

ARTICLE VI.

ON THE VEDIC DOCTRINE OF A FUTURE LIFE.

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THE design of this Article¹ is to exhibit an interesting feature in the ancient religion of India, and, at the same time, to furnish an illustration of the manner in which the Veda is made to contribute to the history of Hindû creeds and institutions, and of the character of the light which it sheds upon them.

What has been for more than two thousand years the prevailing belief in India respecting death and a future life, is so well known, that it is not necessary here to do more than characterize it briefly and generally. It is the so-called doctrine of transmigration. It teaches that the present life is but one of an indefinite series of existences which each individual soul is destined to pass through; that death is only the termination of one, and the entrance upon another, of the series. Further, it holds that all life is one in essence; that there is no fundamental difference between the vital principle of a human being, and that of any other living creature: so that, when a soul quits its tenement of flesh, it may find itself next imprisoned in the body of some inferior animal; being, in fact, liable to make experience of all the various forms of life, in its progress toward the final consummation of its existence. The grade of each successive birth is regarded as determined by the sum of merit or demerit resulting from the actions of the lives already past: a life of exceeding folly and wickedness may condemn one to be born for myriads of years in the shape of abhorred and grovelling animals, or among the depraved, the ignorant, and the outcast among men; on the other hand, it is possible to attain to such an exalted pitch of wisdom and virtue, that

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the soul escapes the condemnation of existence, and sinks into the void, or merges its individuality in the universality of the world-spirit. It is held also— although rather, it would seem, as a relic of creeds which have preceded this, than as any properly organic part of it— that, in further recompense of past actions, an intermediate period may be spent, after death, in enjoying the delights of a heaven, or suffering the torments of a hell, before the weary round of births is again taken up. But this is a feature of the creed of only minor consequence: the inexorable fate which dooms each creature to a repeated entrance upon a life full of so many miseries in the present, fraught with such dangers for the future, is what the Hindû dreads, and would escape: he flies from existence, as the sum of all miseries; the aim of his life is to make sure that it be the last of him. For it is virtual, if not defined and acknowledged annihilation, that the Hindû strives after; it is the destruction of consciousness, of individuality, of all the attributes and circumstances which make up existence.

The antiquity of this strange doctrine, and its dominion over the popular mind of India, are clearly shown by the fact that even Buddhism, the popular revolution against the creeds and the forms of the Brahminic religion, implicitly adopted it, venturing only to teach a new and more effective method of escaping from the bonds of existence into the longed-for freedom of nonentity. Yet, in spite of this evidence of its great age, we should be led to suspect, upon internal grounds alone, that it was not the earliest belief of the Hindû nation. It has that stamp of elaboration, of a subtle refinement of philosophy, which is not wont to characterize the creeds of a primitive period; it is in harmony rather with the other Brahminic institutions in the midst of which we find it, and which speak plainly of a long previous history of growth and gradual development. There are also external evidences pointing us to the same conclusion, in the elaborate system of funeral rites and ceremonies practised by the Hindûs. These seem not only not to grow out of the doctrine of transmigration, as its natural expression, but

even to be in many points quite inconsistent with it. Thus, to insist upon only a single instance : it is the duty of every pious Hindû to make upon the first day of each lunar month an offering to the Fathers, as they are called, or to the manes of the deceased ancestors of his family. Food is set out for them, of which they are invited to come and partake, and they are also addressed with supplications, in a manner which supposes them to be glorified spirits, capable of continuing in their condition after death intercourse with those whom they left behind, and of exercising over them a protecting and fostering care. As we look yet further into the forms of the modern Hindû ceremonial, we discover not a little of the same discordance between creed and observance : the one is not explained by the other. We are forced to the conclusion, either that India derived its system of rites from some foreign source, and practised them blindly, careless of their true import, or else that those rites are the production of another doctrine, of older date, and have maintained themselves in popular usage after the decay of the creed of which they were the original expression. Between these two opinions we could not hesitate which to adopt. We know with what tenacity once-established forms are wont to maintain themselves, even when they have lost their living significance ; we know how valuable an auxiliary, in studying the development of a religion, is its ritual ; and we could even proceed, by the aid of the Hindû ceremonies, comparing them carefully with what we know of the doctrines of other ancient religions, to reconstruct in part the general fabric of the earliest Hindû belief.

