1946

Home Economists Overcome Indian Superstition

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol26/iss8/7

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Overcome Indian Superstition

Miss Hoffman taught at the Agricultural Institute in Allahabad, India, from 1940 to 1944. After refresh­er work at Iowa State College, she taught for a year at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia. Now she is teach­ing at the American Junior College for Girls in Beirut, Syria.

India’s thousands of villages, each consisting of a few mud huts, overwhelm one from the West. Yet the seed of a desire for higher standards of living has been planted among India’s village people by missionaries, government agencies and social service workers. Whenever one sees a decorative finger painting over a doorway, a clean courtyard with a flower garden or even a simple drain for waste water, one knows that there lives a woman who is “house-proud.” With such a woman a teacher can make headway in introducing basic principles of sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, child care and other aspects of home living.

Adjustments to conditions of poverty are necessary constantly in dealing with people whose cash earnings during a lifetime have been practically negligible and whose life savings lie in the silver jewelry the village homemaker and her daughters wear. Further, because nine-tenths of India’s people live in small villages, chiefly as farmers or small landowners, the rural emphasis of any home improvement program is important.

Many of the problems which face home economists in India are unique to that country because of concepts and ways of thinking established over many centuries. Although science has been held in high esteem in India, apparently it has played little part in the everyday life of the people. A great many unheathful and actually harmful practices persist, based on custom and ignorance. According to Hindu belief, a man is born to a certain position in life, and any effort on his part to improve his lot would involve a struggle against Fate.

It is the Custom

An objection to the washerman’s beating one’s clothes over rocks is met by one of the most inexorable reasons for a course of action—the simple statement, “It is the custom.” And when an Indian village woman is about to have a child, the family calls in an old mid­wife, customarily equipped with a rusty sickle and filthy rags. The result frequently is that tetanus develops soon after birth, but “it is the custom.”

The problem of caste creates complications also. A village may have a well, but it may be used only by...
the higher caste. Those of lower caste must depend for their year's supply of water upon rain water collected in deep depressions during the monsoon season of two or three months. This water rapidly becomes stagnant, but it has to be used for all washing and cooking purposes. Education is helping to break down such attitudes somewhat, though much progress can hardly be made until a system of universal education prevails.

Universal education does not exist at present in India. In primary and secondary schools some teaching of home economics is usually found; however, many of the cooking, sewing, and hygiene classes are taught by teachers employed for other subjects. Then, too, facilities are inadequate. The result often is unimaginative and stereotyped teaching.

*Reprint from Journal of Home Economics*