

## MODERN INDIA.

BY A. CHRISTINA ALBERS.

A SANYASIN of stately mien meditating over his rosary in the early morning hour; a pilgrim placing a flower on a wayside shrine; a chapel dedicated to a deity in the heart of the jungle, with the deep scarlet of the Jaba flower shining from dark green foliage; a group of nude children noiselessly playing, faces young yet dignified, classic in form and noble in expression; women talking silently, drawing their veil more closely as a stranger passes, leaving open to view a pair of eyes black and lustrous;—these are the visions, these and many others, that haunt the memory, that the eye having seen the mind will never forget. These are some of the expressions of the lifeforce of this ancient land, which is, as it was, the heart of the world. A strange land this India! Her masses are poverty-stricken, and suffering is intense; yet there is here a wealth of spirituality, which to him who has touched on it, is a revelation and opens up before him a world of the existence of which he had not dreamt.

“Dirty!” says the globetrotter, “In uncleanness this India surpasses all I have ever seen before.” “Those natives,” complains the European resident, “are an unclean lot.” Alas, they know not that underneath all this they call dirt, underneath all this refuse of ages there runs a crystal stream, there burns a fire that centuries of foreign rule, centuries of missionary endeavors of foreign religions, have not been able to quench—the high ideals of the people.

The Hindu is calm, he is tolerant. He makes a broad allowance for all that goes on around him. He looks upon the Englishman as a burly policeman, who is useful as long he is there, knowing all the while that his rule will come to an end some time, just when, he knows not, nor does it matter. Another ruler will follow some day, just who, is hard to tell, nor does it concern him greatly. But there is one thing he knows better than aught else in the world, and

that is that the spiritual dominion that India holds over the lands of the earth will last for evermore. Here lies the secret of India's greatness and of her strength, here is to be found the reason why



HIGH-CASTE BRAHMINS.

the Hindus through centuries of oppression and hardship have retained their strong originality, have not lost their religion, their philosophies, their customs.

It is a vast land this India, and many are they who are her children, two hundred and fifty millions and more in number, and therefore it may be easily understood that in speaking of them as a race one statement does not apply to all. From the lowest coolie of the aborigines to the highest sage every step of human evolution is here represented, but there are among the Hindus those—men and women—who form the highest type of humanity as yet evolved. Stately they are, these men of the Brahmin caste, whose bearing is kingly indeed, men who are philosophers since generations, but who in many cases work behind the desk of a European for a mere pittance. Often have I watched them going to their squalid dwellings. Proudly and erect they walk, bearing their burden without a murmur, and inner consciousness of their inborn superiority shining forth from all their movements, which makes them look upon complaint with disdain. Sir William W. Hunter in his *Indian Empire* speaks of them as follows:

“The Brahmins of the present day are the result of probably three thousand years of hereditary education and self-restraint; and they have evolved a type of mankind quite distinct from the surrounding population.”

And again he describes the Brahmin as being “tall and slim, with finely modelled lips and nose, fair complexion, high forehead, and somewhat coconut-shaped skull—the man of self-centred refinement.”

And yet these men are not what once they were; they have fallen, we hear, from the lofty pinnacle of their ancestral greatness. What then must they not have been when India was in the palmy days of her glory? Unfortunately in these days of degeneration there are many who are Brahmins only in name, from whom the ancestral dignity has faded, but notwithstanding this a remnant of the old stock has been preserved to cast upon the world to-day a reflection of India's great spiritual inheritance from the past.

But even the coolies are a cause of much comment among strangers on account of the erectness of their figures, which is no doubt due in part to the physical training they receive from carrying weights on their head. Wherever one turns there is here a wealth of picturesqueness and artistic groupings, which is an ever new source of admiration to the beholder. Every coolie is a fit model for the artist's brush as he drapes his garments around him, however ragged and unclean they might be in many cases. He bears his turbaned head with dignity and would not exchange his birth-right for that of the wealthiest of foreigners.

A street scene in an Indian city presents untold variety. There are squalid little shops with tradesmen sitting cross-legged among their ware, offering goods for sale that often show a delicate taste,—gold embroideries on rich velvets, shawls and dresses of fine texture, embroideries in silk of rare designs, wood and ivory carvings of fine workmanship,—tailors, menders of boots, bakers, dyers, all busy at their respective trades on the public street; men in picturesque attire from many different lands. Yonder walks a woman with garments gracefully flowing from her shoulders. She carries a



A BHUTEA BAZAR.

heavy basket on her head, her infant on her right arm and a packet in her left hand; yet she walks with perfect unconcern. Haste and nervousness are unknown to her. A busy man passes a temple, he stops to make obeisance; a fakir with hair unkempt, his body covered with ashes, begs of the passers-by, and the vender calls out his ware with a strange pathetic cadence in his voice. From yonder mosque the priest calls forth at eventide, while from the church-towers the bells call to worship.



