

SCATTERED SEEDS; OR FIVE YEARS' ZENANA WORK IN POONA.

INTRODUCTION.

So much has been written of late about the condition of our women of our Eastern Empire, that there does not seem much left for any new writer to say on the subject. Still, the country is of such vast extent, and peopled by so many different nations, that the restraints imposed upon the females differ greatly in the different parts of India; and even in these are modified by the rank and position in the social scale which the families occupy.

Over the greatest part of the Bengal Presidency and the North-West Provinces, where the Mussulman element predominates, a much greater degree of seclusion and isolation from all society, beyond their nearest relatives, prevails among them, at least in the higher classes. How far it is the case among the middle classes, or in the rural districts, it is not our province to inquire. Our work lay in a different part of India: and it is chiefly of the Mahrattas of the Deccan that we have to speak. Among them the term "Zenana Mission" is not so correct a one as it is further north and east. In Western India generally, polygamy is by no means so common among the middle classes as that term would lead us to expect, although it is permitted by their religion, and occasionally practised. The most common reason for it is the want of a family by the first wife, and this will give occasion for it sometimes among the very poorest; indeed many men, even if they have daughters, contract a second marriage in the hope of male issue, so great is their dread of having no son to carry their body to the funeral pile. This is considered to involve a certain degree of disgrace, and even the risk of some

penalty in a future world: and the opinion adds a fearful poignancy to their grief on the death of an only son.

Instances do, however, occur of a man marrying more than two wives, even among the middle classes; for one young woman in whom I took a great interest was a *third* wife,—the other two being both alive. She lived with her father and mother, just as any unmarried daughter here might do, and was an articulated pupil at the Normal School:—a fine, intelligent-looking girl, receiving an education up to the sixth standard of the Government schools. For a long time I believed her to be one of those widows from childhood, for whom one always feels such sympathy; but when I heard what her real condition was, a feeling of indignation arose in my mind against the system that allowed a woman like her to occupy such a position.

These marriages are often formed at the urgent solitations of the bride's family. A man may not have his daughter unmarried beyond a certain age, or he is looked down upon by his caste people; and if he has several daughters and no great dowry to give them, the consequence is that he gets some friend to advise any man of the caste who is tolerably well off to take one of them as an additional wife, even though he should have one or two already.

I have known girls thus wedded in their youth—*nay*, childhood,—to men older than their fathers, and placed under the dragon-like guardianship of a mother-in-law, subjected to all the jealous and suspicious humours of the elder wives, enduring a lifetime of bondage and misery. One such instance rises to my mind just now: a sweet-looking, gentle girl, in whom I felt a deep interest, and of whom, at one time, I had great hopes that if she became a widow she might be won over to the Christian faith. These hopes, like many others, have, as yet at least, not been fulfilled; but of individual