

CHAPTER XI. THE PARAMHANS MANDALI (SOCIETY)

ALTHOUGH I belonged to the party of the reformers, I did not like to be called a reformer, as that word had become a term of reproach both in Bombay and Poona; and it was natural for people to entertain strange views of the reformers, as not a few of these indulged in evil practices. This was chiefly in Poona. In Bombay things were not so bad; atheism had not made so much progress in it as at Poona, and the reformers were usually serious men, who professed to believe in God. They were active workers and sought converts. Some of them once got round me, and argued hard against caste; and when they had succeeded in convincing me, they asked me there and then to give a practical demonstration of my sincerity. I did not know what they meant, but one of them produced a biscuit and challenged me to eat it. I had not expected such an ordeal. I said I would eat it if they did so; for I did not think respectable Brahmans would do anything of the kind; when, lo! and behold, they actually put a bit of the "Unclean food" into their mouths, and it went down their throats! I and other novices had to follow the bold example. But I was in the greatest perturbation of mind in consequence. I feared to go home, for I expected the severe vengeance of my orthodox relatives. I thought my mother would expel me from the house, and that I should be shunned by my people as a poor Christian outcast. Indeed I feared I should be execrated by all Hindus, and saluted on the roads and in places of public resort with the reproachful term of "pervert,"*¹ which was then vociferously bestowed in all the streets and lanes of Bombay on the Christian converts. The companion who was, like me, only then initiated, found it hard to swallow the unholy food, and he sought the aid of a glass of water to help it down his throat. Thus I broke my caste first of all in the company of my Hindu friends. My Christian teachers and acquaintances did not insist on such trivial matters as food and drink. I may mention that Dr. Wilson once stated on the subject of caste. A Hindu, he said, should not violate the rules of caste simply with the view of indulging his appetite; let it be done from the sense of duty. Caste is sinful; God does not approve of social arrangements that sow discord among His children; and if with this conviction a man throws off its yoke, he does right, and God will help him bear the persecution that follows such conduct. This was excellent advice; and hence, although he offered tea to all that came to the social gatherings of the Mission-house, Dr. Wilson did not insist on Hindus partaking of it. At special meetings, when men of high standing came, refreshments were placed in separate room such as no orthodox Hindu would object to partake of.

After I had been initiated, I was introduced by my reformed friends to the members of the *Paramhans Mandali* Society. I had to declare my assent to the principles and objects of the society. The chief objects were the abolition of the caste, the introduction of custom of widow remarriage, and the renunciation of idolatry. The members hoped to make a public profession when their number rose to one thousand; till which time they swore to maintain absolute secrecy regarding the operations of the Society. The rule of initiation at the meetings was as follows: - The candidate had to declare his assent to the principles of the Society, holding a little water in the palm of his hand, which he poured on the ground at the conclusion of the declaration. Then he had to drink a cup of milk, of which the president and others had already drunk, and

¹ * The word in the original is *bâtyâ* which may be rendered *polluted wretch*.- Edit

to eat a piece of European bread. His name was then enrolled in the list of members. Every meeting was commenced and closed with prayer. The prayers were composed by the late Râo Bahâdur Dâdobâ Pândurang the well-known Marathi grammarian.

A young man had been admitted into the Society who broke his solemn promise and divulged its secrets; he published the names of its members and declared that they would soon all turn Christians. This greatly alarmed the people. Grown up lads from the Mission schools were at once removed, and some of them were sent up country. The newspapers were filled with most alarming statements. Satirical poems were published and widely circulated. An orthodox learned Brahman wrote a book in defence of the Hindu religion, but the reformers boldly encountered him in argument. There was immense excitement, and much sorrow and wailing in many a Hindu home. A class-fellow of mine, who was an earnest inquirer and not far from the kingdom of heaven, was removed from the school, when he wrote to me the following letter :-

“I am very much grieved to inform you that I am constrained to keep away from school and deny myself the pleasure of your society. I do not know when shall I be free from this restraint. Not only am I forbidden to go to the dear school, but to attend any meeting or lecture. There is no help for it. Those who, like me, are seekers for truth must often suffer such persecution. May God help you in your secular and religious studies, and may He save you from the bondage which I am enduring!”