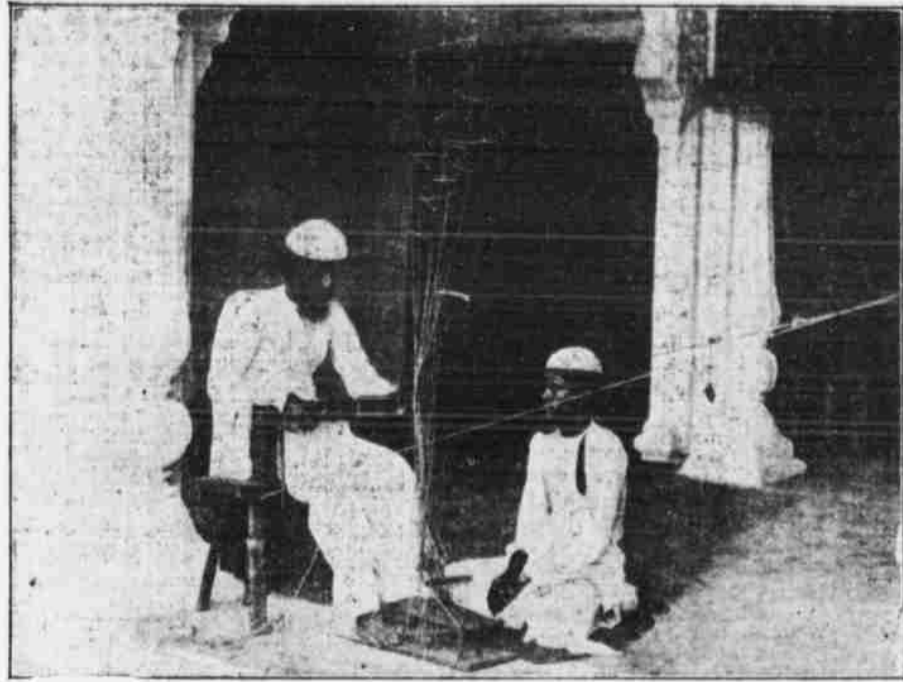


The Real Life of the Hindoo



THEY MAKE LACE AS DID THEIR GREAT-GRANDFATHERS.

(Copyright, 1904, by William Thorp.)

AN American and an Anglo-Indian were watching a "dhoby" laboriously washing clothes at the "fuller's ground" of an Indian village.

"That man," said the Anglo-Indian to his friend, "represents the antithesis of your social system. He has been a washer of clothes for a thousand years. He will wash clothes for another thousand years. He is bound down by the rigid laws of caste, and he can't rise in the world even if he wishes—which he doesn't."

"But don't such men ever leave their villages and try to get out of their groove? Aren't the boys ambitious?" asked the American, who remembered how every Yankee lad aspires to become president.

"No," was the response. "This is the Land of No Ambition. Men work hard, but without any expectation or desire of ever being any better off than their fathers were. As you see this village today, so it was a thousand years ago, and so its inhabitants were."

Everybody has heard of caste in India, but few foreigners realize what caste really means. The village sweeper, who always belongs to the pariah classes, may not even enter the houses of any of the other villagers. He dare not go to the public well for a drink lest he contaminate it. If he is thirsty, he must stand afar off and wall dolefully until somebody takes pity on him and brings water to him from the well or from one of the houses.

The village has a highly organized social life and in many ways it is distinctly socialistic. The "dhoby," the blacksmith, the barber, the shoemaker, the sweeper and other laborers and artisans are all public servants. Each receives so much per annum from each villager, the sum usually varying according to the wealth of the individual.

Nobody dreams of paying laundry bills. He pays the equivalent of 12 cents a year to the washerman, and gives him a handful of food now and again, besides other perquisites at weddings, births and other festivals. This seems small pay for a year's washing, but the "dhoby" has another valuable privilege. He and his family can wear the clothes given them to wash, and nobody dreams of objecting. Thus they are always gaily clad—one week in the borrowed plumes of Ram Lal, the next in those of Jhaman Singh.

Everything goes on in the village as it has gone on for 1,000 years or more. There are many remote villages in India in which no European has ever set foot, and in few of them are white men seen from one year's end to the other.

The potter makes his pots as he did in the days of Omar Khayyam. His simple machine has remained unaltered for 2,000 years, and he has not the slightest desire to improve it. What was good enough for his ancestors is good enough for him. He cheerfully shapes his ball of clay on a clumsy wooden wheel by tedious labor into forms of exquisite beauty, for if his tools are poor his skill is remarkable.

The potters are a simple, meek folk. They never quarrel, and do not even insist on payment for their goods if the customer bullies them. "As simple as a potter" and "As mild as a potter" are common sayings. It is curious how every man's character in India seems to be determined by his occupation. Bricklayers are always active and energetic; swineherders lazy and immoral; shoemakers poor, ignorant and despised; goldsmiths clever and plausible rogues, and blacksmiths gossips of the first water. Carpenters have usually a turn for poetry, and many of the greatest poets of India have come from their class.