Fortunately, however, we are not left to this uncertain and unsatisfactory method of investigating the religious history of India. In the hymns of the Veda we have laid before us a picture of the earliest conditions, both civil and religious, of the country. They exhibit the only partially developed germs of the civilization, the creeds, the institutions, which we are wont to call Indian : in them we read the explanation of much that would otherwise have remained always an enigma in Indian history. They show

us that the inconsistency of the rites with the doctrines of later times is indeed only a measure of the deviations of the latter from their ancient standard.

We will proceed to state, as briefly as possible, the views of the ancient Hindûs upon the important subjects of life and death, and the life beyond the grave, and will then illustrate them by extracts from the hymns of the Veda, whence the knowledge of them is drawn.

The difference between the modern doctrines and those by which they were preceded is one, not of detail merely, but of the whole spirit and character. The earliest inhabitants of India were far enough removed from the unhealthy introversion of their descendants, from their contempt of all things sublunar, from their melancholy opinion of the vanity and misery of existence, from their longings to shuffle off the mortal coil forever, and from the metaphysical subtlety of their views respecting the universe and its creator. They looked at all these things with the simple apprehension, the naïve faith, which is wont to characterize a primitive people. They had a hearty and healthy love of earthly life, and an outspoken relish for all that makes up the ordinary pleasures of life. Wealth, and a numerous offspring, are the constant burden of their prayers to their gods; success in predatory warfare, or in strife for consideration and power, is fervently besought. Length of days in the land, or death by no other cause than old age, is not less frequently supplicated: they clung to the existence of which they fully appreciated all the delights. Yet death, to them, was surrounded with no terrors. They regarded it as only an entrance upon a new life of happiness in the world of the departed. Somewhere beyond the grave, in the region where the gods dwelt, the children of men were assembled anew, under the sceptre of him who was the first progenitor of their race, the divine Yama. No idea of retribution was connected with that of the existence after death. It was only a prolongation of the old life, under changed conditions. They who partook of it were not severed from intercourse with those whom they had left behind upon earth, nor were they even exempt from

the material wants of their earthly life. They were capable of deriving pleasure from the offerings of their descendants; they were even in a measure dependent upon those offerings for the comfortable continuance of their existence. The ancestral feasts, which it was the duty of each head of a family to provide from time to time for the deceased progenitors of the family, were not only a means of gaining the favor and protection which they, in their disembodied state, were held capable of extending, but were a pious duty toward them which might not be neglected. In this respect the early Hindû doctrine resembled the Chinese; and traces of a similar creed are found among the religious observances of many other nations.

The funeral ceremonies to which such a creed would lead need not be otherwise than simple. To illustrate those of the ancient Hindûs, we will first offer the translation of a hymn from the concluding book of the Rig-Veda (x. 18), which places before our eyes the whole series of proceedings at a burial in that early period. The passage is one of more than usual interest; it has maintained, down even to the present day, an important place in the Hindû funeral ceremonial; it has also attracted especial attention from modern European scholars, and been more than once translated.¹ We present here a new version, made with all the literalness which the case admits, and in close imitation of the metrical structure of the original hymn.²

We are to suppose the body of the deceased brought forth to the place of interment, surrounded by his friends and

¹ See an interesting and valuable Article by Roth, on a subject closely akin with that of this paper, in the *Zeitsch. d. Deutsch. Morg. Gesellschaft*, viii. 467, etc.; and another by Müller, in the following volume of the same series, for 1855: the only English translation which we know is that of Wilson, in the *Journ. Roy. As. Society of Gr. Br. and Ireland*, xvi. 201, etc.; this latter, like most of Wilson's translations from the Veda, is made rather from the native commentary than from the Veda itself, and neither in spirit, nor as an accurate translation, fairly represents its original.

² Like almost all the Vedic hymns, it is in a simple iambic strain, dependent for its movement upon the quantity of the syllables, but far from strict in its construction, and changing, often within the limits of a single verse, from a half-line of eleven syllables to one of twelve, or of eight.

There remains now with the deceased only his wife ; she too is summoned away, the last ; the person whose duty it is to be henceforth her support and protection, to sustain the part of a husband toward her, — a brother-in-law, the rules say, or a foster-child, or an old servant — grasps her hand and leads her after the rest, while she is thus addressed :

Go up unto the world of life, O woman !
 thou liest by one whose soul is fled ; come hither !
 To him who grasps thy hand, a second husband,
 thou art as wife to spouse become related.

