there can be only one God,) every act of violence is supposed to be acceptable to the destructive power—and hence the fearful waste of human life, having its origin in a supposed duty, and degenerating into a selfish principle, which surrenders the weak, the helpless, and the useless to a cruel doom. The most sublime notion of the omnipotence of the Supreme Ruler of all things, is perverted by these deluded people, who leave their fellow-creatures to perish, under the conviction that God will preserve them if it be his pleasure, and that it is useless to contend against the power of the Almighty. “It is the will of God,” is a phrase in common use amongst all classes of Hindoos ; and every incident of life, whether trifling or important, is supposed to emanate from a direct decree of Heaven. The infant exposed in a basket, during its fearful ordeal is believed to be committed to the all-sufficient care of an unerring Providence ; and, impressed with this idea, excepting when under the influence of the strong

excitement produced by the frightful orgies with which the festivals in honour of the destructive power are celebrated, the most heartless apathy prevails amongst the people at the sight of human suffering. They rejoice when the Moloch of their imaginations is appeased, and satiated with blood ; and all the kinder feelings of their nature are deadened by the belief that it would be vain to struggle against an immutable destiny. They, however, shew that they are not destitute of the natural impulses of humanity, for, if there seems to be any relenting on the part of the deity, they take advantage of it, and will adopt those infants who survive the trial to which they have been subjected.

Mr. Ward relates, in his "Hindoo Mythology," that the late Mr. Thomas, a missionary, once saved, and restored to its mother, an infant which had fallen out of a basket, at Bholahatü, near Malda, at the moment a shakkal was running away with it. As this gentleman and Mr. Carey were afterwards passing under the same tree, they found a basket hanging in the branches, containing the skeleton of another infant, which had been devoured by ants.

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