But the village does not rely upon such amateur talent. It always supports a professional poet of its own. Poetry is ingrained in the Hindoo nature. Even the schoolboys are taught to recite and compose poems before they can spell words of

three syllables, and the very beggars solicit alms with harps in their hands and songs upon their lips.

Like most poets elsewhere, the village bard is usually a poor man; but he is never in actual need. When he wants a meal he hitches up his Pegasus and goes to some rich villager—a goldsmith or bazar man—with a new poem in praise of the patron's wife or house. He is always rewarded with as much food as he can eat, and, perhaps, a few annas as well. He has no trouble with publishers, no weary waiting to see his books in print. Whenever anything happens in the village he is always on hand with a few appropriate verses, and always welcome.

There is much rivalry and jealousy among neighboring villages as to the merits of their respective poets, and at certain festivals during the year they assemble together for a literary tournament. Every Hindoo rajah or "zamindar" (rich land owner) keeps his own laureate, to whom he sometimes gives large estates and the rents or taxes of whole villages. Altogether, the poet's lines are cast in pleasant places in India.

These village bards let their fancy run riot in a bewildering maze of Oriental imagery, and there is no limit to their capacity for flattery. This is the kind of poem they compose for the rustic Romeo who wants to charm the ear of his well beloved:

"O Lal! Thou art sweeter than the honey and more graceful than the deer; I faint and die for thy love!

"O, thou dove! O, thou swan! In still waters I see thy face, in the night wind through the feathery bamboos I hear thy voice, and the gloom of my thoughts goes from me.

"Thy words are as drops of honey, and thy voice is as the voice of the 'kull' (the Indian nightingale). When thou walkest before me thou art beautiful as the spreading peacock.

"O Lal! O beloved! Thy forehead is as the new moon, and thy face like the rising sun for glory!"

So the lovesick swain goes on for half an hour, enumerating the beauties and graces of every part of her body and every trait of her character. When he is quite certain he has left nothing out, he gets down to business.

"O Lal! I can give five bracelets of fine silver, two bullocks and three donkeys as the price for thee. I will work for thee and for thy father and mother, and all thy house, forever."

Negotiations with the father ensue, and if the terms are satisfactory, the marriage is arranged. The young people cannot marry out of their caste and rank in life without becoming outcasts. If the man is a "dhoby"—washerman—he must wed a washerwoman, the daughter of a "dhoby." And they have both descended from a countless line of "dhoby" ancestors. It is the same with the barber, the potter, the farmer, and all the other trades and professions.

Love-making in the "dhoby" class is conducted in a curious way. The young people meet at the river or at the "fuller's ground" where they wash the clothes, and fall in love. They may not speak directly to one another, but they sing love songs, in which they enumerate the other's virtues and graces and express their own feelings. Here are two of these songs, as they were taken down by Babu Pandian, an educated Hindoo:

She: "O, thou young man, black as oil, sweet as sugar cane, I cannot ever forget thy face. Whenever I think of thee, I become useless to do the work of my parents. Thy love makes me uneasy in the day and restless in the night. My mother has promised to give me the young and beautiful colt as my dowry, and my father has promised me the right of washing the clothes of the whole village when he gets old and helpless, for I am the only daughter to my



VILLAGE FUEL GATHERERS.

father. I saw thy footprint and the footprint of thy black donkey, and my heart was glad. When will the day come in which I may get a handful of betelnuts from thy hands?" (This is a marriage rite.)

He: "O, swan! O, dove! Thy love kills me. I can give my four donkeys as a price for thee. I will work for thy father and for thee all the days of my life. If I have thee in my house there is no need for a light. O, thou dove! show me thy face in the waters by my side to remove the gloom of my thoughts."

This seems fairly direct courtship, but as a matter of fact, the lovesick youngsters have not spoken to one another. They have sung with an air of careful detachment and there is nothing on the surface to show to whom the songs referred. But their parents notice their mutual affection, and if the match is a satisfactory one, arrange for them to be married and set up in the profession of village "dhobies."

The choice open to the young man and maiden is narrowed by the strict rules of caste, and narrowed still further by the fact that the vast majority of the people of India seldom, or never, travel beyond the village in which they are born. They must choose strictly within their own class in their own village, or in one of the villages close by. But, indeed, the choice is usually made for them. In some castes it is made by their parents in their infancy. As a rule, the choice is cheerfully accepted and the marriage is a happy one.

"We grow up to think that such a one belongs to us," an Indian village girl explained to an English woman known to the writer. "We take the relationship as you take your brothers and your sisters. You do not choose them, but you do not therefore hate them."