Hitherto the deceased has carried in his hand a bow ; that is now taken from him, to signify that he has done forever with all the active occupations of life, and that those who remain behind have henceforth his part to play, and are to enjoy the honors and pleasures which might have been his.

The bow from out the dead man's hand now taking,
 that ours may be the glory, honor, prowess —
 Mayest thou there, we here, rich in retainers,
 vanquish our foes and them that plot against us.

The separation between the dead and the living has thus been made complete, and this part of the ceremony concluded with the benediction to both parties, the prayer that both, each in his own place and lot, may enjoy success and happiness. And now, with gentle action and tender words, the body is committed to the earth.

Approach thou now the lap of earth, thy mother,
 the wide-extending earth, the ever-kindly ;
 A maiden soft as wool to him who comes with gifts,
 she shall protect thee from destruction's bosom.

Open thyself, O earth, and press not heavily,
 be easy of access and of approach to him ;
 As mother with her robe her child,
 so do thou cover him, O earth !

May earth maintain herself thus opened wide for him ;
 a thousand props shall give support about him ;
 And may those mansions ever drip with fatness ;
 may they be there forevermore his refuge .

Forth from about thee thus I build away the ground ;
 as I lay down this cover may I take no harm ;
 This pillar may the Fathers here maintain for thee ;
 may Yama there provide for thee a dwelling.

The funeral hymn properly closes here ; but in its form as handed down to us, there is yet another verse, of somewhat obscure import, but which seems to be an expression of the complacency of the poet in his work ; it may or may not have belonged originally to this particular hymn. It reads as follows :

They've set me in a fitting day,
 as one the plume sets on the shaft,
 I've caught and used the fitting word,
 as one a steed tames with the rein.

There can be no question respecting the interpretation of this interesting relic of Hindû antiquity, nor respecting the character of the action which it was intended to accompany. The record is too pictorial to be misapprehended ; the ceremony is set plainly before our eyes, in all its simplicity, as a leave-taking and an interment, and nothing besides. One or two things especially strike us in connection with it.

In the first place, we note its discordance with the modern Hindû practice of immolating the widow at the grave of her husband. Nothing could be more explicit than the testimony of this hymn against the antiquity of the practice. It finds, indeed, no support anywhere in the Vedic scriptures. The custom is of comparatively recent introduction ; originating, it may be, in single instances of the voluntary self-destruction of wives who would not survive their husbands ; a devotion held to be so laudable that it found imitation, gained in frequency, and became a custom, and then finally an obligation ; the form of voluntary consent being kept up even to the end. Authority has been sought, however, for the practice in a fragment of this very hymn, rent from its natural connection, and a little altered : by the change of a single letter, the line which is translated above : " the wives may first ascend unto the altar," has been made to read : " the wives shall go up into the place of the fire."

Again: the funeral ceremony here depicted is evidently a burial of the body in the earth. Not a few passages might be cited from other hymns which show that this was both permitted and frequent among the more ancient Hindûs. Thus we read:

In earth's broad, unoppressive space,
 be thou, O dead, deposited;
 The offerings thou hast made in life,
 let them drip honey for thee now.

In another verse we have a hint of a coffin, of which no mention is made in the hymn translated above:

Let not the tree press hard on thee,
 nor yet the earth, the great, divine;
 Among the Fathers finding place,
 thrive thou with those whom Yama rules.

Indeed, in the freedom of that early period, any convenient method of disposing of the worthless shell from which the spirit had escaped, seems to have been held allowable. Thus a verse says:

The buried and the cast away,
 the burnt, and they who were exposed—
 Those Fathers, Agni, all of them,
 to eat the offering, hither bring.

Again, we find the general classification made, of

Those burned with fire, and those whom fire hath not burned.

