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THE
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

OF THE

INDIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

(A paper read by Rev. W. Raju Naidu, M. E. Mission, before the Madras Native Christian Association on the 6th August, 1897.)

MR. CHAIRMAN AND GENTLEMEN,

It is with extreme diffidence, not unmixed, frankly I admit, with pleasure, that I now stand before you at the request of Mr. S. Sathianadhan, our worthy Secretary, to read an address on a subject of my own choosing. I have selected for my evening's address the past, present and future of the Indian Christian community; and crave your indulgence for the few remarks I am about to make on this large and interesting subject.

In dealing with the subject it is necessary to guard against two extremes—an undue laudation of things as they now are, when contrasted with things as they were, and an undue depreciation of the modern aspects of our community when contrasted with what the community attempted and achieved in the past. It is too common a fault with some to see every excellence in the present, while it is equally the fault with others to magnify the past, or, as it is described in familiar speech, the good old times. There is no more respectable sentiment than that which induces us to invest the bygone times with a halo of veneration, and I believe the sentiment, under due restraint, has a most healthful tendency as, however much we may have improved since times gone by, those times cannot but be laden with lessons, a careful study of which

must yield the most salutary results. What then do the voices that speak to us from the years that are no more convey to us, Christian men of to-day? The answer to this is necessarily a wide one, but I shall endeavour to give it as briefly as possible. Those days tell us of conviction that was so deep-rooted as to defy the buffetings of trial; of indomitable resolution which, when once the truth was clearly discerned, impelled men onward to grasp it and keep it—no matter how severe the ordeals which had to be passed through before the treasure was secured; and withal of a simple but strong faith that burned with a clear and steady flame, illuminating every nook and corner of the Christian life. Of a truth, they were giants in those days. The history of the Indian Christian Church is full of records of the lives of great, strong men and women whose story does not fall behind that told of the heroes of any other country in the world. Nor is this a matter for much wonder as a strong religious feeling is an ingrained characteristic of our race, and the converts from the native religions have brought with them into the Christian life all the elevating elements that formed the constituents of their pre-Christian lives. Religion was an essential portion of their being. They lived and moved, so to speak, in an atmosphere of piety which enabled them all the more easily to see the distinctive truths of Christianity stand out in all their strength and clean-cut beauty. To them the teachings of Christianity were not mere propositions to be talked about and to be reasoned about, but stern realities and efficient forces operating upon their every thought and feeling and determining their every act. They, in fact, lived their Christianity, and thus not only obeyed the injunction placed upon them to so walk in the sight of men as to approve themselves living testimonies of the great Christian truths vitalising their entire lives, but also left behind them a glorious record whence the Christian of after ages may draw some of his highest inspiration. They belonged to a generation characterised by a concentration of force and thoroughness of purpose, doing all that they found to do with all their might, laying themselves out for the cause they so dearly loved, and displaying a faith strong enough to cause the removal of mountains. They were not great numerically, but so rich were they in mental culture and spiritual gifts that their inferiority in respect of numbers was no hindrance to the work they undertook for the

extension of Christ's Kingdom in this country. Their education was not like what we understand by education now. They were not educated in a hurry. Their training was more gradual, and thus their knowledge became more fully digested and assimilated, creating minds full of depth, solidity and vigour. They had the advantage, too, of living in a serener atmosphere than that in which we live at present. To them were unknown the disturbing speculations of science and that ceaseless theological wrangle which is so distracting us to-day and is helping to thwart the work of Christianity by setting up a chronic state of doubt and misbelief. Not that they had no knotty problems to solve, but to help them to a solution of them they had more time at their command, and their work was done in the calm serenity of a library and not, as now, amid the dust of the road side, the noise of the platform, the immature crudities and presumptuous asseverations of journalistic critics. Every thing that those great men contributed to literature bore traces of the highest artistic excellence, and was so perfect in point of thought as to secure for it an enduring existence. Anybody who cares to satisfy himself that I am not indulging in exaggeration of language has but to consult the literary relics they have left behind which may be said to constitute literature in the real sense of that much abused word. But the intellectual excellences of these strong men of the past generation, striking as they were, were eclipsed by their spiritual graces. We ought never to set intellectual gifts over spiritual. Mere brain, however strong, is cold and weak as compared with a heart warm with the glow of faith and trust. It is, therefore, in this latter respect that these worthies shine out through the mists of the ever receding past and arrest attention to themselves, though the times in which they lived were full of many stirring historical events. They exerted a formative influence on events slowly accumulating towards future fruition.

