

## A PLEA FOR ZENANAS.

What is Zenana work—this work of which such frequent mention is made in connection with missionary operations in India? To answer this question in many private circles has been the pleasure and privilege of the writer of this short sketch; but she is induced to adopt the present mode of giving information on the subject by the earnest desire of several upon whose judgment she can rely, as well as by her own anxiety to awaken as widely as possible the concern of English ladies for their less favoured, yet most interesting, Indian sisters.

It is not easy to describe to persons in this country the condition of Hindoo domestic society. In England, as a rule, every family sufficiently opulent possesses a habitation peculiar to itself, and, on marriage, a son literally "leaves his father and mother" to establish a home of his own. The house of a respectable Bengali, on the contrary, is seldom the abode of one couple only. It is rather the dwelling-place of an aggregation of families: father and sons, with cousins and grandsons, often residing together in one domestic community. The family inheritance even is not divided amongst the sharers; but a patriarchal bond unites the several members of the household, and preserves the deference and subordination which nature and custom dictate to them.

In every respectable Hindoo house a range of apartments is found set apart for the occupation of the women. This is called the Zenana, from the Persian word *Zen*, women. To this part of the house no man has access, except the fathers, husbands, and sons of the family; and from it no female member of that family beyond the age of childhood is allowed to pass unguarded. The apartments of the zenana are usually dreary, ill-lighted, ill-ventilated, and miserable-furnished rooms, so constructed that no curious eye can overlook them, and that their inmates may see as little as possible of the outer world. In some cases the number of women thus immured is very great; and the same patriarchal system which regulates the relation of the men of the family prevails also amongst the women. The aged mother of the household is supreme, and the other women rank according to their husband's relative positions. How monotonous and wretched a life passed in such circumstances must be, need hardly be remarked. These poor women enjoy little of their husbands' society—they do not even sit or eat with them; and having received no education—unable to read books—with no knowledge of any useful or elegant art of needlework or other pleasant occupation to beguile the wearisomeness of their lot—they are shut up to utter indolence. The survey of such jewels as they may possess, the care of their little ones, and the discussion of any family gossip, or of whatever items of news find their way to them from the outside, are their only amusements; and great is their delight when a marriage takes place, or when some idolatrous festival or ceremony is celebrated, and they have their share in the stir, the feasting and the illuminations which attend it. Such occurrences are their gala days, and form the only breaks in their monotonous lives.

According to Hindoo custom a girl must be married before she is ten years of age, but usually the ceremony takes place at a much earlier period. Though married, she generally lives with her parents until she is twelve or thirteen years old, when she is regarded as quite fit to take her place in the family of her husband; and thenceforth she remains in his zenana,

never being allowed to leave it but on very special occasions, and then only in a carefully closed carriage or palanquin, and with the additional protection of the darkness of night. Such a position as this is sufficiently revolting to our English ideas of social comfort and domestic bliss. What, then, must be the condition of the widows in such households? Now that an inhuman practice has been prohibited by our enlightened Government, and the widow may not voluntarily or by compulsion be immolated, her life is usually rendered as bitter as possible. If she is the mother of sons, she has a status which secures her from many of the petty degradations and annoyances which befall the childless widow—often herself a child. When a girl becomes a widow before she has entered her husband's dwelling, she is yet transferred to that home as soon as she has reached the age when, had he been alive, she would have gone there. Unwelcome to his family, who henceforth have to support her, she becomes but too often the drudge and servant of all, and thus has the desolation of her lot most painfully and perpetually kept before her. By Hindoo law her food is limited to one meal a-day, and that of the coarsest kind; and she may never wear an ornament of any description whatsoever. The re-marriage of widows is now sanctioned by legal enactment, but the sentiment of the people is against it.

