

## CASTE WOMEN OF INDIA.

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We hear much of a Hindu woman's degradation and seclusion and ignorance; of her sufferings, her helplessness and hopelessness, and the half of it all is neither told nor known. Shut in from all the world, without books, without music, or even the knowledge of a song to sing; without needlework or fancy work of any kind, or any occupation or amusement whatever save what the naked little children make, how can she escape an almost vacant mind, if not hopeless imbecility? If she is a wife she may arrange her cloth and her jewels becomingly and contrive dainty dishes for her husband, of which she will partake when he is satisfied; but if the one to whom, probably, as a baby she was betrothed, happens to die, even these poor pleasures are denied her. She is a reproach, an outcast, accursed; in all God's heaven no star casts a ray of hope to her. What influence can such a one exert or what power can she wield?

A whole race of women have lived for generations under these conditions, and remain intelligent and lovable, with a native refinement marvelous to see, and no women in the world exercise greater power. Perhaps you will be startled if I say that they hold the destiny of their country more completely in their hands than the women of any other land; that they are the ruling power in India, although this power is exercised so quietly and out of sight. Repressed power is always the most dangerous. Women in Christian lands can participate in almost every amusement and every privilege open to the other sex, can have their women's aid societies in every philanthropic measure of the day; and perhaps this very widening of her influence diverts time and thought from father and brother, husband and child. Certainly it gives us community of thought and action. Women are as much elevated by the mental and moral culture of the day as men are.

In India it is not so; all the influx of civilization and religious light from the New World has fallen on the men alone. It has had no means of reaching the hidden retreats where the women dwell. The only rays of light that have penetrated there have been carried by the missionary women, sadly few in number, who have been able to reach their sisters in their seclusion, and tell from house to house the story of the cross. I believe this, above every other reason, is the cause of the slight hold Christianity has taken of the caste people of India. A caste woman has not even her father or brother to care for; she was separated from them in early childhood. Her whole life has but one vent, one direction in which to grow, and that is out through her husband and her sons to the world beyond. To keep her husband and her sons loyal to her is her one ambition, and there is nothing too hard nor too high for her in her endeavor after it. Thousands fail and yet many succeed; and when one fails it is generally because another woman has usurped the place. There is something very suggestive in the fact that the most beautiful and renowned building in India (the Taj Mahal) was built as the tribute of a devoted husband to his queen.

Again, every Hindu woman is bound to keep her husband and sons in the good old paths after the strictest sect of Hinduism. She generally cares far more for religion than her husband does—she is, if you please,

more superstitious. Woe to the man who is recreant to her faith! His wife may not say much, but his mother will; there is neither peace nor rest for him henceforward.

When you urge a Hindu to give his reason for not accepting the Christ of whose claims he is intellectually convinced, he will be slow to give it; but it is almost invariably one of three reasons: "I cannot break my poor old mother's heart." "I am afraid of my mother's curse." "I cannot give up my wife and children." *It is a woman's influence that holds him back.*

Many of these men love their wives and children—more, perhaps, love the tasty breakfasts and savory dinners that no one else will take the trouble to cook for them. For one reason or another, all find it inconvenient, at least, to have no home, especially as hotel life and restaurants are incompatible with caste. Now, to have a home one must please the women who dwell there. If a man wishes to be a Christian, he has not merely his wife or wives to contend with; his mother and grandmother, his brothers' wives, and all the women of the establishment (usually not a few) club together to bring him to his senses; they will coax him first, but they have no end of devices for bringing him back to their faith if coaxing fails. Men know this, and the terror that hangs over the head of every one of them is, that if he persists in what the women of his household call evil courses, something will be mixed in the food which they cook which will conquer all his stubbornness and end his days.

The only thing a man can do, and what every caste man who has become a Christian has been obliged to do, is simply to leave them all—literally, to run away and leave with them his property, his house, his children, and everything he owns in the world. Bunyan's description of the pilgrim starting on his pilgrimage has been literally fulfilled in many a Hindu.

I remember a case in point—a wealthy and influential high-caste man, who, I have no doubt, is a converted man, and who was baptised by my husband some years ago. This man was remarkable for breadth and strength of character, a man of sterling worth and great independence. He was practically king in the district where he lived, and he thought he was able to be a Christian and make his household either submit or leave. He was wealthy, had two wives and a large "following."

When he came to the house of the native preacher to ask for baptism and to offer himself to the Church, a crowd of retainers came with him, among whom were his two wives, weeping and tearing their hair. One of these—one to whom he was strongly attached—beat her head against the wall of the house until they had to hold her to keep her from killing herself, while she declared she would kill herself rather than see her husband a Christian.

But none of these things moved him. He deferred his baptism for a while in consequence, but avowed constantly his faith in Christ, and his purpose to confess His name publicly in baptism. And he did so. He came and was baptized, but he held to his property and one wife. He had no children.

His friends found that they could do nothing with him, for he was too far above them to fear them. However, they were determined not to lose him. Finding that he had actually left them, they all rallied round him again. His wife said "he was wise and good, and