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### THE MISSIONARY WORLD.

#### CASTE: THE OBSTACLE TO MISSION WORK IN INDIA.

It is difficult, and indeed impossible, for any one who has never seen the practical working of caste in India, to gain an adequate idea of its nature and influence. Some notion may be obtained from books written on the subject, and some from intercourse with people who have lived a few years in the country. Yet, at the best, it will be imperfect. One reason of this is that people in Britain frequently talk about caste as existing among themselves. And there is no question that it does—that is, that wide distinctions separate the various classes of British society. Envy and jealousy are ranged on one side, and haughtiness and pride on the other. On one side, again, is poverty in various gradations, and on the other are wealth and luxury. On the one side are the ennobled and distinguished few, while on the other are the untitled many. And this is supposed to be a reflection of Hindu caste, the difference between them being regarded as merely one of degree.

Undoubtedly some resemblance does exist, but the difference is fundamental. English caste is an evil by no means necessary to the fabric of society. It may be modified, broken down and destroyed. Indian caste is so inherent in the social life of the people that its abolition would be followed by a revolution in native society, complete and universal. It is not connected with the possession of wealth, for it often happens that a Brahmin is poor, and nevertheless receives the highest appellations which human language can give, while men of low caste with abundance of riches are treated with contempt. A Rajah may not be of the highest caste. He is not infrequently a Rajpoot—that is, he belongs to the military caste; sometime he is a Sudra. In either case he is below the Brahmin, who, however poor he may be, will not associate with him on terms of equality, or give his daughter in marriage to him. Caste is intimately associated with religion, so much so that it is considered to be a solemn religious duty for a man to adhere rigidly to the regulations, ceremonies and duties of his order, and not to admit the smallest infringement of them. A Hindu holds that the gods would be angry with him if he broke his caste—that is, departed from any of the rules which his fraternity observes.

The Hindus, as is well known, are separated into four great castes—Brahmins, Rajpoots, Vaisyas (traders), and Sudras (agriculturists, artisans, etc.). Practically, however, castes are innumerable, for every trade, profession and occupation constitutes a distinct caste. They do not inter-marry, nor can they eat and drink together. Not only does the caste system prevail among Hindu tribes properly so called, but also among the low and outcast tribes, who are as punctilious in its observance as their Hindu neighbours. They look down upon one another, and dispute about priority of position with an eagerness and pertinacity unsurpassed by any. They trade with one another, are perhaps servants in the same house, and are associated publicly in various avocations—but here their relations terminate. They cannot draw nearer to each other than this; and the same thing is true of the higher castes. Not only are the castes kept separated from one another by the strictest rules, and by the awful threat of excommunication, which is rigorously visited on the hapless individual who consciously or unconsciously has broken his caste regulations, but the subdivisions of the castes are kept apart, and can have socially nothing to do with one another. Moreover, the Brahmins of the south hold themselves aloof from those of the north, and the Brahmins of the west will not eat with the Brahmins of the east.

Hindu caste, in alliance with idolatry, has petrified the spirit of exclusiveness, which is one of the most prominent features of Hindu national character. The Hindus have shut themselves up to themselves. They admit no one into their communities. No one can tempt them to alter their rules, and no Englishman can possibly become a member of any one of their castes. On the other hand a man may be, and often is, expelled from his caste. This is specially true when a Hindu becomes a Christian. The ceremony of baptism cuts him off at once from all further intercourse. Parents, brothers, friends abandon him because he has broken the rules of his order. Thenceforward they shun him, will neither eat nor drink with him, and in some cases will not even trade with him, or allow the washerman to wash his clothes for him. The caste system has been properly described as the essence, the life and soul of Hinduism. So long as a Hindu observes his caste rules, he is at liberty to believe what he pleases, and do what he pleases. He may be an atheist and propagate atheism without losing his caste. He may be an anti-theist, and propagate hostility to God without being excommunicated. He may believe that his great-grandfather was an anthropomorphic ape, to the great delight of some scientists of the day, without being ostracised. He may be guilty of fornication, adultery and theft without losing his caste. But if

he eats or drinks with the holiest European alive, or with a Hindu of inferior caste, he is ostracised. It is no matter of astonishment, therefore, that many Hindus, although thoroughly convinced of the truth of Christianity, dread to avow their convictions lest they should be cast off by their dearest friends and relations. They naturally shudder at the social ostracism and isolation to which they would have to submit. To be convinced of the truth of Christianity is one thing, but to embrace it, especially in a country like India, is a very different thing.

The sacrifice which native Christians have to make should awaken the deepest sympathy of every one interested in the evangelization of India, and should be carefully pondered by those who talk glibly of the paucity of converts. They are socially separated from their fellow-countrymen as effectually as though they lived in another land. In fact, in one sense they form a caste by themselves, with which all other castes have no communion. They draw closely to the British residents in India, as a consequence of the exclusiveness of the Hindus around them, and because of their having embraced the Christian faith of their rulers. Hence they are loyal to the backbone—a circumstance which should call forth greater sympathy toward the native Christian communities from the British Government in India than it has hitherto done. Idolatry, degrading as it is, yields more easily to the Gospel than caste.



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