## II.

“If we Hindus have not lost all that marks us as a nation, it is due to our women.” How often have I not heard the men of India say that! It is the Indian woman, patient, long suffering, tender, and dutiful who has kept glowing in the hearts of men that great love for the land of their fathers, that reverence for the sages and the teachings of the ancient rishis that since time immemorial have been India’s stronghold. Never was there a greater mistake than to think that the Indian woman is weak and that her position is one of slavish drudgery. To fully realize and appreciate her position one must first learn to thoroughly grasp Indian sentiment, for this, as in fact any other phase of the inner life of India, cannot be fully appreciated while beheld from a Western viewpoint. One must learn, as it were, to look with the Eastern eye, to go to that inner life itself to see it aright. It is only then that a life unfolds itself that is rich in its manifold coloring.

The whole life of an Indian woman is interwoven with religion. Everything she does has value for her only when viewed in a spiritual light, and her daily avocations cannot be separated from the higher thought. On rising from her bed she pronounces the name of the Deity or that of some of the holy personages who are so numerous in Indian mythology, at the same time doing homage to the pictures representing them, which are always found in the sleeping apartments of an Indian household. After taking her daily bath she worships the Deity in a sanctuary with which every Indian household is provided. The cooking is superintended by the matrons of the house, who also teach the younger female members. Never does a Hindu woman forget to give alms to the poor, and comes a stranger to her door begging he is certain to receive food. The instances are not rare when a mother, after, according to time-honored custom, having served food to all the members of the household before taking her own, has given away her own and cheerfully cooked again for herself before being able to eat.

Hindus are very sociable, and the ladies very frequently visit one another. When the work of the morning is done they gather together from neighboring houses and the elder women narrate stories of ancient times, through all of which runs a strain of woman’s enduring love and sacrifice. Meanwhile she ministers to her children. The Zenana is really a world in itself, a world where woman rules. While her sphere of activity is confined to it, yet in

this realm she is quite free, and woe unto the man that trespasses upon the sacred precincts of the Zenana. The Indian women have the right of property even after marriage, and manifold are the duties of the men towards them.

The women, especially those of the higher castes, are dignified in bearing and often of rare beauty. Their dress, called *sari*, consists of one piece of cloth about eight or ten yards long. This is partly fastened around the waist to serve as skirt, and the remaining part draped gracefully over the hair, hanging down loosely over the



AN INDIAN WOMAN.

shoulders and serves as veil to protect the face when occasion requires it. It is a graceful robe, and when on festive occasions the lady of rank appears in bright gold-embroidered silk, richly decked with costly jewels, bracelets, and rings, toe ornaments and anklets, necklace, earrings and head ornament, the latter falling prettily over the forehead, she presents a picture of dignity and loveliness.

The life of the wealthier women of all castes has considerable variety. Aside from the mutual visits they pay one another, they often

go on pilgrimages to the holy places; they visit theatres where special seats, carefully screened, are reserved for them. They go to public gardens, museums, industrial and art exhibitions, in all of which there are special days for ladies. Notwithstanding all this the *purdah* is strictly observed, particularly in the cities, where the ladies go about in carriages and palanquins securely closed, occasionally venturing to leave the doors slightly ajar to take a peep at the world outside, and alight only when they are within the court



AN INDIAN WOMAN.

of the house they wish to enter, safe from the glances of profane eyes.

Their life becomes burdensome when lived in poverty. For aside from the usual pressure that poverty always brings to bear, the numerous caste obligations and the strict seclusion make a woman's life hard indeed. Not being in a position to hire a conveyance, she spends her days entirely in her lowly dwelling, which, alas! only too often is insanitary to a high degree, ill ventilated, and unclean. And if one adds to this the fact that in most cases

the poorer women are illiterate, and unable even to sew, one may form an idea of how sad their lot is. This is mainly true of city life. In the villages poverty presses less hard, for there all women enjoy more freedom. They frequently go to the river or public tanks for bathing, often having special roads set aside for them, where they move freely and without restriction.

There are among the women of India many of unusual mental caliber. Although not educated in the Western sense, they have that spirit of artistic discernment which is really the sum total of all education, developed to a very high degree. This is especially true of the elder ladies, who possess an unusual amount of common sense. They manage their large households with great foresight and are excellent financiers, in many cases having the entire management of their husbands' income, seeing to the investments and expenditures with no small amount of shrewdness, which is the more remarkable since they do not engage in the public affairs of the world.

