

CHILDREN OF ALL NATIONS : THEIR HOMES, THEIR SCHOOLROOMS,  
THEIR PLAYGROUNDS.

## VIII.—INDIA.



PARSEE CHILDREN.

INDIAN children, it strikes me, from what I have been able to observe of them, do not lead such merry lives as those born in other countries. They seem to take life from their earliest years as a very solemn business. This is in a great measure due to the ignorance and heathen superstition of their parents, which cause the children to be hedged in, at a comparatively

early period, with the ceremonies and mysteries of their religion and their caste. There is an unnatural look of old age on their little faces, and though of course they have their childish plays, somehow their amusements partake of the gravity which seems part and parcel of their nature. They take their pleasures sadly, and bursts of joyous merriment are rarely, if ever, heard amongst them in their play-hours. They are what we should call "old-fashioned."

The generality of Anglo-Indians know but little about the native children who literally swarm in their compounds, as the grounds around an Indian bungalow are called. They, of course, see their servants' children running about in scanty garments, if they have any on at all, and making off, in an excess of shyness, on the approach of the Sahib or Mem-Sahib, to a place of shelter, and that is very often the extent of their knowledge.

Visions rise before me of my ayah's children. She had a large flourishing family of all sizes and ages, from the wee baby in arms, to her eldest son, who helped the *mallee* (gardener) in the garden. I hardly ever went round to the stables without meeting either these children or those of the *syces* (grooms) or the *dhobies* (washermen). Pretty little things many of them were, either with shocks of black hair, or else shaved heads, chubby faces, large black bead-like eyes, and beautifully-white teeth. But if their faces were pretty, their forms were not graceful, for Indian children are either too fat or too thin; and they go about in the fruit season, as a well-known writer has said, like "pots

of green preserves, 'chow chow,' undeveloped," and their round little bodies give them an almost laughable appearance, taking away considerably from their good looks.

I am writing now of quite poor native children. They have one great virtue, which children of other countries would do well to imitate—they are naturally polite, and when you pass them, rise and make a most graceful salaam before they scamper away into hiding. If you give them a kind word, a few sweets, or, what they love more than aught else, a few small coppers, they get over their shyness, and you have leisure to observe their sedate ways a little.

It may be as well to give an account of Indian children from their earliest years.

Babies in India are not troubled with much clothing; they are not swathed up, for example, as are the German babies, or even as English infants. They go through a curious and what we should think a very disagreeable process; their little bodies are rubbed all over with oil, and lamp-black is put on their eyelids, and below their eyes; there being an idea amongst the women that this is good for their eyesight.

The children have generally a quantity of black hair, but often, especially if it be very hot weather, this is all shaved off so as to keep the head cool. In the case of boys, however, one lock is always left on the top of the head, and the hair is kept together by wax. With Hindoos this sacred lock, as it is called, is never cut off. Some parents make a vow not to cut a boy's hair until he is twelve years old, and boys are occasionally mistaken for girls, owing to their long plaits of hair. When the lock is finally shaved off, a great feast is given, presents are made to the Brahmins, the child is dressed in new clothes, and a variety of ceremonies are gone through.

Very soon after the birth of a child of well-to-do parents, the astrologer is consulted to cast the infant's nativity. He arrives with his different instruments, his compasses, stellar tables, astrolabe, and scrolls of cabalistic characters, and asks a great many questions. He then consults, or pretends to, the stars, and unfolds the roll of its destiny, describing the events of its future life. The parents treasure up this prophetic record, and consult it as often as good or evil happens to their child. Poor people who cannot afford to go to the expense of an astrologer's visit content themselves

with merely entering down the day on which their child is born.

The bestowing of the name is another very ceremonious affair, and generally takes place when the child is about twelve days old. The names of gods or goddesses are generally chosen, or perhaps that of a flower, but, curiously enough, never the name of either father or mother. The choice is usually the mother's business, but the

Little Indian girls are covered with jewels very soon after they are born. Quite tiny babies wear silver nose-rings, ear-rings, bangles, anklets, and necklaces, seeming, poor little mites! quite weighed down with them. Children are very often stolen away, and sometimes murdered, for the sake of these ornaments.

