

Letter 34
Allahabad
July 1767

Whenever a Hindoo has occasion to cross the Carramnassa, or the Accursed River, which in the dry season is fordable, he gives a Mahomedan money to carry him over upon his back, that his feet may not be wet with the accursed water, which is a thing forbidden by their religion. In this, and many other instances, the letter of the commandment is observed, while the spirit of it is lost; for I think one cannot doubt, but that the intention of this law, was to keep them within their own provinces.

Their being forbid to eat or drink of what has been touched but by those of their own casts, is likewise a great help to migration, as they cannot always meet with those of their own cast to provide what they want; and is particularly calculated to prevent their taking voyages by sea. It is astonishing with what strictness the Hindoos observe these rules, even to starving themselves to death rather than break through them.

The children of the Hindoos are not to be tempted to eat any thing forbidden, either by persuasion, or by offering them the greatest delicacies; which I have often been witness of.

It is the first impression their minds receive; they are used to seeing it strictly observed by their own and other casts; it grows

up with them as the first, and most absolute law; and is perhaps observed with more strictness than any other law, religious or civil, by any nation under the sun.

It must be acknowledged, that the religion of the Hindoos is now so overgrown with absurd and ridiculous ceremonies, that it is difficult to believe there has ever been any degree of common sense in it.

And yet, upon a closer examination, one must admit, that the division into casts and tribes promotes subordination. It is not peculiar to this country, but has been observed by other nations in the early ages: amongst the Romans, the sacerdotal office was likewise confined to the Patricians; as amongst the Hindoos, it is to the Brahmins; and in the Levitical law we are told, that the ark was carried by the tribe of the Levi, and to them was the priesthood for ever. Something like it likewise exists at present in the ideas of noble blood amongst the French and Germans.

The impossibility of rising to any higher cast checks ambition in the bud. Their abstinence from animal food promotes temperance. Their being forbid to eat of certain food, and with none but those of their own casts, prevents migration. Their belief in the transmigration of souls makes them tender of the lives of all animals, and produces an aversion and horror at the idea of shedding blood.

It is no wonder, that, being taught to revere and preserve a cow on account of its utility, or to admire an elephant for its sagacity and strength; and the river Ganges, as causing the fertility, and facilitating the commerce of their country; and these opinions delivered to them in the lofty and figurative style of the East; it is no wonder, I say, that they should rank the two first in the number of their demi gods, and believe that the other is able to cure diseases, and wash away sin.

When the priests of the Christian religion were first compelled to celibacy, it seems to have been intended, that the acknowledged purity of their characters should gain the most perfect veneration. But long after it was known that this end was not answered by it, it was still held to be a sin for any priest to marry.

In this and other institutions in the Christian church, were held sacred after the first intention of them was forgot; it is not at all surprising, that the ancient customs of the Hindoos should be yet observed, although the use of them is either lost, or not understood.

No Martin Luther has arisen to open their eyes; and was it possible that any Brahmin by translating the Shastah from the Sanscrit to the vulgar tongue, or by explaining it according to common sense, was to endeavour to free them from their absurdities, they are too ignorant, and too indolent, to be benefited by it.

Monsieur Montesquieu, who has unravelled the causes of different manners says,

"Si avec cette foiblesse d'organes qui fait recevoir aux peuples d'orient les impressions du monde les plus fortes, vous joignez une certain paresse dans l'esprit, naturellement liee avec celle du corps, qui fasse que cet esprit ne soit capable d'aucune action, d'aucune contention; vous comprendrez que l'ame qui a une fois recu des impressions, ne peut plus en changer, c'est ce que fait que les Loiz, les moeurs, & les manieres, meme celles que paroissent indifferentes, come la facon de sevetir, sont aujourd'hui en orient, comme elles etoient il y a mille ans."