The future that stretched out before them is now our present, and that present is all the richer for the great exemplars set up in the midst of the Christian Church even as beacons on a hill. The grave holds them and conceals them from view, but their influence is deathless and is even now felt by us who cannot but be exalted by contemplating the grand Christian lives they lived and the splendid work they achieved. Now let us dwell for a little

on the present that is ours, and examine our condition a little so as to discover what of profit we may derive from the models that have been bequeathed to us. It will strike us at once when doing so that the conditions of life are considerably changed. The old foot-path of life may be truly said to be converted into a rail-road. We are not moving, but whirling. Many of the results following this change are not altogether healthy. It produces a dissipation of forces inimical to concentration, and as in the case of railway travelling, which produces the optical illusion of fancying stationary objects in motion and fancying movement in a direction opposite to that in which the traveller is actually proceeding, the incessant mental agitation of the times sets up delusive unrealities, and if we do not take excellent care to shake ourselves free of the spell, we shall make a terrible mess. For instance, we have everywhere written up in large characters the word Progress with a capital P. It cannot be denied that there is much of it observable. Nevertheless we cannot be quite sure that we are all tending to a perfectly safe and desirable goal. The Indian Christian community, like other communities, feels the impact of the tide and needs therefore careful steering to avoid the reefs and shoals to be met with in the onward way. A latitude in thought is noticeable everywhere about us; men would be now esteemed broad, liberal and tolerant; excellent virtues these, but when it comes to a stepping over the old lines we quickly find ourselves quitting the domain of these virtues for an unknown region beset with new perils we know not of.

In our social life, in our religious life, these perils are to be found; in the one is to be found, because of our contact with the West, a tendency to imitate, too much, all the forms of Western life, and in the other we are growing so tolerant and so liberal that religious zeal is apt to be well-nigh strangled out of existence. As an Oriental people we are under no necessity, however much we might address ourselves to taking lessons from Western Society, to completely assimilate our social life to that of the West, and in our religious, however much we may feel disposed to tolerate differences in opinion, we are under no obligation to subordinate Christianity to the conflict of the creeds which now surround it as its rivals and are becoming every day more militant and aggressive. In talking to you, dear Christian brethren, of social change, I am aware that I

tread upon most delicate ground, as it is obviously difficult to definitely decide what to select and what to reject. There is absolutely no standard of selection, no line of limitation; and it therefore requires an almost instinctive and rare discrimination to decide wisely, fittingly and adequately. Something must be allowed for the enhanced capacity of our community and something must be allowed for that desire to surround oneself with the refinements of civilised life. The standard, as it is called, of comfort of life cannot but be raised by our modern environments, but it is our duty to steer clear of those luxuries which a recent discriminating writer in the English *Spectator* brands with the hard word 'immoral' by which term he means habits and practices which have a tendency to produce moral enervation.

Nobody realises more strongly than I do how hard it is to be in the world and yet not of the world, not only in matters touching our higher duties, but also those lesser matters of which, in the main, our life here consists. It is impossible for us to follow the life of an ascetic. We are led by circumstances to mix in the busy world of every-day life; we are constantly in touch with temptations, great and small; we are obliged to subscribe to some extent to prevailing usage and fashion, if we would escape the ascription to us of singularity or eccentricity. It requires a brave resolute Christian soul to face this host of little persecutions set in battle array against us, but the very arduousness of the struggle should brace us up to carry it through to a successful issue. I cannot prescribe for every individual case which is marked by its own peculiar features. Who can tell the peculiar surroundings of each individual life with which we come in contact? It is therefore with humility that I undertake the rôle of an humble adviser. I will not, for I cannot, deny that the pleasures of life are given us to be enjoyed, but I declare it to be an absolute necessity that that enjoyment should be indulged in with moderation and judgment. He alone is wise who knows how to enjoy with discrimination. Indeed, I must say that this is the cardinal aim of the highest morality which does not pledge us, as some seem to think, to total abstention except, of course, in cases where enjoyment trenches upon sin. We have all heard of the phrase—harmless pleasures—but the difficulty with most is to justly discriminate between the harmless and the harmful. What, one would ask, is wrong in