When a woman enters widowhood her whole life changes and the restrictions put upon her are severe, too severe it would seem. Yet statistics prove that in most cases the widows live to a ripe old age, which does certainly not argue against adaptability to the rules imposed upon them. A widow may eat only one meal a day, and once in a fortnight she must fast entirely, not being then permitted even to take a drink of water. Her meal consists of certain food prepared of rice and vegetables, which she must cook herself. Simple white is her garment, all personal adornment is laid aside on the day that marks her widowhood, and in many instances her head is shaven. She retains, however, the right of property. Her time is spent in religious devotion and she frequently goes on pilgrimages to the holy shrines. Death does not sever the marriage tie, and the widow ministers ever to the spiritual well-being of him whom on earth she called her husband. She never marries a second time, remaining faithful to the man to whom she was joined for better or worse, hoping to be reunited to him in a future state. Many a child is a widow at the tender age of ten or twelve and spends her days henceforth doing penances and in humble service. It may be mentioned that at present there are societies that advocate the remarriage of child-widows, and that such marriages have occurred of late.

There is one feature in the life of an Indian woman that above all others seems almost incomprehensible to her Western sisters, and one which when considered evokes universal sympathy. She



lives her life without a girlhood. From childhood to womanhood,—this is her lot. Her life is like a day without the rosy hues of morning. She bears children before her tender frame is fitted for the



BRAHMIN CHILDREN.

task, and of toys and childhood's plays she knows little.

Prior to the Muhammedan conquest girls were not married so young, nor were their lives so secluded, and it is in those districts

where the Moslem rulers had their firmest footing that the *pardah* system even now is observed the strictest. But sad necessity compelled the Hindus to protect their daughters, for in those days the beautiful women of the land were taken by force and the harems of the victorious oppressors held many a sad victim whose young life pined away behind the walls that imprisoned it. But now the people are awakening to the fact that the necessity for these customs is passing away and steps are gradually being taken to give the women more liberty and advance the marriageable age of girls to fifteen. But movements like this must needs come from the people themselves. The English Government has no control over this part of India; in the social customs of the land neither the King nor the House of Commons has a right to interfere. In his oath of office the King of England as Emperor of India distinctly vows to leave the customs of the people intact.

And here may it be understood that this India has never yet been conquered. She was defeated in many a cruel battle; for long and weary years she has been oppressed. But with the heel of the oppressor ever upon her neck, with the lifeblood sucked from her very veins India has stood and stands to-day a distinct nation. She has seen nations appear and pass away upon the world's arena, and she will live as long as she upholds all that is noble in her race and be a people when many great nations of to-day will have stepped behind the scenes forever, their parts finished. She will again take her place among the great powers of the world, for she has to give to the world a message. She is the spiritual teacher among the peoples of the earth, which is the most important of all objects to fulfil. Therefore she is not a vain imitator of another's method, but her work is to infuse new life into her old national ideals. Whatever she adopts from the West she must adapt it to her own ways.

And now that the dawn is once more heralding the day when India's daughters will enjoy greater freedom, it must devolve upon those women themselves to become the educators of their people, the women of India who are at once the foundation and the crowning glory of their race. In this their Western sisters can help them and have helped them much already. But so far the way has been greatly blocked by want of confidence. In too many instances the religion of the people, not being understood by the foreign educators, is taken from them in exchange for education. The Christians have won the lasting gratitude of the Hindus by their work in the lines of education and philanthropy; among them are many noble and self-sacrificing souls who work with undaunted perseverance. But

they would find their work much easier and accomplish more if they would try to grasp the spirit that underlies the life of the Indian people, if they tried to understand that back of what they call "idols" there lies a great truth. In their wake will yet have to come those who will prove to the people of this land that they understand their ideals and their religion and that they are willing to work with them leaving these undisturbed. For in this land there is a silent sea that may be navigated by no foreign bark, where bloom the sweet lotuses of the greater truth of which her ancient poets have sung. Such is the inner life of India. And if on the surface of this lake to-day there is a scum, if the flowers by the water's edge are overgrown by weeds, these can be removed by the hand of love. When Western people learn to take this India just as she is, when they cease to make their conditions as to what she ought to be, then will India open up to them her treasure house, then will she teach them the secret of a greater life and take them to her heart as her children.

