AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE BRAHMO SOMAJ

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THE BRAHMO SOMAJ.

BY

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PREFACE.

THE following Sketch was written at the desire of Dr. Max Krenkel of Dresden, as an Introduction to a German translation which he is about to publish of the "Lectures and Tracts" of Babu Keshub Chunder Sen. Its publication in India at the present time having been thought desirable by friends in Calcutta, Dr. Krenkel has kindly permitted the Sketch to appear there in its original English form.

The statements of the narrative have been drawn from innumerable Brahmo authorities, public and private. For the earlier portions I am almost wholly indebted to an unfinished treatise entitled "Brahmo Somaj or Theism in India," which appeared in the *Indian Mirror* at intervals from December 1864 to September 1866. (I regret that I am not sufficiently advanced in Bengali to make use of the "Brahmo Somajer Itibritta," published at Calcutta in 1871, the fullest History of the Brahmo Church that has yet appeared.) For the

rest, I could not crowd so condensed a narrative with specific references, but I have taken every possible means to obtain strict accuracy in my statements of fact. For such judgments as I have ventured to give or imply concerning characters and events, no one is responsible but myself.

In bringing this Sketch, written only for perusal in Christendom, before a mixed Indian public, it may be proper to add that I am a Trinitarian Christian, and not a member of the Brahmo Somaj. But I feel strongly that all earnest believers in a Personal and Perfect God hold so much vital truth in common, that Christians and Theists, without the slightest unfaithfulness to their separate differences of conviction, may and should co-operate largely for the promotion of truth and righteousness, and the abatement of heathenism and unbelief. And it may in some small degree contribute to that end to help in spreading a fuller knowledge of the Theistic Church of India.

S. D. C.

London, December, 1872.

I.—RAM MOHUN ROY.

THE Brahmo Somaj or Theistic Church of India owes its origin to the Rajah Ram Mohun Roy, a man of remarkable mind and noble character, who was the first Hindu reformer since the establishment of the British rule in that country. His vigorous and persevering exertions were the main cause of the abolition of the barbarous rite of Suttee; he was one of the foremost pioneers of native education, and his valuable suggestions contributed much to the reforms which took place in the early political administration of India. But it is only as a religious reformer that we have now to speak of him.

He was born in 1774, at Radhanagur, in the district of Burdwan, and was of the Brahmin caste, his mother's ancestors being of the sacerdotal order by profession as well as by birth. From his earliest days the strong religious tendency of his mind was manifested, and while yet a boy he appears to have been a staunch follower of Vishnu, his first duty every morning being to recite a chapter of the Bhagvat. When about the age of sixteen, he composed a manuscript calling in question the validity of Hindu idolatry. This, together with his known sentiments on the subject, produced a coolness between him and his immediate kindred, which induced him to leave home. "He

travelled through several parts of India, cultivating theological studies and making researches, and spent three years in Thibet, where, also, his anti-idolatrous proclivities excited the anger of the worshippers of the Lama." At the age of twenty he was recalled by his father, and restored to favour; but Ram Mohun's continued controversies with the Brahmins, and his interference with their custom of burning widows, &c., aroused their animosity, and caused his father again to withdraw from openly countenancing him, though a private goodwill was still maintained. "After my father's death" (in 1803), he says, "I opposed the advocates of idolatry with still greater boldness. Availing myself of the art of printing now established in India, I published various works and pamphlets against their errors, in the native and foreign languages. The ground which I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahminism, but to a perversion of it, and I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmins was contrary to the practice of their ancestors, and the principles of the ancient books and authorities which they profess to revere and obey."*

Nor did he confine his attention to the Hindu religion alone. Besides Sanskrit and English, he studied Persian, Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew. He went through the Hindu, Mahometan, and Christian Scriptures with indefatigable perseverance, setting forth the Unity of God, from the teachings of all these books, while arguing against all

* Letter published in the London *Athenæum* of October 5th, 1833.

doctrines contravening strict Monotheism. But though his sympathies were given to the noblest elements in every religious body, his own creed was never identified with any of them. Nor did he seek to found a new sect or to originate a new creed, however pure and fundamental. His great ambition was to bring together men of all existing persuasions into a system of universal worship of the One True God, the common Father of all mankind. By degrees, friends gathered round him to sympathize and co-operate in this aim, and after one or two unsuccessful attempts, he at length, in January 1830, founded what was then called the Brahmu Subha or Brahmiya Sumaj (Society of God) in the city of Calcutta. He bought a house in the Chitpore Road, Jorasanko, endowed it with a small fund for the maintenance of public worship according to specified directions, and placed the whole in the hands of trustees. (In the course of this same year he had the happiness of seeing the Suttee abolished by law throughout British India.) In the following November, he sailed for England, charged with several public duties for India. He had long desired to see our country, and his visit here created much interest in liberal circles, where his cultivated mind, dignified presence, and generous character, won him universal regard and esteem. Much was hoped from him on his return to India, but his career was suddenly cut short, and to the grief of all who knew him, he died at Bristol, September 27th, 1833, after a brief illness. His remains lie in Arno's Vale Cemetery, where a handsome oriental monument was raised over