

# THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY.

## AMERICAN SECTION.

### Oriental Department.

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*First.*—To form a nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, or color

*Second.*—To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions, and sciences, and demonstrate the importance of that study.

*Third.*—To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.

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#### SOME CUSTOMS OF ARYAVARTA.

##### I

RYAVARTA is that land now called India. Instead of using the term Hindû I have adopted the word Aryavarta in this title intentionally and with what seems to me to be a good reason. Although some of my countrymen have given their approval to the use of "Hindû" as a proper designation for us, yet it is true that this title was given to us by the Mohammedan conquerors as one of contempt and as meaning "black, bad, thief," and so on. I, therefore, do not think it should be used; some other one ought to come into vogue more representative of our descent, of our ideals, of our ancient state toward which we ever strive. "Arya" means "wise or noble," and "Aryavarta" "the land of the wise." Other names are Bharata Varsha, the land of the Bharata, for Varsha is a division or region; and Inindustan, of which "In" means the sun, "Indu" the moon, and "Stan" a place or country, having reference to the solar and lunar dynasties of India. The Mussulmans came and took our country

and called us Hindû; the English followed and retained the name, calling the country India. But these names are not found in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Shastras*, or any other of our sacred books; but there the name is Aryavarta, Bharata Varsha, or otherwise. It is of course quite possible that the Mohammedans, having no sympathy with any of our traditions, very carelessly or intentionally used the term Hindû.

All peoples have their habits and customs, which are nearly always the natural result of the religion and philosophy at the bottom of their thoughts. If they have no religion of their own—as, for instance, the European and American nations whose religions are borrowed from Semitic races, or else are absent—their habits and customs are generally of a mixed character, but in an old country like Aryavarta or India, which for so many centuries has had a religion and philosophy peculiarly its own, the study of the habits and customs growing from that must be of interest and value. And especially in India, for another reason—that is, there are found the old habits and customs of a past untouched by foreign influences, side by side almost with others taken up or imposed by force from the conqueror's civilization. Such a study as this I would recommend to all true theosophists who desire to enlarge their conceptions of human brotherhood by becoming better acquainted than hitherto with my people, who were once called by Englishmen of education and supposed intelligence, “blackamoors,” “heathen,” and other opprobrious names. As, for the present occasion I will not be able in the limits of this first paper to say all that should be said, or, perhaps, even all that the title of the paper seems to suggest or demand, what will be done is to speak to you as a brother theosophist, as a son of Bharata Varsha, about some of the habits and customs past and present of my country.

**WOMEN IN INDIA.**—Before the Mohammedan conquest, women in India were educated, learned and free. This freedom extended even to their taking part as soldiers in the military operations of the country. They could go to and take part in the sacrifices with their husbands. This is seen very clearly in the picture showing Rama and his wife preparing to offer daily devotions at the altar, and in another where Krishna and his wife are also at their devotions together. They wore no veils in those days, and were not secluded, but associated with the male members of the family. But later they wore veils and were secluded from the gaze of others. The reason for this arose when the power fell into the hands of the Mohammedans, who looked upon the Hindû women as additions to their harems and only with lust, looking about, or

as we say in our own tongue "peering anxiously," for new women to add to the number of their wives.

The people had no power to resist this, and so in order to protect their women when walking veils were adopted and great seclusion came into practice. This habit is only about 900 years old. And when the English came as conquerors my people were full of suspicion, very much increased also by some of the acts of the early English officials, and the women themselves grew at last not to wish for more freedom just because of the dangers they feared. Such fears are those felt by the women of all nations. When I was in London at the time of the excitement about "Jack the Ripper" I noticed that the English women were afraid to walk abroad, and it made me think of the origin of the habit of our women of wearing veils and being secluded because of the Mohammedans, who, in their eyes, were so many fiends like "Jack the Ripper." The loss of honor under them was worse than death. But now this old habit is fading out in places; in the Dekkan, which is in Southern India, veils are not worn, and women walk freely about, for of late years a greater confidence has arisen that the laws and rights of the people will be respected.