The village is not without its amusements. They are cheap and plentiful and life need never be dull. There are no traveling circuses, but in the summer time after the harvests are garnered and the hardest work of the year is done an itinerant dramatic company is pretty sure to visit the villagers. The worst of American barnstormers would disown professional kinship with these half-naked, ill-fed, oil-smeared Thespians, but often their acting has great force and pathos. The repertoire gives them little trouble, and there are no royalties to pay, for ninety-nine out of a hundred of these companies perform only the two famous classical dramas, "Harishandra" and "Markanda." The villagers know the stories by heart, but they weep for the twentieth time over the sorrows of Queen Chandramati, a Hindoo Niobe, and watch with bated breath the struggle between Siva and the Angel of Death for the beautiful young Markanda.

No charge is made for the entertainment, but at the close of the performance a cloth is opened on which the villagers throw money, according to their means. As each coin is thrown, one of the actors calls out the name of the donor and wishes a blessing on his or her head. Naturally, that stimulates generosity.

Then, too, there are dances and concerts in the moonlight, arranged by bands of young men who correspond, somewhat, to the "waits" on Christmas eve. They choose a leader, who trains them carefully in dancing and in singing interminable songs, usually taken from those great Indian epics, the "Ramayana" and the "Mahabara's." After they are perfect, they parade the village, dancing and singing, on some moonlight night. Their great aim is to attract the admiration of the girls; and they are just as vain as any of the amateur actors of western civilization.

There are cock-fights and bull-fights and ram-fights, fortune tellers and astrologers, wrestling matches and games which closely resemble cricket, football and quarter-staff. The villagers of Southern India are keen sportsmen, who never lose a chance of hunting hogs, deer, elephants and even tigers. The poorest dweller in the forest and mountain villages, where game is plentiful, owns a dog and a spear.

There are no braver hunters than some of these poor peasants. Many of them will face a man-eating tiger with nothing but a spear or a bow, and slay him or be slain.

"I have seen an Indian villager actually wrestle with a tiger," said a native missionary who has traveled widely in Southern India. "The left hand of the man was in the mouth of the tiger, and the right leg of the beast was round the back of the man, while the man, with his right hand, was lifting the upper jaw of the tiger. The tiger tried his best to extricate his upper jaw, but the man held on grimly until another hunter came up with his gun and shot the beast."

Every Indian village has its school, and the lot of the pupils is a hard one. Let no American boy complain of his school hours. The Hindoo youngster goes to school at 6 o'clock in the morning, works at his lessons for a couple of hours, and then goes home to breakfast. He goes back to school at nine, studies until noon, has two hours for the midday meal, and then works until 6 in the evening. His "home lessons" take him an hour each evening, and he has to bring a note to school next morning to show that he actually spent that time over them.

There are no long vacations, but single holidays are frequent. They are given on all Hindoo festivals, which are numerous, at the new moon and the full moon, and whenever a new boy enters the school. The punishments given to the boys are very severe, and even barbarous. Sometimes they are hung up by the hands, or forced to stand for hours on one leg.

Hindoo schoolboys are mischievous, like schoolboys all the world over. Their favorite trick is to hide thorns in the palm-leaf mat on which their teacher is wont to take his afternoon nap.

The villagers are the most charitable of people. They take the keenest pleasure in giving alms to the secular beggars and religious mendicants who swarm all over India. Every village maintains a "chattram," or public inn, at which all comers receive free board and lodging. Charity is ungrudging; it is a privilege to give, not an unpleasant obligation. The beggar does not cringe or implore. "Give and acquire merit," he imperiously demands. He is doing you a favor by helping you on the path to salvation, and he thinks you ought to be much obliged to him.

The village government is presided over by the "munsif," a kind of justice of the peace appointed by the British government, and by the village accountant, whose office is hereditary. It does not matter whether the latter has a head for figures, so long as he is the son of his father. These two officials are apt to be petty tyrants, who seize every opportunity for "graft."

But their powers are circumscribed by the "panchayat," or court of arbitration, which is composed of village elders elected by the inhabitants. This patriarchal tribunal decides all family disputes and most of the petty civil and criminal cases. Does a man fail to pay his debts or beat his wife, or neglect to support his mother, or maliciously damage an enemy's property, or sneer at another man's gods he has to reckon with the "panchayat." Divorces are granted by that court with a celerity and nonchalance unequalled even in South Dakota. WILLIAM THORP.

The Lettuce Habit

Medical Talk declares that lettuce eaten once a day will insure immunity from scurvy, smallpox and all scorbutic diseases, and that patients suffering from such diseases will recover promptly and surely if given lettuce to eat. Whether used as a prevention or a remedy, the prescription is not a difficult or expensive one to fill. Hot-house culture makes it possible to eat lettuce every day in the year if one desires it, and it is said that a taste can be acquired for it that will render it as essential to the daily bill of fare as bread itself.