To set one's foot upon the triangular peninsula of Southern Asia, to travel in railroad cars and live in hotels, to see buildings and throw a coin at a coolie,—these things are not knowing India; on the contrary they only confuse and estrange the more. But he who would know India aright must go in silence to her heart; he must tarry in her sacred places and sit at the feet of her sages; he must listen to the whisper of her palms and melt away with the mellow sadness of her plains; he must linger to behold the ancient prehistoric methods that he encounters everywhere and see India, as the artist, in a thousand forms of beauty; he must weep with her in her sorrow, weep as a child weeps that longs for a mother's soothing word; then will he feel her heart throb and she will open up before him a life that is fathomless in its depth.

But alas, how many are there that do this? Not they who call themselves the rulers of India, and the result is that the gulf between the rulers and the ruled is very wide and is ever widening. Nor will they be drawn nearer until the English learn to understand and appreciate the noble ideals of the race intrusted in their charge. It is remarkable to meet English people, who, having lived in India for years or in many instances were born in the country, and yet know absolutely nothing of these people; to whom the great literature of India is entirely unknown; who have never visited a zanana, a monastery, or a temple; the art ideals, the great religion of this land they are incapable of understanding. They place the native people in the same relation to themselves that the monkey bears to man, and to this the Hindu is too proud to reply.

Nor does the ruling race gain anything thereby, for the Englishman of ten years residence in India is not the Englishman of England. He sacrifices much of the culture of manners that marks the Englishman of his native land and only too often exchanges that spirit of independence, which is the natural inheritance of his race, for one of domineering and rudeness. I do not say that the English Government has not done good in many instances, but it has failed to touch the heart of the people. Instead of winning their love the foreign rulers have antagonized them and are still continuing to do so. And well might they beware, for they are antagonizing a people that is intense in its nature: intense in devotion, intense in gratitude, but intense, I fear, when once roused into revenge.

### III.

Ceremonies form a very important part in the Indian home life. From the cradle to the grave they mark the different stages in the life of a Hindu. The first ceremony, after a child is born, is that of welcome by the father, when he prays for its health, long life, and wellbeing. When the child is about eight months old the ceremony of the first rice is performed, which is at the same time the naming ceremony. The child receives then its first solid food. Originally the naming ceremony took place about a fortnight after birth, but now the two are generally celebrated together. When the child reaches the sixth or seventh year the ceremony of the earboring is performed.

The most important ceremony in the life of a boy is the *Upanayam* or investiture with the sacred thread. He is usually nine or ten years old when this important event occurs, and he is henceforth known as a twice-born. This ceremony represents the birth into the spiritual life, and he then receives the triple cord, knotted together, which he must henceforth wear, and which is a symbol of the Trinity, the threefold forces in nature that manifest themselves everywhere. He who wears it must exercise a threefold control over himself: control over thought, speech, and action, and the twice-born must live a stainless life. This ceremony originally marked the student's life. From this ceremony the Sudras are exempt, it includes the Brahmins, Katriyahs, and Vaishnahs.

When a young woman is twelve, and often earlier, a bridegroom is selected for her by her parents, and the wedding that follows soon after is really intended to be a mere betrothal, and the bride remains



for two or three years in her parental home after she is married. During this time she visits the house of her father-in-law at intervals in order to become gradually acquainted with her husband. Unfortunately this last custom is not now always observed. The idea of early marriage is that these young people, being united in early youth, are to grow into each others lives, and the affection that thus springs up is very strong. The nuptial bond in India is considered a union of souls and the object is not so much the promotion of individual happiness as the joint performance of religious duties. Man or woman alone is imperfect, the union is necessary in order to complete the human being. The young people are trained to cultivate thoughts of affection towards each other after their young lives are joined, and although they did not know much of each other prior to their marriage the families are always well acquainted, and marriages in India are as a rule happy. In the villages the young men usually manage to have a glimpse at the maidens yet unwed, for Cupid will find a way, and the life of the young Hindus is not so devoid of romance as it would seem, and the whole not nearly so severe when seen close by as it appears when viewed from a distance.

It was in the house of a high caste Brahmin that I saw the choosing of a bride. The young lady, a distant relative of the family, was rather over age, for she was past fourteen. Her mother lived in a distant village, and had much to suffer, I was told, from tantalizing neighbors for having a fifteen year old spinster on her hands. But her friends in the city came to her rescue and took the young lady under their protection.

The day appeared when the guardian of the suitor entered the house. The young woman, fair as a lotus and shy as a doe, was dressed in her festive attire to appear before him. Robed in a graceful silk *sari*, prettily adorned with jewels, she looked more like a charming picture than a thing of flesh and blood. The elder ladies attended her with a solicitude tender and touching. There was not a sign of eagerness to make a bargain, on the contrary, a deep sympathy prevailed, and with sweet motherly tenderness they spoke to her in words of admonition. The young woman herself, however, seemed pleased with the romance of the situation in which sentiment she was joined by the young ladies of the house.