The proofs about the freedom of women in the old days may be found in the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Upanishads*. In the *Upanishads* such characters as Gargi are women who discuss high religious questions with men such as Yagnavalkia, and one great woman—Lilavati—wrote a book on mathematics, and hundreds of such could be named.

The women of India, both high and low caste, rise at 6 A. M. and go to the Ganges River or some adjacent stream to wash. Their dress is very scanty but ample for the warm climate of India. No shoes whatever are worn on the feet, and the dress is made of very thin material. The morning is generally occupied in bathing and worshipping idols. About 10 o'clock these duties for the day being over they return to their homes. The domestic duties which are recognized in all civilized countries as the proper sphere for women, are unknown and unappreciated in India. Among the Indian women who are married a child is a source of great pleasure. The married women are fond of children, and if they do not have them, they petition heaven through idols to furnish them with offspring. This is particularly so among the ignorant class. Many fakirs and members of the Bairajee and Udasi sects pretend to women that they can procure them children and other desired things if they will fast and do certain penances and pay the fakir. The Brahmins who are learned do not like this, and try to prevent it. Unlearned Brahmins do not object to it, as they believe it can

be done. There is a great reform going on in India to help and elevate women, to give them education, to allow widow remarriage, to prevent shaving of young widows' hair and to show what idol worship means and how it may be given up. The reason idols are still so much worshipped by women is that they are not now well educated. The reforms I have spoken of were begun by my countrymen, and they are carrying them on; and the Arya Samaj is very earnest in this matter. There are too, in India, very many educated women, chiefly of the Brahman caste, but of others also. In Bombay there are many girl schools, started by native princes and learned natives. The red mark which the women of India put on the forehead after bathing, means that they are not widows. A black mark on the temples means that she is a widow.

But although they worship idols, they only look at them as representing God or Parabrahm, except among the extremely ignorant. They say that they have not enough knowledge to understand Parabrahm and must therefore have a substitute. One image will mean one power of the Almighty and another a different power. This worship is also seen in Catholic churches where Mary intercedes with God.

After bathing, the women return and cook themselves the food, first cleaning the floor, for they say if the floor is not cleaned first a bad emanation comes up from it and those who eat will be sick. She then gives food first to her husband, saying, "I regard you as after God, and that you are my support, and therefore I give you food." After eating she takes her needle and makes a beautiful work. She never reads novels. There are some Hindû novels they could read, but these are few in number. Only lazy women read such books among us. The high caste women read and write, and some are well acquainted with the Sanscrit Scriptures. Western people in India cannot see high caste women at home, and only meet coolies and low caste women. In my caste Europeans are not permitted to see our women, and their idea of the women of India is formed by their knowledge of low castes, who are nearly all ignorant. I myself in England and Ireland met several English and Irish men and women who can speak English but cannot read it nor write it and seem to be just as ignorant as any of my people.

In my caste there are no such amusements at home for men and women as in the West, and which we do not approve of. When the husband and other male members come home and have meals and clean clothing they sit down in the house to read holy books and pray aloud. The women attend and help and listen. This goes on from 7 till 8 every evening. It is our duty. There is no

card playing or amusements of that kind. Sometimes when relatives come on a visit everybody sits down and engages in singing, conversation and playing the vina or zither. At 8 o'clock they retire.

Western scholars have said that there was or is a custom in India for women to throw their children in the Ganges. I do not think that this ever was a custom. There were many women who had illegitimate children whom they wished to get rid of. They feared to leave them on the land where they would be found, so they threw them in the river which carried them away. This is infanticide, which is a crime that prevails also in Western countries. It never was a religious custom in India.

BURNING OF WIDOWS.—This is called suttee. The widow ascends the funeral pile of the dead husband and is consumed with him. It pains me to hear now and then that certain people in the West still pretend that this is a custom of our country. It is not. It has died out. It was the invention of women themselves, of women who had a high spirit and who would not survive their husbands if the price of life was to be dishonor. It began not more than 300 or 400 years ago, and arose out of the act and from the ashes of a great number of women who went into the flames together. It was after the Mogul conquest. In Rajputana, the Prince of Oodeypoor, who was a member of a great Aryan family, one of the oldest in India, had a beautiful daughter. He lived at Chitturgath. The Emperor—a Mohammedan—desired this daughter for his harem. But the Prince said: "I will not give my daughter to one who is not of my religion."

