

THE HINDOO MARRIAGE ATROCITIES.

The recent telegram announcing Lord Dufferin's decision regarding Hindoo widow-marriage (says a Times correspondent), receives emphasis from the outbursts of fanatical hostility which are agitating Northern India. During the past month the British Magistrates of Northern India have passed many an anxious night patrolling the cities or sitting for hours on horseback at cross-roads where the processions of the rival religions might possibly meet. There are over twenty millions of widows in India, and two millions of them belong to castes who practice child-marriage and insist on the celibacy of their widows. These customs are not enforced with equal rigor in all parts of India, nor among all the castes who follow them. But, broadly speaking, there are about two million Indian women of good family, or more than the whole female population of Scotland, who are condemned to a life of penance or of shame.

HIGH CASTE MARRIAGES.

This, however, is a very mild statement of the case. For it must be remembered that the cruelty of enforced widowhood in India is aggravated by the circumstances that a vast number of widows have only been wives in name. In Bengal 271 Hindoo girls out of every thousand between the ages of five and ten are married, and no fewer than 666 are returned as married between the ages of ten and fourteen. This applies to the general Hindoo population. But among the higher castes, who enforce the celibacy of their widows, the proportion is much higher. Practically every Hindoo girl of good caste is either a wife or a widow before she reaches the age of fourteen. In thousands, indeed in hundreds of thousands of cases the child has never known what it is to be a wife. The most orthodox idea is that a girl should be given in marriage before the sense of natural modesty arises. For canonical purposes this was taken to be her eighth year. The marriage is not consummated till she reaches the age of about twelve; and meanwhile, if the husband dies, she is condemned to a life of penitential celibacy.

THE MARRIAGE TRADE.

It is essential for the honor of the Hindoo family of good caste that it should contain no unmarried daughter of mature

years. The existence of such a daughter is not only a social disgrace, but a religious crime. When, therefore, a female infant is born, the first idea in her father's mind is not one of pleasure, nor perhaps of very active regret, but simply how to find a husband for her. It is not necessary that she should become a wife in our sense of the word. It suffices that she should be given in marriage and go through the ceremony of the Seven Steps, which completes the religious rite. Aged Brahmans of good family still go about the country, marrying for a pecuniary consideration, female infants whom they sometimes never see again. Within the memory of men still living this abominable practice was a flourishing trade. A Kulin Brahman, perhaps white-haired, half-blind, and decrepit, went the round of his beat each Spring going through the ceremony of marriage with such female infants as were offered, and pocketing his fee, and perhaps never returned to the child's house. So long as he lived she should marry no other man; when he died she became a widow for life.

THE HORROBS OF WIDOWHOOD.

The Hindoo child-widow is looked upon as a thing apart and accursed, bearing the penalty in this world for sins which she has committed in a past existence. Her hair is cut short, or her head is shaved altogether; she exchanges her pretty childish clothes for the widow's coarse and often squalid garment; she is forbidden to take part in any village festival or family gathering; the very sight of her is regarded as an ill omen. Her natural woman's instincts are starved into inaction by constant fasts, sometimes prolonged to seventy-two hours. Amid the genial and bright-colored life of the Hindoo family she fits about disarrayed, silent, shunned, disfigured—in some parts of India a hideously half object—bidden all joy and all hope. There are hundreds of thousands of widows in India who have acquiesced in their cruel lot. They accept with a pathetic faith and resignation the priestly explanation which is given to them. They penitently believe that they are expiating sins committed in a past life, and they humbly trust that their purifying sorrows here will win a reward in the life to come, but among large masses of human beings the promptings of nature act pretty much in the same way in India as in mediæval Europe. Enforced celibacy leads to secret vice. The canker