It has been said above that the Hindoo women are wholly uneducated. It does not appear that they were always so. In the literature of the country mention is made of the women who were proficient in every department of learning. For ages past, however, custom has denied all instruction to the daughters of India. It has even been thought disreputable for a woman to be able to read and write. Thus it was that when missionary enterprise found its way to India, and efforts were made to give the people the blessings of Christian knowledge, for a long time it was impossible to teach any but the lads and young men of the community. They might be benefited by learning: it would be to them an introduction to profitable employment; whilst to girls it could be nothing but an injury and degradation. So the Hindoos reasoned, and thus the efforts of Christian philanthropy were baffled for many years.

Western literature has been effectually taught to the young men of India in the many Government and missionary schools. That their mind have been to a wide extent enlightened by it. The dense ignorance of the women was no disadvantage to their husband whilst they were themselves untaught, or instructed only in the absurdities of Hindooism; but now that their minds have been stimulated by the possession of true knowledge, and are prepared to enjoy intelligent conversation, they find it to be no small evil that, in their homes, there can be no sympathy with their pursuits, as there is no power to appreciate their choicest acquisitions. Besides, with knowledge, there has come to the young Bengali an impatience of the restraints of caste and a disregard of the prescriptions of idolatry which are leading him on to great, and it is hoped salutary, social reforms; but for these his household, while uninstructed, must be altogether unprepared.

It will be readily understood that the task of instructing Hindoo women in their own homes, under the circumstances above described, is incumbered by no few difficulties. The labour cannot be economised by collecting the inmates of several houses together, and each family presents pupils differing widely amongst themselves

in age and capacity. Visits, too, must be adjusted to the family convenience; and it has been found that the afternoon, from one to six o'clock, is the only time when attention can be expected. Thus, if a Christian lady were able to give her full strength to this work, she could probably teach twice a week in at most ten or twelve houses only. Regular daily instruction can only be secured, even within such a limited sphere of labour, by the employment of native Christian women as assistant teachers. Before the work of a European lady is passed over, we may call attention to the amount of self-denial required for the discharge of it. The journey to the houses she has to visit, made in the very hottest part of the day, and taking her through dusty and squalid thoroughfares, is of itself very fatiguing. To sit and teach in the close and dirty apartments, or in the ill-screened verandah where the women congregate around her, is attended with no small inconvenience and exhaustion. Yet the eagerness with which such visits are welcomed, the delight at any new information acquired, the joy as increased facility in needlework is gained, and the loving gratitude for the care and interest bestowed, which the women evince, are sufficient to make the Christian visitor oblivious of discomfort and weariness; and not until she is returning to her own home is she aware how severely both mind and body have been taxed by her labour of love. Nor does her task terminate here. Work must be made ready for her next visit, and very much time and patient industry are required for this purpose.

As a mere philanthropic effort, such a work must commend itself to Englishwomen; but when, in addition, the higher aim of carrying life—eternal life—to those who are now so evidently sitting in the shadow of death is considered, we believe we shall not appeal for help in vain.

## LOCKE ON LYING.

Lying is so ready and cheap a cover for any miscarriage, and so much in fashion amongst all sorts of people, that a child can hardly avoid observing the use made of it on all occasions, and so can scarce be kept, without great care, from getting into it. But it is so ill a quality, and the mother of so many ill ones, that spawn from it, and shelter under it, that a child should be brought up in the greatest abhorrence of it imaginable; it should be always (when occasionally it comes to be mentioned) spoken of before him with the utmost detestation, as a quality so wholly inconsistent with the name and character of a gentleman, that nobody of any credit can bear the imputation of a lie; a mark that is judged the utmost disgrace, which debases a man to the lowest degree of a shameful meanness, and ranks him with the most contemptible part of mankind, and the abhorred rascality; and is not to be endured in any one who would converse with people of condition, or have any esteem or reputation in the world. The first time he is found in a lie, it should rather be wondered at as a monstrous thing in him, than reproved as an ordinary fault. If that keeps him not from relapsing, the next time he must be sharply rebuked, and fall in the state of great displeasure of his father and mother, and all about him who take notice of it. And if this way work not the cure, you must come to blows; for after he has been thus warned, a premeditated lie must always be looked upon as obstinacy, and never be permitted to escape unpunished.

In the place of doing, we too often exhaust ourselves with preparing to do.

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