Mohammedan children generally wear charms tied round their necks and arms, which consist of



SCENE FROM INDIAN CHILD-LIFE: A MOHAMMEDAN SCHOOL. (See p. 91.)

father sometimes wishes for another name than that chosen by the other parent, and then the matter is decided by a lamp being placed over each, and the one over which it burns the most steadily and brightly is chosen.

The clothes for a baby are generally provided by the grandmother on either side of the house. They consist of little jackets (*kurtas*) of net, trimmed with a bright colour, scarlet or yellow; little net caps are made to match the *kurtas*, and a warm jacket lined with cotton wool of some warm stuff of brilliant colour is provided for the cold weather. These garments are only kept, however, for best occasions, high days and holidays, and the children, even of better-class natives, are often to be seen with nothing on beyond a string tied round their waists, or, in the case of girls, with their jewels.

verses from their sacred book—the Koran—written on small slips of paper, and then put into square lockets of silver. A Hindoo child wears other charms, perhaps a tiger's claw or tooth; sometimes acorns, shells, or coins. The mothers are not generally willing to say what they put round their children's necks.

As they get a little out of babyhood they have their pets, like English children. Pigeons, parrots, and *mainas* (starlings) are very favourite birds in Indian houses; sometimes partridges and tame squirrels may be seen; and dogs are also made pets of, both in Mohammedan and Hindoo families.

Their toys are usually made of baked mud or wood, and gaily coloured, the figures of animals mostly. I brought home some, which the ayah

gave my little girl. The shapes of the animals are very curious—horses of most eccentric form, well-striped tigers, elephants, and so on. An English doll to a native child gives the greatest delight. They incline to those with blue eyes and flaxen hair as the greatest contrast to their own brown little faces, often rendered still more dingy by the curious custom some mothers have of making a black smudge on their children's foreheads to prevent—as they think—wicked spirits taking a fancy to them on account of their good looks.

Kite-flying and swinging are at certain seasons of the year among their most favourite amusements; they are also fond of a game of football, and are experts at "cup and ball." The annual fair, held to celebrate the return of Rama, is the great day for native children. Their parents, however poor, strive to scrape a few pice together to give their little ones a treat then, and take them, decked out in as much finery as possible, to share in the fun; to swing in the gaily-painted red and gold cars; to have a turn in the merry-go-rounds, drawn, perhaps, by an elephant or a camel gaily trapped; and last, but by no means least, to buy some of the baked earth toys before mentioned, and curious-looking sweetmeats.

The older children play at various games, pretence forming a large feature, as with all children, in the entertainments. They pretend to cook, or to write in the dust, or to read. Naturally they make a species of "mud pie." I wonder if anywhere in the known world "mud pie-making" is not a game with children. But the "mud pies" Indian children make take the form of graves—so I discovered, when I remarked on the small hillocks of dust they had been industriously piling up and decorating with flowers and leaves, after the fashion in which their elders ornament the tombs of their relations. A solemn sort of amusement this, but quite in accordance with their natures, and most gravely conducted.

School-life commences for boys at about five or six years of age. They are sent to school, or in some instances have a master at home, who teaches them with two or three neighbours' children, thus making up a class of eight to ten scholars. They sit generally in the large porch, or entrance of the house, on a raised platform; and as you enter you see the master sitting, stick in hand, at one end, and the boys at the other, in a row, bending over their books, and swaying their bodies backwards and forwards as they read. The characters of the alphabet are not learned as in Europe by being pointed out in a book, and having their names pronounced aloud; but the scholars first write them with their fingers or sticks on the ground in the

dust or sand; when more advanced they write on wooden slates called *takhtis*, and with reeds and Indian ink, or (if Hindoos) with chalk.

Indian children are generally very clever in arithmetic, saying their tables up to an extraordinary number; but they cannot endure being severely exercised in them very well. Ordinary slates are now used for sums; formerly palm-leaves and green plantain-leaves were given to the scholars to write on, and a reed, or iron stylus, to write with.