They then engaged in conflict. The Mohammedans defeated the Aryans and then destroyed all the men, leaving the women. The princess was at Chitturgath with nearly 300 of her women, all made widows at one blow, and to them the news was brought that their husbands were dead. They erected a funeral pile, set fire to it, walked on it and were consumed, saying: "We will not survive our dead." The deed was too great to be forgotten. A monument was made, learned pundits wrote books and poets composed poems praising such loyalty and courage and saying that all these women went to heaven. All this was natural, and so it was natural, too, when other Indian women read these things, that they should wish to gain an easy entrance into heaven upon the death of their husbands. These were ignorant, but they were loyal.

The custom was very general for about 200 years, and then began to decrease until the present time, when it only occurs in very rare cases. The English government stopped it by law about 1829 A.D. It had no holy writ, no sacred book to support it. Yet in other lands are cases where women have done the same thing under like circum-

stances. If only one woman had burned herself at Chitturgath instead of 300 the practice would never have arisen. Now it is dead. To bring it forth as an accusation against my country now is a falsehood, a dishonorable act. It is true that in the *Ramayana* there occurs one instance of one woman who committed suttee. She was the wife of Ravana's son, and feared a miserable fate when Rama had defeated Ravana, but she was in error, for Rama would not have permitted any of his warriors to take her, as he followed the Brahmana, and had no *Koran* to sanction such acts as those of the Mohammedans in India.

RELIGION ENTERS EVERYWHERE. —No matter whether the religious belief relied on be false or true it is a fact that all the habits and manners of my countrymen are intimately connected with religion. Some of these forms of religion are not true, but the religious sentiment is there; the belief in the particular doctrine is a consequence of education; the sentiment is not altered. But our habits and customs are associated with what appears to me to be the true religion. Let us begin the day with one of my own caste—a Brahmin. At about 6 he rises from bed. If he lives in a small town he goes outside of the town to bathe and then returns to the house to say his prayers. I speak of those who do not use any images as aids to contemplation. He first washes a small stone which represents the Supreme Being, this being in correspondence with his own bath, which was taken with the mind fixed on the necessity of washing away all impurity. Certain small lights are lighted, incense burned and colored powder prepared. While audibly praying he rings a small bell to conceal the words from hearers. This seems very like following the command of the Christian saint to take measures that daily prayers should not be heard by your fellows. When these prayers are finished, he puts marks on his forehead which signify that he has bathed and offered prayers to the Supreme Being.

These marks on the forehead refer to religious differences of opinion. The Siva worshipper puts three lines made with white ashes across his forehead. The Vishnaivite makes three vertical lines that compose a trident, starting above the eyes and nose; of these the two outside are white and the one in the centre is made of red powder. The Saktis make three lines across the forehead of red sandalwood powder. There are other marks and also others for women, but the above are the principal ones.

After this he goes first to teach religion to his friends and disciples before eating, and then he eats. He is supposed to take only two meals a day. In the middle of the day he washes again and again prays. The learned Brahmin should again in the afternoon teach religion in Sanscrit. At 6 in the evening he washes

again, again prays and then eats. After that are other works and social intercourse and then sleep. When he is about to begin any meal he goes or sends outside to see if there is any one there who is in want of food.

All that I have said about this Brahmin is part of the customs of the present day. But sadly, indeed, other customs, all against the rules of religion, have been taken up. These are chewing of the betel and smoking the hookah, drinking bhang and other habits, nearly every one due to foreign influences from countries where the holy men of the people do not consider it wrong to indulge in them. Many Brahmins have forgotten their duty and followed the evil example set by foreigners, who can hardly be said yet to have a well-defined religion of their own, and who worship God but once a week.