indulging in the vanity of dress? What, another would ask, is the harm in moderately tasting wine? What, again a third would ask, is the mischief that would come from the giddy delights of a ball-room or the pleasurable excitement of the stage? These and other kindred questions lead us into the wide domain of controversy, and as it is not my intention just now to occupy this province, I would limit my reply to this, that whatever interferes with our spiritual life is, on that ground alone, to be avoided. Indeed, this is the Apostolic idea which goes further still, declaring that such avoidance is imperative, not only on our own account, but on account of our weaker brethren to whom our self-indulgence, even in things not directly baneful to ourselves, may be the cause of stumbling. If every Indian Christian would hold himself bound to be an exemplar in things of good report to the rest of his brethren, we should soon reach a truly ideal state of society which depends for the sum of its perfection, on the individual contribution of its members. It is only a too common way of thinking to hold that what we do begins and ends with ourselves, but let us remember that the deeds of men have such a subtle inter-relation that they act and re-act upon one another. It is in this way we arrive at social standards which are after all the total of collective experience of what is best suited for the well-being of an entire body. It is therefore an obligation laid upon every individual Christian to contribute to the maintenance of this standard; and this he can do in various ways. Now I hold that the losing sight of this essential truth contributes, not a little, to the weakening of what is called the unwritten law. Each one of us is too apt to go on his way unmindful that every step taken by him leads, if taken aright, not only to personal perfection but to strengthen, in the shape of example, those who are treading the same path with him. The whole of the idea which I wish to convey is most beautifully and forcibly set forth in one of the Epistles of the Apostle Paul which enjoins us to emulate one another in good works. The latitude of our times is apt to produce a general break-up of the uniformity of law as there is a tendency in each individual to become a law unto himself. Almost in every department of thought in which principles are supposed to have grown hard in the mould, we find a fusing process now going on as the result of the incessant friction of controversy. We frequently hear of different and conflicting schools

of thought in one and the same church. The effect of this on individuals is apparent on all sides; and if we do not take good care its collective results will prove most disastrous.

We, Indian Christians, have to be particularly careful of our in-comings and out-goings during the present times of transition in which the East and the West meet to learn of one another, for of a truth the East is not altogether unable to convey lessons to the West which is usually supposed to be the receptacle of all wisdom. In frugality, in quietude, and in moderation the life of the East contrasts favourably with the life of the West where all is marked by a feverish haste which, in many ways, is destructive to spiritual life. When saying this, I do not depreciate the virtues that flourish in Western soil. What I would guard you against is a too servile imitation of some models whose abnormal aspects sufficiently indicate that they have their root, not in that Christianity which has wrought so many wonders of a moral and spiritual character, but in the diseased conditions of the terrible and unavoidable rush of the life lived by men who have hardly time left them to winnow the multitude of new thoughts that arise so as to separate the wheat from the chaff. Read your modern books and your modern news-papers, and you cannot but be struck with the anarchic chaos of thought therein to be observed. Against this, a recent book raises a warning finger, but, alas! it is difficult to decide how all this confusion is to be ultimately reduced to order. However, we should not despair. We should not be heard exclaiming, weary of the toil and the moil, 'who is sufficient for these things,' for we live in the sure and certain hope that there is a profound design at work tending to evolve good out of this seething mass of evil.

