THE CREEDS OF INDIA: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH. A LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE UDDINGSTON YOUNG MEN'S MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION, OCTOBER 9TH, 1879

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SIR EDWARD COLEBROOKE

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BY

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I have endeavoured in this lecture to give a popular account of a series of changes amounting to revolutions of opinion, which India has passed through from the remotest time of which we have any record. The reception my address met with was very gratifying, and I was subsequently requested to deliver it again to another audience. This has encouraged me to hope that my sketch may interest a larger circle of readers, and I now send it forth in print. In preparing it for the Press I have expanded it very considerably, and after all it must be regarded as an outline of a very large subject.

I had thought of prefacing this paper with some suggestions to guide those who may desire to follow up the subject; but the materials are now very large, and scattered over such a variety of publications that it would be difficult to make a selection. There are very few systematic treatises on subjects connected with the Vedic literature suitable to the general reader. Some are referred to in these pages. Works on Buddhism are in greater demand, and those who desire further information will find the materials ready at hand. It is very satisfactory to find that popular information on all subjects connected with the antiquities of India are now sought for by a larger circle of readers than was the case sixty years since.

E. C.

THE CREEDS OF INDIA.

I.

THE VEDAS.

The subject which I have chosen for this lecture will appear to many of my hearers dry and, I fear, repelling. I propose to carry you through a history of some three thousand years, dealing with matters that cannot be presented in a light or attractive form, but have been laid open by the labour of scholars under circumstances of unusual difficulty. It is a history of religious opinion in a distant country and in remote ages, that presents none of those stirring incidents which excite the imagination, and to which the public usually turn when they open a chapter on the world's history. It is drawn from no historical records, for India has none, except what belongs to modern times. What we know directly of the political events which have influenced its destiny is chiefly derived from highly cultivated nations like the Greeks, who have come in contact with them in ancient times, or in more recent times from the Mahomedan conquerors of that country.

But India has a literature, and by its aid we learn something of the social life and religious opinions of its inhabitants at different epochs, some of them far removed from our time; and we know that they have undergone great changes, and that these changes have had great influence on hundreds of millions of neighbouring nations. I propose to present you with a short sketch of them. The results, I should add, have been worked out by the labour of successive scholars, some of them being men of eminent genius.

There are minds that feel a mysterious fascination in the remote history of their own and of other countries. The very obscurity which surrounds it constitutes the charm. Though there is an uncertainty with regard to some passages in this narrative, the main outline rests, in my opinion, on the soundest criticism.

As regards myself, I can only say, in justification of my having taken it up, that I have been, to some extent, familiar with Indian subjects from early days; that I was specially led to the study of the matter I have taken in hand about ten years since, when I undertook the biography of my father, a pioneer in the study of the literature of ancient India, and one of the greatest oriental scholars of his day; and I have since then followed with interest the progress of oriental research both at home and abroad.

If I were asked to state in a few words the popular view of India, as it prevailed some fifty years since, and which exists to a certain degree to the present day, I should say that it was a country a prey to the grossest superstitions, and whose people are divided into castes, that place an insuperable barrier between different classes, and form an obstacle to progress and improvement; and that the present condition of society has existed, with very little change, from the remotest ages.

The public have been led into this error regarding the past, and, to some extent, the present condition of this continent (for error it is), by the accounts which have come down to us from the Greeks more than 2000 years ago, and, partly, owing to the fact that the Hindus acknowledge the sanctity of certain ancient works called the *Vedas*, written in a language long obsolete, and that these works continue to be referred to as authorities in law and religion, and are employed for purposes of ritual at the present day. There is also a code of laws called the Institutes of Menu, written in the same dead language, the *Sanscrit*, and translated into English about eighty or ninety years since, which gives a picture of the social and religious life of that portion

of the people of India who recognize the authority of the *Vedas*, and the supremacy of the Brahmins, which resembles, in some of the leading particulars, their condition in the present day.

I may say, in passing, that while speaking of the people of India, you must dismiss from your minds any notion of India being occupied by one race professing one religion, or by two or three races of people. Putting aside the Mahomedans, who are estimated at forty-one millions, being one-sixth of the whole population, we have a variety of nations, differing as much as the nations of Europe. There are certain broad divisions, as the people of Hindustan, the Bengalees, the Marathas, the Punjabees, several distinct races in the south, besides various wild tribes in the hill country in Central India, and on the eastern frontier. To what extent the Indians are split up and divided may be inferred from the great variety of languages and dialects spoken throughout that great continent. My father, writing in 1801, estimated that there were fifty-seven or even eighty-four provinces, all with peculiar languages. But in speaking of India in the present day we embrace a larger circle, and, according to the estimate of Professor Monier Williams, there are, if we include the Tibetan dialects of the Himalayas, at least 100 languages and dialects; and Mr. Cust, who has lately written a work on the same subject, estimates that there are no less than 300 varieties of tongues. You may imagine from this how great must be the diversity of religious opinion; and that what we call the Hindu religion may really embrace a variety of faith and teaching.

But, to return from this digression, the accounts which have come down to us from the Greeks are very curious. After the invasion of the country by Alexander the Great, in the fourth century before Christ, Greek kingdoms were established throughout Asia, and one especially arose on the north-west of Affghanistan, and India became to some extent known to the Greeks through embassies and travellers; and much of the information they possessed is to be