

THE POSITION OF WOMEN.

SIR HERBERT RISLEY, the Director of Ethnography for India, issued in November a collection of notes on the Position of Women among Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists and Jains, compiled by Rao Bahadur B. A. Gupte, the Assistant Director.

The pamphlet is made up of quotations giving details of the position and duties of women as laid down by the leading authorities in these four religious sects. Mr. Gupte says in the introduction:—"The evolution of the present-day women of India can be conveniently studied from these pages. It is interesting to see how from the woman-bating Jain and Buddhist periods women rose higher among the Hindus and higher still among the Mahomedans. The advance, though very slow, is quite chronological, and the present Brahmo or Native Christian ladies and their friends have much to learn from this brochure."

Among the old Buddhist and Jain teachings some respect for mothers is shewn, and the duty of supporting them is enjoined, but for the most part women are to be avoided; they "tempt even the Munis (Saints)," and are "the cause of quarrels." One picture is given in this era of "Woman as a Ministering Angel. (An indirect recital of the duties of a wife during her husband's illness)" "Oh Great King, my loving and faithful wife moistened my breast with the tears of her eyes. The poor lady did not eat, nor drink, nor bathe, nor use perfumes, wreaths, and an ointment, with my knowledge or without it. Oh Great King, she did not leave my side even for a single moment, but she could not rid me of my pains." But this is offset by the glimpse of the poor hen-pecked husband, which is headed "Woman as a Wife"—"When a son, the reward of their life, is born (the mother bids the father) to hold the baby, or to give it to her. Thus some supporters of their sons have to carry burdens like camels. Getting up at night they lull the baby asleep, like nurses; and though they are ashamed of themselves, they wash the clothes like washermen. This has been done by many men who for the sake of pleasures have stooped so low; they become the equals of slaves, animals, servants, beasts of burden,—mere nobodies." The general verdict seems to be that "The world is greatly troubled by women."

Going on to the Hindu law-givers, there is a continual reiteration of what a woman must or must not do, with very little that she may do; and practically nothing of what she should be, except the devoted slave of her husband, however unworthy he is, and of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. One is impressed by the utter absence of high ideals of love and service, there being no idea of social service but alms-giving and absolutely no independence. "A woman has no independence at any time. She should be brought up by being supplied with food, ornaments, clothes, etc." If this tree of formal regulations has brought forth the fruit of selfless love and devotion which Sister Nivedita (Miss Margaret E. Noble) eulogizes in "The Web of Indian

Life," it must needs be that some other scion has been grafted on to it. It is difficult to reconcile such quotations as these in Mr. Gupte's book:—"Even if the husband is cruel, selfwilled, devoid of merits, however bad, wives should serve him like a god."—"If through irritation or for fault he beat her, a woman that would wish to assault him is a veritable tigress."—"If he shows contempt to her she should not retaliate. If he assaults, she should not lose her temper" with these statements in "The Web of Indian Life:"—"The courtesy of husbands to their wives is quite unfailing among Hindus. 'Thou shalt not strike a woman even with a flower,' is the proverb."—"The husband would not be so strenuous to return home at his best if his wife did not understand and appreciate his noblest qualities,"—"It has seemed to me in watching Hindu couples that they were singular in the frequent attainment of a perfect intimacy."

This definition is given of a faithful wife—"She who dines if her husband dines, she who eats at his command, after he sits, she who sleeps after he sleeps, in short she who is agreeably disposed towards him is a faithful wife." "She who is sorry if he is sorry, she who is glad if he is glad, she who pays no attention to personal charms, who during his absence gets lean, and she who discards life at his death is alone a faithful wife." Is it because the faithful wife should discard life at her husband's death that there is practically no mention in this collection of rules of the position and duties of widows? It would be interesting to know if the ideas prevalent among Europeans of widows being considered accursed and of evil omen, and living in hardship and servitude are consistent with the actual state of affairs, or if that given in "The Web of Indian Life" is the truer picture:—"Yet still the widows represent the intellectual centres amongst women. The more modern they are, the less likely is it that they can reel off Sanskrit verses, but the more probable that they read books in the vernaculars. In any case, they produce the saints; and the position of a woman saint in India is such that no man in her neighbourhood will venture on a journey without first presenting himself before her veiled form, taking the dust of her feet, and receiving her whispered blessing."—"It is because her life is holier than that of others that no hand must touch her food, though she may prepare and serve the meals of any in the house. For the same reason, if questions of precedence arise, she stands higher than married women." Other books give an impression quite the reverse. A man starting on a journey and meeting a widow is said to turn back, as only having seen her will bring him ill luck, and the widow's position in the family is more suggestive of a poor Cinderella than of her older and happier sisters. The real condition probably varies with the status of the family or lies somewhere between the two extremes. Mr. Gupte would render a great service to the English community in India and students of Indian life generally if he would at some time bring his notes up to date, for it is really more important that the present improved position should be known than the old orthodox one.

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Religious life is almost entirely restricted to the worship of the husband. "Women need not observe religious austerities, fasts, etc. They reach heaven if they but serve their husbands faithfully." "The woman, who performs austerities and observes fasts, takes herself to hell by such conduct and reduces the term of life of her husband."—"If a woman feels inclined to go on pilgrimage to holy places, she should drink the washings (*sic*) of her husband's feet; because to her, the husband is higher than either Vishnu or Shankar (Shiva)." But on the other hand, Brahmin women are allowed to study a few of the religious books.

Mr. Gupte makes the statement that women rose higher under the Mahomedans. This seems surprising at first in view of the purdah system and the prevalence of polygamy, but education was encouraged and rights of inheritance insured to women in a way unknown in the earlier Hindu laws. There is also a suggestion of compromise in marriage, which savours of greater consideration for women. "If women fear ill usage or feel aversion for their husbands, it shall be no crime in them to settle the matter amicably between themselves, for a reconciliation is better than separation."

The paragraph quoted from the introduction gives the impression that it is only the Brahmo and Native Christian women for whom these teachings of the ancient law-givers have no weight, and who are living on a higher plane of service and appreciation. Certainly all classes must be slowly rising away from belief in the innate viciousness of women. What could be expected of women so long as the prevalent idea about them was expressed in Manu's enumeration of their propensities:—"Sleeping, sitting (idle), wearing ornaments, sensuality, anger, impudence, remorselessness, scandalousness, are the instincts of women."

The improvement in the condition of women, and it has been great in many quarters, is chiefly due to the modern education of men; but real emancipation will only come in India, as in other countries, when the women themselves are educated. The Maharaja of Burdwan, addressing the Kshattriya Conference at Lahore, said: "You say in one of your resolutions that female education should be encouraged. Brethren, 'encouraged' is, to say the least, a very mild word. It ought to have been an accomplished fact by now, and it is a thousand pities that our progress has been so slow. But let not the lethargy and ennui of the past dishearten us, but let us with a whole-heartedness devote ourselves to the cause of our women-kind, so that they may be real mothers of men, and of such men as India may justly be proud of."

Mr. Gupte's book is of great interest and parts of it are amusing, but as a whole it is very sad, even if it is only a picture of the past. However, the future is full of hope, and the coming days will certainly see the women taking their rightful place in the work and pleasures of this vast country.

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