But to come now more immediately to our community, I do not believe that there is another body in this country so peculiarly placed as ourselves. On the one hand, we have gone away from our Hindu brethren, and on the other, we have drawn nigh to, indeed, we have merged ourselves in Christian society. Thus we have critics standing on this side and on that. The Hindus mark us to see if our change of faith and profession has been productive of good; and the Christian people, crediting us with being under the entire influence of the living faith we have embraced, expect us to bear fruit worthy of our profession. Both at times are hard censors and on

this account it behoves us to be ever on our guard against providing occasion for adverse strictures. I would not however urge upon you the maintenance of that standard to which I have referred simply because our falling away from it may expose us to the slings and arrows of our critics. No! that, in truth, would be a motive lying at a very low level. Our entire conduct should be governed by an infinitely higher incentive—the teaching and standard of our Great Master Himself within whose great mission is embraced the setting out of an ideal, the attainment of which will raise humanity from the low-lying deeps which are found in the unregenerate world. One who follows the precepts of our blessed Saviour—and who is there who would not if only he knew their excellence—cannot possibly miss the way to the goal of our being—the perfection of our nature. No undue burden is laid upon humanity; we have His own assurance that His yoke is easy and what is more comforting still, that He is ever ready to endow us with abundant strength to bear it. Christ is near me—that should be the thought ever present in our minds; near to cheer our drooping spirits; near to animate our failing courage; near to revive our fading strength with His own infinite power. I am afraid that many of our failures are due to our not adequately realising the nearness of Jesus Christ whose promises are ever faithful and ever sure. Many of us, I regret to have to affirm it, would live our lives with, so to speak, Christ out of them, which must result in sad and terrible failure. Christianity is reduced to mere lip-service, as it needs must, when lacking the vitalising influence of Him who declared Himself to be the way, the truth and the life. Missing this aim, we are like vessels without a chart or compass, tossed amid the surging breakers of some stormy sea. We are in truth like those disciples overtaken by the tempest in the sea of Galilee. When we let our Saviour sleep, so to speak, the waves prevail and our souls are full of terrible apprehensions. Let us wake the slumbering Master and then one word from Him, commanding the war of the elements to cease, straightway restores the peaceful calm so different from the raging tempest that succeeded it. It is saddening to think how many of us miss the way, though in touch with the Pilot, ever willing to guide us to a safe haven. In all things, my dear Christian friends, let us not shut the portals of our mind against the conviction that we have a Friend near, ready to aid us in our greatest extremity. This

thought must energise us in every position of life in which we may be placed and when it pervades the entire community, difficulties will vanish as the mist of the morning, and there will grow up a power capable of achieving undreamt-of results. As I have said, we live in a time of transition; we stand midway between two communities, and circumstances force upon us an election to which we have every reason to give good heed. We are caught in the whirl of civilisation that urges us along as resistlessly as a torrent hurries forward the floating *debris* on the surface. We must at once determine then the ultimate form our Christian community is to take and every one of us can more or less influence that determination. And every one of us who neglects to exercise that influence betrays the trust reposed in him. Is it not possible to evolve out of the existing state of things a model that shall avoid the falsehood of extremes—the extreme of the West on one hand and the extreme of the East on the other? I believe it is. You cannot attain to it without honesty of purpose, deep convictions, and strenuous struggles.

In our hands is placed the lever of education, but much depends upon how we use it. Perhaps there is no word, the true significance of which is so little understood as this. To most it means the highest cultivation of our intellectual faculties till we bring within our grasp the wide domain of human knowledge. And as to its practical effects we look for what is commonly known as progress which very often means the advancement of our interest from a mere secular point of view. To that progress we are not strangers; indeed, next to our Brahmin neighbours we stand high in the educational and emolumental category. In respect of the enlightenment of our women, we are even more advanced than most of the communities now feeling the impelling power of the rising tide. Truly, we have much to be proud of and much to be thankful for. But do we and our women possess the true regenerative power—the philosopher's stone whose touch transforms dross to gold? Have we attained to charity, love, union, self-restraint and all those cardinal virtues without which our profession of Christianity would be a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, a delusion and a snare? We see the siren luxury beckoning us on, and not a few falling a prey to her wiles. The common talk is heard of the raising of the standard

