1943

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Teaches Homemaking to Women in India

Mrs. Edgar Vestal, ’22, tells of her work as head of the Home Economics Department at the Allahabad Agricultural Institute in South India. She has spent the past year doing graduate work in consumer economics at Iowa State.

"I HAVE eaten egg!" exclaimed Maryada with a horrified expression. This Hindu girl sampled a muffin made by other home economics students, less orthodox Hindus than she, who had tempted her to taste the muffins prepared in class. To eat egg is to take life, according to Hindu belief, so eggs and meat are avoided in the Hindu diet. They get most of their protein from vegetable sources, chiefly dal, which resembles thick split pea soup and is served on rice.

Home economics students in India are gaining new knowledge of food and nutrition in their country. There is a need for this type of education because many people of India are malnourished. The primary cause of their diet deficiencies is the economic factor, but progress is being made in raising dietary standards by making the best use of available resources.

Obtaining sufficient milk of good quality is a big problem in India. Cattle are numerous but the milk production is low. Agricultural workers at the Institute have been working on the problem and now the Institute cattle give six times as much milk as does the average cow in India. The agricultural director, Sam Higgenbottom, has been aided by three Iowa State graduates: Dr. Burch Schneider, ’25; James N. Warner, M.S., ’37, and T. W. Millen, D.V.M., ’39.

Home economics students learn how to feed and milk a cow and how to use the milk products in the family diet. Keeping the milk is difficult in a country where ice may be 40 or 50 miles away and the ground temperature as high as 145°F.

Cleone Brookins Warner, ’38, is working on boarding school diets for the home economics students and for grade and high school youngsters throughout India. Her work is important because the schools have limited operating funds. One school has only one cent a day per student for food.

Rice is a most important item of diet for many millions of Indians. Dr. W. R. Aykroid, prominent research nutritionist in India, finds that the people of the Madras area of South India who eat milled rice, have the poorest physique of any group. If the same rice is parboiled, many of the vitamins and minerals are steamed into the kernels and if it is lightly milled or hand-pounded it will retain most of its original food value. The Allahabad Agricultural Institute, a government-aided school, uses hand-pounded rice. The Punjab Province in North India is better fed than the others, according to Dr. Aykroid, because its staple foods are wheat and milk.

A Mohammedan begum, or princess, ordered an American-style hoe made at the Institute workshop because she was so impressed with its usefulness in the gardening class she attended. She had thrown aside the veil or purdah and come out of her semnana or retreat, to learn how to become more useful to her ill-nourished country. Other Indian princesses have followed her lead.

A student returned from his home in Assam carrying several pineapples which had been rotting on the ground because of their abundance. When asked why the surplus was not shipped to the parts of India suffering from lack of fruit, she answered: "It would require coolies a day or two to bring them down to a railroad and it would be difficult to ship them because there are no cold cars. We have no cannery and no capital with which to build one. Even if we did, most of the people could not afford to buy the canned foods and many would not eat them because they would fear that the proper caste person might not have prepared the food."

One of the most thrilling aspects of the home economics education is the cooperation of the students with the woman doctor. Through years of faithful service, she has removed many of the unfounded fears of the villagers who now trust her to minister to their needs. She has taught them that cholera and smallpox are not caused by a black goddess who stalks through their villages. One day she took two of the advanced class of home economics girls into the adjacent village and they assisted her in inoculating 81 villagers against cholera. Each girl must be able to vaccinate a classmate and assist at the delivery of a baby before securing her diploma in home economics.

These phases of hygiene and public health are helping to reduce the tremendous child mortality. The students also help care for babies of the coolie women who work on the farm. The babies otherwise would be left under a tree, doped with opium to keep them from being restive while their mothers work.

Bombay economists have a post war plan in which the yearly cost of a balanced diet of 2,800 calories per person a day is placed at $22. Thirty yards of cloth at 7 cents a yard is considered a sufficient annual amount per person. It is estimated that houses for five providing 100 square feet for each person in the household would cost $150 in rural areas and $280 in cities. The average annual income for the farmer is about $35 so the costs of living are still too high for the average Indian peasant. If more farmers leave their tiny fragments of farms and go into industry, farms may become organized as economic holdings, crops may yield more per acre and there would be a better market for the goods produced.

It is difficult to superimpose an industrial society upon the Indian handicraft and barter society, but a blend of these two cultures may solve the problem. It would be unfortunate if the world lost some of the good aspects of the Indian life, but it is hoped that equally beautiful fabrics, baskets and gold and silver pieces can be produced with less suffering, more adequate food and water and a more abundant life.

January, 1945