Hindoo schools are of two kinds, called *tols* and *patha-salas*. The latter are vernacular schools for elementary education and for reading, writing, and arithmetic—and are conducted by a village schoolmaster, as already described; the former are of a higher class, in which the course of grammar occupies from seven to twelve years, law about ten, and logic from thirteen to twenty-two years. The two kinds of schools are in no way connected, pupils not passing from the inferior into the superior, as one might naturally suppose would be the case. Sometimes the girls are sent to an old woman, who beats a smattering of the Koran into their heads, and perhaps teaches them the Arabic alphabet. Happily this state of things is now being altered; and each year greater facilities are offered to those ladies who, giving themselves up to the cause of enlightening Indian women and children, go out to India as zenana missionaries. At first they found their work very difficult; now they obtain an entrance into the zenanas with little trouble, and teach the native ladies and children they find in them. Children in England can do a great deal to help these lady workers in the mission-field, and I am glad to say very many do take a great interest in India's children, by sending out boxes full of presents for distribution; and it is wonderful how much pleasure such offerings give to those for whom they are intended.

Perhaps you will like to know what Indian children have for food, and when they take their meals. The hours vary according to the time of year, and the time that the schools are open. If from six to ten, the children get a piece of cold bread before going out in the morning to school, and return, if Hindoos, to a meal of *dal*,\* and *chapatis*, the latter being thin cakes made of flour and water, with sometimes a little spice. If Mohammedans, they are given meat. Then they get another meal at about six in the evening. Between whiles they eat a good deal of fruit, and are quite as fond of sweets as any English child.

The Mohammedans take their meals together,

\*A sort of pea, called in England pigeon-pea; it is boiled and eaten with rice.

father and mother and children all sitting around the tablecloth, which, by the way, they spread not on a table but on the floor. In a Hindoo house, on the contrary, the father and sons have their meals alone, waited on by the mother and sisters, who afterwards take their food anyhow, partaking of whatever scraps are left, as they are looked on as quite inferior to the male members of the family.

Some people who know little of India have an idea that the natives are by no means a clean race. This is quite a mistake, for they wash much more frequently, as a rule, than do people of other nations. Both Mohammedans and Hindoos wash not only before and after meals, which of course is absolutely necessary, as they eat with their fingers, but also at various other times in the day. My old bearer, Seethal by name, seemed to be always washing at every leisure moment, when he was not indulging in the peaceful charms of his "hubble bubble," or pipe.

You probably know that in India early marriages are the custom. Among the Sudras, boys are frequently married at the age of five or six; but the Brahmins delay the celebration of marriage until the boy, by the ceremony of the investiture of the cord—the *paita*, as it is called—has become a member of the sacred caste, that very important ceremony in the life of a Brahmin youth taking place when he is about nine years old. Often with Brahmins marriage is put off until the age of fifteen or sixteen; but then the wife must not exceed the age of four or five. The ceremonies connected with the celebration of a marriage are very numerous; the rites occupy a long time, and not only are vast sums expended on such occasions, but much pomp is usually observed in the case of wealthy families.

All married women in India wear on their necks a small ornament of gold called *takly*, which is a sign that they are married; this ornament is removed when they become widows with great form. The nose ring, or *nutt*, is also put in on marriage, and this is likewise removed if the child-wife become a widow.

These infant marriages are the source of much misery in India; and an agitation is now going on to endeavour if possible to put a stop to them, by a restriction on the age for marriage. The lives child-widows lead are most miserable. Very often they have never even seen the faces of the husbands they are compelled to mourn for; they have to abstain from all, even the most innocent pleasure, eat the very coarsest food, wear the coarsest cloth for clothes, and be deprived of all their ornaments, as no widows are allowed to wear any jewels.

It is to be hoped that in time Government will do something to lighten their troubles. Many bad practices, such as *suttee*—that is, widows burning themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres—have been put down, and infant marriages may too, let us hope, for they cause an immense amount of grief and misery both to girls and boys, but more particularly to the former.