of living which, I say, is both a necessity and a thing very desirable, if we only hedge it round with reasonable limitations. In the rush to attain it we land in extravagance, than which perhaps there is nothing more baneful to any society. Our lives in fact are becoming dangerously artificialised and we would do well, while giving reins to our legitimate desires, to check this mischievous propensity. Here is a matter in which each individual Christian can do something by prescribing for himself or herself a mode of living which shall be satisfying without overstepping the bounds of that moderation enjoined by the commonest prudence and the highest religion as well. I fully recognise how much easier it is to declaim than to reduce the details of wisdom to practice ; but not on that account would I deny for a single instant the imperativeness of the obligation laid upon us to counteract the adverse influences at work. Luxury is a deadly foe to the true spirit of our faith, enervating the spiritual within us and dangerously relaxing our moral fibre. There can be no climbing the heights when the nerves are relaxed and muscles flaccid. Our whole spiritual system needs bracing up and nothing so effectually does this than the tonic of self-restraint. Show me the presence of luxury and there I at once recognise the beginnings of a general breaking up of all that we call good in men. It breeds numberless vices which, like the cankerworm eating into the bud of some beautiful flower or the heart of some luscious fruit, is a sure harbinger of decay. Under its blighting influence goodness withers like grass on the house-top. It leads slowly on to general deterioration. A community under its spell cannot be equal to great attainments.

Our aim should be perfect manhood and perfect womanhood. I grant you that we cannot attain to this without deep-based convictions and arduous endeavours. But what after all is this perfect manhood and womanhood ? I will say that it is the sum of all attainable Christian excellences. Strive then, without ceasing, to attain to the perfect union of hearts which must result in the perfect union of aims. Put away from you the petty strifes and bickerings of sectarian differences that serve so much to embitter the Christian life and expose it to the sneers of adverse spectators. Gather up all the existing Christian forces to be found, and unite them all into one great impelling motor force instead of frittering them away in a hundred different directions which land us in dis-

union and disappointment. Be not too assertive in non-essentials, for remember that well-balanced compromise goes a long way towards solving most difficulties. We cannot afford to be divided when the enemy is strong and united. How can we expect to wage a successful war against the enemy when our own counsels are rent with dissensions? Let us recognise to the full that we are here not only to justify our claims to be Christians, but also to recommend our Christianity to others. It is said, and must be admitted to be true, that converts to Christ are less numerous now than in the old time. Surely for this there must be a cause. Well, I frankly admit at the threshold that the art of criticism is more developed now and has more weapons in its armoury; but this alone does not fully explain the phenomenon. May it not be that we, Indian Christians, by our own neglect, are retarding the progress of Christianity? That there is with us too great a contradiction between precept and practice, which is a cause of stumbling to those to whom our appeals are addressed, I fear, must be admitted; and I most earnestly appeal in the name of Christ to every one present to remove this lion in the path by remembering that the sermon of a life is more persuasive than the most eloquent discourse ever delivered from a pulpit. I pray we should live our Christianity, so that others noting the power of Christ within us and the blessed results flowing from it may be willing to come under its beneficent influence. Every evil liver among us, whatever the degree or kind of his or her shortcomings, puts the Cross of Christ to open shame in this country. It is truly an awful thing to think of. We, in the enjoyment of light, are bound to convey that light to others; we who drink of the stream of living truth should lay ourselves out tirelessly to induce others to avail themselves of its life-giving waters. Each one of us should, even as our Master when seated by the well in Samaria, make it his or her duty to tell those who do not enjoy it of the existence of that water of which whoever partaketh can never thirst again.

The future of India rests, I would say without arrogance, in the hands of our community; we can make or mar it, if we will; we can bring India to Christ or repel it from Christ. If we do the former, great and glorious will be our reward; if the latter, unutterably terrible will be our condemnation. Ours is the privilege to know the mind of the Master, and bad stewards indeed would we

be, should we fail to interpret aright that mind to the multitude. Rid yourselves of the delusion that mere loud and self-exalting work can shake the huge rough-hewn Hinduism with which Christianity has latterly come in hostile contact. We must not only work for Christ in the ordinary acceptance of that word, that is, in a sort of mill-round routine, but we must speak for Christ through *our lives*. That is the eloquence that Hinduism needs to gain its ear, to win its heart, and bring it captive to the foot of the Cross of Calvary.