In July in each year all Brahmins worship Siva, the third power in the Hīndū Trimurti. At 6 o'clock in the morning they go out of the city, get a flower and bil leaves and after washing they make with mud a small rude image which is to represent Siva, and bring it into the house or temple. Some families make 100 and some 500, others 1000 of these. Rice is put in front of each image with sandal powder and a light made of ghee—butter, with a bil leaf and flower on each image. They then touch each eye and ear and the body with the image which is then thrown into the river. This is done each day of that month. The image of mud represents this world. It is a rude image with no defined features, meaning that God has no features or attributes. The touching to the eyes and other parts means that God has made all our organs although he himself has none. The putting of rice, flowers, and leaf means that all things are made through Parabrahm, but the ignorant do not understand these reasons in India, nor in the West either, where they think we worship mud images, but we do not. In each month we have two holy days; one is the 11th and one the 15th. On those days it is taught by the Brahmins not to eat anything but fruit. On each of the days ceremonies and prayers are had to show the holiness of the day. This last custom is about 2000 or 2500 years old. All castes perform these ceremonies except that the sudras must employ a Brahmin to do it. The object of these fasts is by a religious custom to regulate the health of the body. There are four great holy days in India with all castes: (1) Rama's birthday, (2) Krishna's birthday, (3) Devali, worship of Maha Lukshmi, the negative power of Vishnu, (4) Durga's festival.

Rama was an avatar and great hero and did immense service for his country. On that day there is a complete fast. It is in the

first month of the Hindû year. There are worship in the temples and ceremonies at home. It ends with the day.

Krishna's day is in our 6th month. There is a grand festival. All our families fast and sing praises to God, who is Krishna. The house is clean and ornamented with flowers, flags and clothes. It is for the birth of Krishna. He was born at 12 in the night. Then all sing with joy and the house priest gives the family fruit, curds, sweets, and other foods, and then the people may eat. No images are to be made. Krishna was an avatar and a hero of power and glory that night all our astronomers and astrologers—called Joshees—examine the moon and stars to prognosticate for the year.

Devali is a very great festival. There are services at home and not in temples. Houses are lighted up outside and inside. An image of Maha Lukshmi is surrounded with decorations and sweetmeats. The people stay awake all night talking and amusing themselves. Those who win games on that day are supposed to be lucky, and those defeated not lucky. This is not a strictly religious custom. It is a Jain custom because one of their Tirthankars was born on that day. It was adopted by the Brahmins. It is the day when presents are given in the morning by friends and relatives to each other.

Durga day is a great festival, especially in Bengal, and has often been described. In our old history the Aryans came from the north. Durga, a woman, went first and fought with the Asuras, who are either evil spirits or ignorant people, so the event either means, as you desire to look at it, that worldly conflict or a great event in ancient times when the white magicians fought at the close of a cycle with the evil magicians. Durga has since been turned into Kali in Bengal, and she, painted black, and with horrible features, has four arms. In one hand she holds a sword and in the left hand a man's head just cut off, his body being under her feet. Another hand points up to heaven and another points below. This really means that sin or evil is under her feet; and the head cut off is shown to the world, meaning that sin is destroyed. The sword means wisdom which cuts off the head of sin, and the hand pointing to heaven indicates that when sin is conquered heaven may be reached, while the hand pointing down means that if sin is not destroyed you will go to hell. Ignorant people have supposed that Kali worship allowed the killing of living beings, but our religion does not so teach. Some Bengali people desiring to eat fish and sheep, but not being allowed by religion, have perverted the Kali symbol and story into permission to kill and eat. I met a man in the

United States, a Christian, who asked me to drink wine. I refused as being against my religion and said it was not possible to drink if the Christian Bible be followed. But he said the Lord's Supper had wine, representing the blood of Jesus, and that his religion allowed drinking, and asked me why my religion did not. In the same way, then, as the Bengali Brahmin uses Kali worship to permit him to eat meat and drink liquor, many Christians get permission to drink also from the ceremony of the Lord's Supper.

## स्वामि भास्करानन्द सरस्वती

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### NOTICE.

Other numbers in this Department will consist of papers by Swami Bhaskara Nand Saraswati showing over 600 important mistakes made by Prof. Max Müller in his translation of the Vedic hymns and other Sanskrit works. The correct translations will be given.



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