Considering, however, what the belief of the Hindûs was in certain other points, it is not a matter for surprise that the method of incineration came by degrees to prevail over all other forms of burial. Agni (Latin, *ignis*), the fire, and the god of fire, was to the Hindûs, as to other primitive people, the medium of communication between earth and heaven, the messenger from men to the gods, and from the gods to men. Whatever, with due ceremony and invocation, was cast into the flames on Agni's altar, was borne away upward and delivered over to the immortals. To burn

the body of a deceased person was accordingly an act of solemn sacrifice, which made Agni its bearer to the other world, the future dwelling of its former possessor. There was less of spirituality, doubtless, in this doctrine, than in that which regarded the body as of no consequence, and the soul alone as capable of entering upon the other existence; but it seems rather to have gained in distinctness and in currency, and it was quite in harmony with other parts of the Hindû belief respecting the condition of the departed, which we shall notice later. There are passages in which the assumed importance of the body to its old tenant is brought out very strongly and very naïvely. Thus a verse says :

Start onward ! bring together all thy members ;
 let not thy limbs be left, nor yet thy body ;
 Thy spirit, gone before, now follow after ;
 wherever it delights thee, go thou thither.

Again :

Collect thy body, with its every member ;
 thy limbs with help of rites I fashion for thee.

Once more, the necessity of making up any chance losses of a part or member, is curiously insisted upon in the following passage :

If some one limb was left behind by Agni,
 when to the Fathers' world he hence conveyed you,
 That very one I now again supply you,
 rejoice in heaven with all your limbs, ye Fathers !

Before the final adjusting of the orthodox Hindû ceremonial, in the form which it has ever since maintained, it had thus become usual to dispose of the bodies of the dead by incineration only; and this is accordingly the sole method which the sacred usages of later times contemplate as allowable. And yet the hymn of which we have given the translation in full above, although originally prepared, in all probability, to accompany the celebration of some special funeral ceremony, had gained such consideration and currency as to have become inseparably connected with the

general funeral service ; of which, as already remarked, it even now forms a part. Its verses, in order to adapt them to their new uses, are separated from one another, and from their proper connection, and are more or less distorted in meaning : a part of them are introduced in connection with the ceremony of incremation, a part with that of the later collection and interment of the relics found among the ashes of the funeral pile. It would carry us into too much detail to enter in full upon the subject of this modern transfer and alteration ;¹ our present purpose is answered by directing attention to this departure also, less violent than the other, but no less a departure, from the usages of the olden time, and to the force put upon the sacred writings to make them conform to and support the new customs.

In the hymn translated, there is but the briefest reference, at its close, to the new life upon which the deceased is supposed to have entered. We will go on to illustrate, by citations from other hymns, the doctrine which this one assumes, but does not exhibit.

Another hymn in the last book of the Rig-Veda (x. 14.) commences thus :

Him who went forth unto those far-off regions,
 the pathway thither pointing out to many,
 Vivasvant's son, the gatherer of the people,
 Yama, the king, now worship with oblations.

A somewhat different version of the first part of this verse is found in the corresponding passage of the Atharva-Veda :

Him who hath died the first, of living mortals,
 who to that other world the first departed, etc.

The same hymn continues :

Yama hath found for us the first a passage ;
 that's no possession to be taken from us ;
 Whither our fathers, of old time, departed,
 thither their offspring, each his proper pathway.

¹ We refer those who are interested in the subject to the articles of Roth and Müller, already alluded to in a former note.

And in a later verse, addressing the person at whose funeral the ceremony is performed :

Go forth, go forth, upon the ancient pathways,
whither our fathers, of old time, departed ;
There both the kings, rejoicing in the offering,
god Varuna shalt thou behold, and Yama.

These verses give the skeleton of the whole of the most ancient Hindû doctrine respecting Yama and his realm, the ruler and abode of the dead. As stated above, there was no distinction of the latter into a heaven and a hell ; nor was Yama the inexorable judge and dreaded executioner which he became to the conceptions of a later time. One or two other passages will illustrate the manner in which he is almost invariably spoken of.

The living have removed him from their dwellings ;
carry him hence away, far from the village ;
Death was the kindly messenger of Yama,
hath sent his soul to dwell among the Fathers.

. . . . This place the Fathers have prepared for him ;
. . . . a resting-place is granted him by Yama.

I grant to him this place of rest and refuge,
to him who cometh hither, and becometh mine ;
Such is the answer the wise Yama maketh ;
let him approach and share in my abundance here.

There is no attempt made, in any Vedic hymns, to assign employments to the departed in their changed state, nor, for the most part, to describe their condition, excepting in general terms, as one of happiness. A few passages, which are palpably of a later origin, do attempt to give definite locality to the world of the Fathers. Thus we read :

They who within the sphere of earth are stationed,
or who are settled now in realms of pleasure.

