

The Women of India.

Side by side with the advance of women in this country, great efforts have been made to improve the position of those in India. There have been established the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society; the Society for promoting Female Education in the East, now some fifty years old; the Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education among the Heathen (!), besides many other agencies which took root on native soil, as, for instance, the school started by Miss Cooke, afterwards Mrs. Wilson, in Calcutta; and later that by Mr. Drinkwater Bethune, a legislative member of the Governor General's Council, for the education of children of a higher caste. England has fully realised her responsibility to India—a responsibility, however, which feels as much for herself as for Hindus—and our women have also recognised a share in this responsibility; yet comparatively little has been done. Shoshee Chunder Dutt, a highly cultured Bengali, writing a few years ago, said: "Throughout all India the total number of schools at this moment scarcely exceeds two thousand, and the total number of school girls fifty thousand; very insignificant figures for a country that numbers a population of about 200 millions." In this same year, 1884, Her Majesty the Queen sent for the Countess of Dufferin, shortly before she left England with her husband, the newly appointed Viceroy, and asked her to consider what could be done to supply medical aid to the women of India. In August, 1885, "The National Association for supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India," was set on foot; and, being generous in its scope and object, and, moreover, having the patronage of the Queen-Empress, and the support of the Governors and Lieut.-Governors of the various provinces, it has met with much success. Under its initiative and fostering care, Hospitals and Dispensaries have been erected on all sides; and native ladies have been induced to undergo medical training, so as to take up the duties of Assistant Surgeons, Nurses, or Midwives. Under this fund Lady Doctors with English qualifications are employed to devote their knowledge to the service of Indian women. Being officially recognised, and enjoying as it does the support of a large number of rich subscribers, it has not been handicapped in its projects for lack of funds, as so many other enterprises have been. Then, too, its objects are not so reformative and revolutionary as are those of some philanthropic institutions. Its direct intention is to alleviate the present condition of the women, not to strike a blow at the basis of that condition.

It will require the work of many generations yet before much is accomplished in the direction of educating or emancipating, not only the women of India but those of other Oriental countries, for they are kept in utter subjection and seclusion. Says Manu, the Moses of the Hindus:—

In childhood must a father guard his daughter;
In youth the husband shields his wife; in age
A mother is protected by her sons—
Ne'er should a woman lean upon herself.

Many harsh things about her are taught in their Sacred Books. "To lie, to be impudent, to deceive, to speak bitter words, to be unclean and cruel, are all

vices inherent in woman's nature." The women are kept ignorant, and their minds a blank—and this is so even among those of the highest caste. The Brahmans have always been cultured, for through them have been handed down the literature of an ancient civilisation; but their wives have been regarded as fit only for domestic duties, cooking, washing, nursing the children, and so forth. Since the subject of female education has been taken up, many parents have been induced to send their girls to school for the first few years of their life; but this is necessarily broken off when a suitable husband has been obtained. The child is married at the age of 12 or 13, and good-bye to further education unless, indeed, the husband takes upon himself the duty of teaching his wife; or women can be found to go round to the various Zenanas, and teach there within the walls of the home. This is slow work, and to Europeans somewhat unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, there have arisen women in India who have vindicated the abilities of the sex in the past as well as the present. Their literature makes reference to remarkable women; and since the British occupation of the country, there have been Princesses who have proved a match in diplomacy for some of our greatest warriors. Even within our own day, instances will be recalled of Indian ladies who have headed the poll in examinations. I have in mind one, Miss Cornelia Sorabji, who, having won the highest honours in India, came to Lady Somerville Hall, Cambridge, to take up the study of Law. This lady, a Parsee, has now returned to her own country to make use of her knowledge on behalf of the less fortunate members of her own sex.

Europeans are horrified to think of children scarcely in their teens betrothed, sometimes to men many years their seniors. But talk to an educated Hindu—that is, to one learned in all the wisdom of the English—and, while acknowledging faults among his countrymen, he will shrug his shoulders upon hearing of efforts to remedy these child marriages. In hot countries, there is little or no transitional stage between childhood and womanhood; and the Hindus, by reason of the high principle inculcated in them through the Vedas and the Laws of Manu, regard their women as sacred, and have a perfect loathing of elopements. Therefore, like every other reform, it will take long, perhaps a century or two, to alter an institution so characteristic and inherent in the race. Meantime, Zenana teaching is slow but sure. It is useless to make things move too quickly in an Oriental country—a reform forced upon a nation is a reform only in name. Its object and value must carry conviction or it is practically useless, ending only in disruption and anarchy.

But it must not be imagined for one moment that the women are sunk in degradation. They are for the most part beautiful with the beauty of health; they are active, busy, modest, and affectionate, possessing a large share of the domestic virtues. While English-speaking Christians on the war path of the Woman Question quietly ignore that little Bible text, which says, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence," the Hindus practise it. The New Woman is not, of course, prepared to acknowledge the advisability of such practice, but—so it is in India.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)