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WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA



WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

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CLARISSE BADER

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WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA



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Translated by
MARY E. R. MARTIN

TO
MR. BENJAMIN DUPRAT

In dedicating the first of my feeble essays to the friend and scholar who led and guided me, with fatherly care, through the splendid range of Oriental Literature, I am joyfully discharging a debt of affectionate gratitude. It is a pleasure thus to render homage to one for a work which, without him, would perhaps have not been undertaken, and which, through him, has been accomplished.

CLARISSE BADER.

PREFACE

THIS modest work, the only one hitherto that has dealt with this subject and therefore been exposed to the terrible glare of publicity, was not intended to appear as a single volume, but as the key to an extended series embracing the rôle of woman throughout the entire period of Eastern antiquity.

To ascertain woman's position in primitive society from the ever-inspired record of the Chosen People and of the disciples of Christ ; from the poetry of the Arabs still burning with desert fire ; from the witness in stone of Egyptian and Assyrian monuments ; from the classical books, the annals and odes of China ; from the mysterious and famed masterpieces of India ; from the sacred texts, history, and legends of the Persia of Zoroaster ; from the Christian literature of Armenia ; and from all the productions of ancient Eastern genius,¹ explained by the genius of the modern West : such was our object and so it is still. Numerous materials had already been collected for this task, but on investigating the Indian contribution, we were suddenly stopped short, struck down by the unexpected spectacle displayed before our eyes. In a sister nation, older than the Grecian yet retaining in a lively degree the first impressions and typical ideas of our Indo-Germanic race, we discovered literary riches whose existence, prior to Hellenic antiquity, had never been surmised.

First, echoes of a prehistoric age were found in hymns, admirably expressing the needs of the human soul ; next, monuments of heroic ages in laws, embodying beautiful verses and eternal principles of justice and virtue, gigantic epics like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, abounding with moving and tragic episodes, covering vast ranges of philosophy and religious thought, with pure and touching sentiments, coming from honest and believing hearts, splendid descriptions of tropical nature ; lastly, the productions of an age contemporary with

¹ This genius, according to the fine expression of an illustrious critic, " a été la source de toute religion et de toute poésie." See M. Villemain, *Littérature au moyen âge*, iv leçon.

that of Augustus, showing the influences of a civilized and refined court, namely, dramas of powerful influence, and elegiacs which might have been uttered by Tibullus—such were the marvels displayed before our eyes.

And Woman! It is she who inspires the greater part of these masterpieces expressing the highest point of moral beauty, and who illustrates by her conjugal love, both heroic and pure, a theme embellished by Hindus in such variety that the fundamental idea is often overlaid by the multiplicity of varying circumstances. To-day, thanks to scholars like Jones, Wilson, Colebrooke, Max Müller, Bopp, Lassen, Weber, and many others, Sanskrit literature has become nearly classical in England and Germany. In France, the works of our learned writers on Indian subjects, Eugène Burnouf, Langlois, Ad. Regnier, Foucaux, Pavie, Fauche, and the strong impulse given, in the Académie de Stanislas, by Baron Dumast, and by Émile Burnouf and Leupol, are preparing for popular reading the masterpieces evolved on the banks of the Indus and the Ganges. Is it not, then, a favourable moment for calling attention to a literature eminently moralistic? Greece and Rome, hitherto acknowledged the only sources of classical perfection, have dried up. Some writers, doubtless, faithful to the principles of truth, beauty, and goodness, will immortalize the France of the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the fact that a suspicion to the contrary has been making itself felt. It was believed that everything grand and good in the human soul had already found expression, and what one might venture to call realism meant painting mankind in his most unworthy colours. In picturing his infirmities and causing him to see his image reflected in impure waters, will mankind thus be strengthened, benefited and elevated for his struggles? No! It is far better to offer him even the standard of a chimerical ideal! For the endeavour to attain the Divine standard means less deception than the relegation to that of the brute creation!

Has not the time arrived, we repeat, to refresh ourselves from more life-giving and generous sources? And only India has the honour of affording such sources. There, a sense of duty dominating all affections, a feeling of respect for the family life, a love for one's neighbour, a charity, including even animals in its tender effusion, a spirit of sacrifice,

presenting a nearly Christian atmosphere,—such are the foundations of a literature, which aims, not only at charming the imagination, but in strengthening the heart, and for which art is truly an apostleship.

How admirably uniform is human nature ! In finding again in the productions of an age pre-Homeric in a people separated by thousands of years from the parent stem, our sublimest ideas, our purest principles, our sweetest sentiments—what a denial of that forlorn maxim anticipated by the mocking scepticism of Montaigne and voiced by the sad doubt of Pascal :¹ “ On ne voit presque rien de juste et d’injuste qui ne change de qualité en changeant de climat.”

Such a literature, uniting the laughing grace and the pleasing philosophy of Greece and Rome with the sad reveries and spiritualism of the Germanic nations, appears called to the highest destiny and to the creating perhaps of a second Renaissance.

Doubtless, inspiration alone does not constitute genius ; inspiration creates, but taste chooses. Doubtless a severe critic would often be right in reproaching the Indian poet with lack of proportion. And why ? Man, dominated by the snowy peaks of the Himalayas ; sheltered by the dark recesses of virgin forests, where Nature was expressed in exuberant growth ; man, frightened by Nature’s moods shown in sudden convulsions and again reassured on the recovery of her usual calmness and grandeur ; man, thus subjected to many and varying influences, gave vent to exaggerated feelings, comparable to the vigorous sap bursting forth from the trees of the tropics.

But if a few blemishes stain the majestic monuments raised by the Gangetic muse, are there not many pages in which sublime thoughts are worthily expressed, and where perfect sobriety is joined to a happy exuberance of expression ?