. . . The Fathers who have the earth — the atmosphere — the heaven
for their seat.

The "fore-heaven" the third heaven is styled,
and there the Fathers have their seat.

The subject most enlarged upon in connection with the Fathers is, naturally enough, the relation in which they still stand to their living descendants, and the duties of the latter growing out of that relation. Both have been briefly characterized above; we now present passages which illustrate the character of the rites practised, and of the belief upon which they were founded.

The Fathers are supposed to assemble, upon due invocation, about the altar of him who would pay them homage, to seat themselves upon the straw or matting spread for each of the guests invited, and to partake of the offerings set before them.

Hither with aid ! ye matting-seated Fathers,
these offerings we have set for you ; enjoy them !

Rise and go forth, ye Fathers, and come hither :
behold the offering for you, rich with honey ;
We pray you graciously to grant us riches ;
bestow upon us wealth with numerous offspring.

Come here, ye Fathers whom the fire hath sweetened ;
sit each upon his seat, in loving converse ;
Devour the offerings set upon the matting here ;
bestow upon us wealth with numerous offspring.

It is customary, in the modern ceremonies, to invite especially to the feast the ancestors for three generations back, bestowing upon the rest the remnants only of the repast. This was also the ancient usage, as is shown by the following passage, among others :

This portion is for thee, great-grandfather, and for them that belong
with thee.

This portion is for thee, grandfather, and for them that belong with
thee.

This portion is for thee, father.

It was already usual, as later, to make the offering to the Fathers monthly :

Go forth, ye Fathers
Then, in a month, unto our dwellings come again,
to eat the offering

It would be easy greatly to extend this Article by additional citations; but enough has been already presented, it is believed, to illustrate all the main features of the ancient Hindû belief respecting the life after death. Any further passages which might be adduced from the Vedic texts would be of a character akin with these; there is nothing in the Veda which approaches any more nearly to the dogmas of modern days. The Vedas — understanding by that term the original collections of hymns, and not the mass of prose literature which has, later, attached itself to them, and is often included with them under the name of Veda — the Vedas contain not a hint even of the doctrine of transmigration; it is one of the most difficult questions in the religious history of India, how that doctrine arose, out of what it developed, to what feature of the ancient faith it attached itself.

The discordance thus shown to exist, in respect to this single point, between the sacred scriptures of the Hindû and his actual belief, is in no small degree characteristic of their whole relation. The spirit of the primitive period is altogether different from that of the times which have succeeded: the manners, the creeds, the institutions, which those ancient texts exhibit to us, are not those which we are wont to know as Indian; the whole Brahminic system is a thing of later growth. And yet the Vedas still remain the professed foundation of the system, and its inspired authority. The fact is a most significant one, as regards both the history of the Hindû religion and culture, and the character of the Hindû mind. It shows that the development of the former has been gradual, and almost unremarked, or at least unacknowledged. There have been in India no violent movements, no sweeping reformations, no lasting and successful rebellions against the constituted authorities, civil and religious, of the nation. The possession and custody of the ancient and inspired hymns laid the foundation of the supremacy of the Brahmans; they have maintained and strengthened their authority, not by adhering pertinaciously to the letter or to the spirit of their scriptures, and attempting to check the natural growth and change of the national charac-

ter and belief, but rather by falling in with the latter, leading it on, and directing it to their own advantage. Thus, while the sacred texts have been treated with the utmost reverence, and preserved with a care and success which is without a parallel in the history of ancient literature, they have exerted comparatively very little restraining or guiding influence upon the moral and spiritual development of the people of India. Each new phase of belief has sought in them its authority, has claimed to found itself upon them, and to be consistent with their teachings; and the result is, that the sum of doctrine accepted and regarded as orthodox in modern India is incongruous beyond measure, a mass of inconsistencies. In all this is seen the terrible want of logic, the carelessness of history, the boundless subjectivity, which have ever characterized the Hindû people.

Herein lies no small part of the value and interest, to us, of these venerable relics of a remote antiquity. They exhibit to us the very earliest germs of the Hindû culture, allowing us to follow its history back to a period which is hardly to be reached elsewhere: but this is not all; they are the oldest, the most authentic, the most copious documents for the study of Indo-European archæology and history; and that for the reason that there is so little in them which is specifically Indian; that they are so nearly a reflection of that primitive condition in which there was no distinction of Indian, Persian, and European.