As light, by the aid of the zenana missionaries and of Christian civilisation, breaks in on Indian women, and gradually spreads amongst them, we may hope to see these heathen customs—the outcome of superstition and caste—gradually dying away; and then, no longer bowed down by cares and by the weighty business of life at an age when play and amusement ought to be their portions, we may see, too, the little ones of India becoming more like the happy merry children of other countries.

ELIOT JAMES.

### THE LITTLE BROWN CHICK.

“**S**UCH weather as this,” sighed a little brown chick,  
 “Will soon drive us all to despair;  
 Let me go where I will, the sun blazes still;  
 I can't get a breath of fresh air!”

“Why not try a swim?” said a bright little duck,  
 Who paddled about at her leisure.

“’Tis really so nice, the water's like ice:  
 Just try, it will give you such pleasure.”

“What say you? afraid you will drown? what a thought!

I never was timid like you.  
 So just tell me why, when you're older than I,  
 You should tremble and shake as you do?”

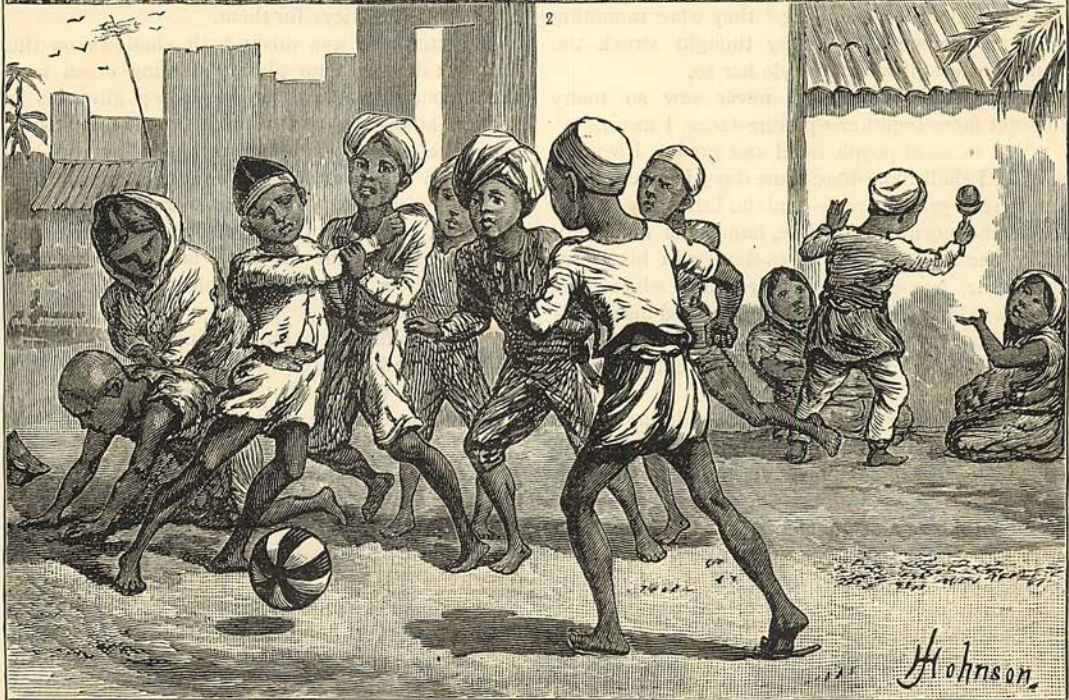
The chicken thus urged, made a sudden resolve

To venture herself in the water,  
 So in like a dunce she tumbled at once;  
 But, ah! her experience taught her

She'd better have stayed on the meadow so sweet,

And left Mrs. Duck to her pleasure,  
 For chickens were never intended to swim,  
 But to walk on the land at their leisure.

D. B. MCKEAN.



SCENES FROM INDIAN CHILD-LIFE. (See p. 89-92.)  
1. VILLAGE CHILDREN. 2. CHILDREN AT PLAY.