With downcast eyes the maiden entered. A rug had been placed for her in the center of the room, on a corner of which she took her seat, legs crossing, as is the customary mode of sitting in the

Orient. Around her sat the contracting parties, the maiden the while not venturing to raise her eyes.

When about a week later I entered the same house, I was informed that the marriage had been settled and that the husband had taken his young wife away to present her to his mother. The matrons were sad, the imprint of sorrow was upon their faces, and it was pathetic to hear them tell that their "daughter" had left them. For in India every young woman is looked upon as daughter and every elderly woman is called mother.

The marriage ceremony is very unique and full of deep symbols, and a house in which this event takes place is easily recognizable, for exterior and interior alike are festively adorned with garlands and lanterns, while music sounds through the halls. The ceremonies vary greatly in different parts of India, but fire always plays an important part, as in fact in many instances the deity is worshipped through the medium of fire. After a part of the ceremony has been performed in which the groom alone takes part, the juvenile bride is carried in, sitting on a litter, robed in a red or yellow *sari* that covers her from head to foot. After many rituals her face is uncovered before him, and separated from the bystanders by a screen, youth and maiden look into each others eyes. Romance is ever ready to weave her net around young hearts, and they must watch with care this first look. If it be one of joy then happiness may they expect from their wedded life, but if on the contrary there is any sadness felt, then, alas, such omen bodes ill. The ceremony lasts usually for hours and when the wedded pair at last arise, their garments are knotted together. They then proceed to the inner department, where there is an hour or two of frolic on the part of the female guests, only too often at the expense of the young couple.

On the day following the wedding the husband takes his young bride home to his mother's house where she remains for a few days. This is, however, a mere formality, an introduction into her new home, and that ended she returns to her parents.

The ceremonies performed for the departed are called *Shradha*, and the performance of these marks the end of the period of mourning. The Brahmins perform it on the tenth day after the day of death, the lower castes later. During this period the mourners wear a loose garment which must be undyed. They sit only on *kusa* grass, and those who are obliged to attend to worldly duties before this time expires, carry with them a mat made of this grass, to use whenever they are required to sit down, because it is said to possess

strong magnetic power and to keep off evil influences. Only one meal a day is eaten, and this must be cooked by a member of the family of the deceased. At this ceremony many offerings are made and the *mantras* are repeated by the eldest son after the priests. These latter are intended to send their vibrations upward to him who passed out and send him in peace into the land he must enter. The Hindu looks upon death simply as a stage in his existence, to him life is eternal, and he who departs goes but into a different sphere, where the blessings of his friends on earth will follow him.

The annual *Shradha* ceremony is performed for parents by the eldest son on the anniversary of their death. The spirit of the departed is then expected to hover near and receive the offerings given. And so strict are they as regards the performance of this duty, that a son cannot inherit his father's property unless he is qualified to perform *pindahts* (ablution for the dead.)

Begging in India is a profession, and bands of beggars are ever moving over the highways and crowding the cities. In an overcrowded country where industries and agricultural pursuits are at a low ebb, it would be impossible to find employment for its teeming millions in the field of labor; hence these organized bands, that are looked upon with perfect tolerance, and for whom the hand of charity is ever open. Is there an event of merrymaking, of thanksgiving, or the performance of a religious ceremony in any Hindu household; or if the revolving year brings the day of an anniversary of a wedding, a birth, or the death of a loved one, ever is the feeding of the poor a part of the day's doing. These almsgivings are frequent occurrences, and strange scenes does one see there. All that human misery can produce is here represented, and yet through it all runs a strain of deep devotion, of fond endeavor to uplift and to comfort. Here are men and women aged, crippled, leprous, and palsied, scarcely able to move along, tenderly supported by younger and stronger hands; infants carried by loving arms, often caressing the wan faces that bend over them, as if to assure them that in the depth of misery there is love. The picture of a sweet young woman that I saw on one of these occasions, I shall never forget. The modesty of her manners and the noble contour of her face spoke of happier days, and judging by these she might have been a Brahmin. She clung to a husband aged and blind whom she tried to guide on his dark road. There was depicted a deep sense of honor, of pride as yet unconquered which made the degrading situation apparently unbearable, yet there was a devotion that overruled all. But the

spirit of youth here too is found, and many a lad, yet in his teens, jumps buoyantly into the air in sheer delight after having received his dole and evokes a laugh from the surprised beholder who did not look for merriment in this division of human society.

The roving beggars have no homes, they live a nomadic life: the broad earth is their nightly couch and the sky their cover. They follow the profession that their ancestors of many generations followed before them, and it is looked upon as being perfectly legitimate.

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]