Because of this little explored mine of literature, our study of Indian womanhood took an unforeseen departure.² The

¹ Pascal’s *Thoughts*, first part, paragraph vi, 8.

² M. Félix Nève has lately published some attractive studies on woman as portrayed in the Mahābhārata, preceded by a very detailed analysis on the condition of Woman in Ancient India. We have had occasion to refer to this beautiful *Mémoire* in which the learned Indologist has inserted several translations from episodes contained in the great Sanskrit epic. If M. Nève had only included in his clever and brilliant remarks all the other periods contained in ancient Indian literature, we should not have dared to continue the subject.

feminine types, creations both new and original in Hindu poetical imagination, are of exquisite freshness and charming suavity. Such portraits, detached from their primitive frames by a cleverer hand than mine, would figure worthily by the side of those bequeathed to us by better known civilizations.

Alike attracted and captivated, we lingered long in this magnificent field of literature, instead of making, as expected, a merely superficial investigation. Six months of incessant research have thus resulted in this volume, destined to form part of a larger series.

Our intention is to combine two objects, each forming the counterpart of the other and both of extraordinary importance, for the description of woman's position in Ancient India involves also the description of the greatest beauty found in that poetry which must, one day, exercise great influence amongst us.

Where necessary we have made use of the wording of the original authors, that is to say—where a French version was wanting we borrowed from the publications of English, German, or Italian Orientalists. Should any Indologist deign to glance at this humble essay, may he pardon us for having weakened by re-translation the vivid colouring of the quotations and for the inexperience of our twenty-two years of age. Our plan is very simple. The religious rights of the individual prove the degree of his or her social importance, and we shall therefore seek first the part played by woman in the Hindu Pantheon and culture, from the time of Aryan symbolism to the materialistic age of Krishna and his worshippers.

In describing woman under the different conditions of daughter, mother, and widow, we shall endeavour to trace the source of each type from the Vedic times, and by following its successive development through the ages and commenting on the various episodes drawn from the hymns and poems, we shall avoid the dullness of merely studying customs and laws taken by themselves. Her national character thus established, we shall further describe the part woman was permitted to play in the legendary times, which have come down to us in the mysterious tales contained in the Puranas; in the heroic periods, reflected in the Epics; and in the court of Malava and its customs, revealed to us in drama and in story.

May the numerous quotations which have been cited win a few more friends for the Oriental cause ! May the Gangetic muse occupy her proper position on the domestic hearth, whose austere joys she has so worthily sung !

Finally, may women learn to appreciate through the translations of elegant interpreters, those poets who in ancient times knew them best and loved them most.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Mlle. BADER'S work, *La Femme dans l'Inde antique*, was published in 1867, and was awarded distinction by the French Academy. The translation now submitted to the public has been considerably delayed from the time when the Indian poetess Toru Dutt first obtained from the authoress in February, 1877, permission to undertake the task. Toru died before any progress was made.

In 1880 the same kind permission of the authoress, who died early in the year 1902, was granted to the present translator, who desired to carry out the work in memory of her friend, Toru Dutt. These delays, however, seem not altogether unfortunate, as in the meanwhile there has appeared at the Oxford University Press *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, by Harihar Das. In this work much charming correspondence between the Indian and the French authoresses is to be found.

Mlle. Bader was perhaps a little before her time in her interest in Sanskrit literature, for its untold wealth had hardly at that time entered the consciousness of general readers either in France or in England. The great charm of this classical literature is that it still lives in the hearts and minds of Indians, whereas to the average man or woman in Europe the literature of Greece and Rome has little or no interest. It is the translator's hope that the knowledge of Sanskrit literature gained from this book may result in establishing a more sympathetic understanding between Europeans and Indians, and that the importance of conserving the inherent qualities of Indian womanhood may not be lost sight of in the desire to impart Western ideals and education. The attempts made so far to reach the mind and heart of Ancient India have been inevitably crude from lack of adequate materials and knowledge. Western writers have hitherto made but few attempts in this domain, but Indian writers have published some good works on this subject during the last half-century, which saw the revival of the literary movement in Bengal. It is therefore:

noteworthy that this question has been dealt with by Sir A. A. Macdonell in his *History of Sanskrit Literature* and in his *Vedic Index*, and that Professor Winternitz has also written on the same subject.

It has been considered advisable to translate Mlle. Bader's book as she wrote it. The translations of the quotations from the Sanskrit have been made direct from the French, except in some places where the translations were made in the first instance from English versions. Scholars have expressed the opinion that Professor Wilson's translations from the Sanskrit are literal and accurate ; but that the French translations (though very free and inaccurate renderings of the Sanskrit) give much more warm play of imagination and inspire and illustrate the thoughts and feelings of a girl of twenty-two much more than the dry, cold, literalness of the English versions would have done. Readers would find it an interesting study to compare the English and French renderings, and the references to them have therefore been inserted in the foot-notes. Their attention is also invited to the impressive sanity of judgment, joined to charming grace of sentiment, in Mlle. Bader's comparison of the *Ramāyāna* with the *Iliad*. They are the justification of that minuteness of detail into which the authoress has entered (which others, Griffiths for instance, have passed over), against any charge of prolixity that may be made : for they are needed to illustrate the soundness of her sober and at the same time picturesque criticism.

The translator is much indebted to a distinguished scholar and educationist, formerly of the Presidency College, Calcutta, who has revised the MS. and also perused the proofs ; to Dr. James Morison, Librarian of the Indian Institute, Oxford, for kind help and suggestions ; thanks are also due to MM. Perrin of Paris for permission to publish the translation, and to the Association des Amis de l'Orient and other friends for their willing assistance.

MARY E. R. MARTIN.

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