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Condition of Women in India

The Hindu brings his wife to his father's home where she is under the indisputable sway of the mother-in-law. It is a strange fact that where womanhood is downtrodden and despised, the mother's authority is supreme over the son's wife. In the average Hindu home there are three generations—parents, sons and their wives, and the grandchildren. A Hindu wife is not permitted to eat with her husband. If they have children, the boy eats with the father, and after they have done, the mother and daughters. The wife never walks beside her husband, but always trudges along behind. These customs prevail among all classes of Hindus.

Marriage in many respects a mercenary transaction and may take place when the bride is but a helpless babe, but the marriage is legal, and if the husband dies the baby wife is the widow and can never marry. A widower may marry a hundred wives if he sees fit to do so.

Of the ninety-nine millions of women and girls directly under British rule, only two hundred thousand of them can read or write, and these are the ones between the ages of seven and nine who have been gathered into missionary and Government schools. History, geography, astronomy, as taught in India, are centuries away from the real facts. They have not, however, been able to entirely shut out the strong light of Western learning and advancement.

The low place given to women in the family is the primal cause of India's degradation. From the hour of her birth to the day of the Hindu woman's death, she endures the most awful deprivations and actual wrongs.

Mrs. Bishop, the well-known traveller, says: "On account of the secluded lives, the intellect is often so dwarfed that a woman of twenty or thirty is more like a child, while all the most passions of human nature are developed and stimulated."

One of the greatest wrongs of India is child widowhood, which is often the lot of girls who have never been married. In 1891 there were more than 22 million widows in India. Everywhere are these poor starving outcasts shunned by everybody.

If slavery means social degradation, Hindu women must be regarded as slaves; they are not regarded as having any claim to any rights or feelings at all.

All Hindu girls at the age of fifteen are either wives or widows. This is of course owing to the system of child marriage which was instituted to escape the disgrace of the parents having an unmarried daughter on the hands.

In order to secure admission to the Zenanas the lady missionaries often find it necessary to offer inducements, such as giving lessons in fancy work, and the more powerful allurements of teaching the inmates to read.

There is no one thing more trying to an energetic person from England or America than the prevalent indolence in India. Hindu and Mohammedan women often sit idle for hours, while the house, the clothing and the children are fairly crying out for attention.

For years the horrible custom of burning widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands prevailed, but has been forbidden by law. Although this dreadful custom has been abolished for nearly three quarters of a century, yet so sad is the lot of the widow that as a Hindu expresses it, "she now endures cold suttee."

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