

# Mahratti



MISS ELIZABETH BENTHIEN, a resident of Chicago, has found the ideal wife. She discovered this rarity among the Mahratti women of western India. This important discovery was made quite by accident, as most great discoveries are, while Miss Benthien was pursuing her work as a missionary teacher among these people.

Miss Benthien spent five years as principal of the high school at Poona. She had occasion to travel about the country a great deal, and often talked with the lower and middle class women, who travel about freely, as they have their own compartments in the railroad trains. Besides, Miss Benthien was several times invited to visit high class ladies in their sananas, where she accepted pansapari made by their own delicate tinted fingers. So she had every opportunity to judge and in all classes of society she found examples of this ideal wife.

What constitutes the Mahratti woman's perfection?  
Why, this: She worships her husband.

## Husbands Worshiped as Gods.

"A husband," says one of the sacred writers of India, "must constantly be revered as a god by a virtuous wife." "Let a wife," it is said in the Skanda Parana, "who wishes to perform sacred ablutions, wash the feet of her husband, and partake of the water." Says another writer: "The husband is her god, and priest, and religion; wherefore, abandoning everything else, she ought chiefly to worship her husband."

This command is not a dead letter either. Its power is felt in every class of society from the doll like creatures secluded in the sananas to the poor servant who goes out to work by the day while her husband toils as a laborer in the rice fields.

While a lower or middle class man eats his rice and bananas his wife stands behind him fanning him and silently praying! What a picture for the high strung American man who is often heard to declare that the ideal woman is deaf and dumb! Imagine a member of a twentieth century woman's club standing behind her husband's chair fanning him and praying while he eats his dinner!

## Afraid to Speak His Name.

And yet this Hindu woman is of our own race! What a poor downtrodden looking creature she is! Timid and patient as a sheep she never dreams of speaking to her husband unless he first addresses her. Even in his absence she holds him in such reverence that she can rarely be induced to speak



son of sons. Suppose she has prayed all her life that in the next incarnation she may be born a man; suppose she has faithfully worshipped her husband all her life; if she leaves no son to pray for her after death, all her lifelong devotion goes for nothing. Small wonder then that it is the Mahratti woman's ambition to have the greatest possible number of children.

his name. If you ask one of a group of Mahratti women the name of her husband she will blush and smile in confusion without speaking. If you persist in questioning her she will finally turn to one of her companions and say: "You tell her."

The high class woman does not wait upon her husband—she does no work of any sort—but her relation to him is just as abject. She is even more helplessly dependent than her low class sister, because she does nothing but chew her pansapari, fan herself, and play with jewelry all day. The making of the pansapari—a mixture of betel nut, butter, nutmeg, lime, and cardamom seed, all wrapped in a green leaf and neatly pinned together with a clove—is her chief consolation. She may never appear on the street as her humbler sister may. She has not even the advantage of going out to work. She prays to the gods to make her a man next time; meanwhile she worships her husband.

## Children Their Only Hope of Heaven.

The first question a Mahratti woman asks a stranger who is introduced to her is, "How many children have you?" The missionary women, who are many of them spinsters, are looked on with pity and suspicion by these Hindu women, who cannot understand how a woman can be free either to marry or not as she chooses.

Miss Benthien was always beought at once by the women she made friends with to tell how many children she had. Once she told some especially insistent questioners that she had seventy-five.

"Wonderful!" they exclaimed. "But are they all your own?" they queried further.

When Miss Benthien admitted that they were only pupils, that she had no children of her own, they freely expressed extreme pity.

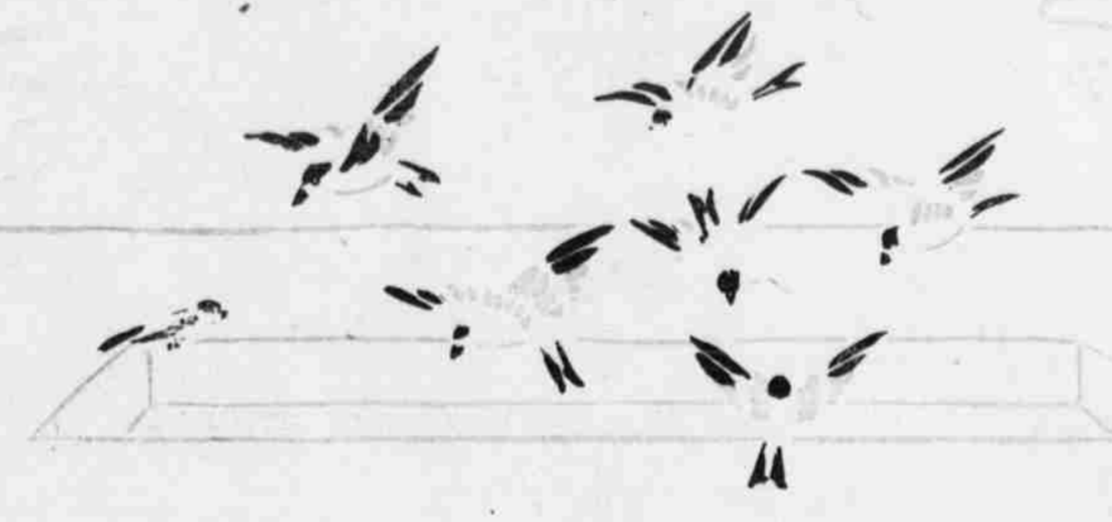
"But you have a husband?" they asked, hopefully.

No, Miss Benthien admitted that she had no husband. Then their manner changed at once, for among these people every respectable girl is provided with a husband in her earliest youth. The woman who admits that she has no husband immediately brands herself as not respectable.

Not to have children is almost as fatal a misfortune as not to have a husband. The woman who has no children is a curse to her husband, for every man must have sons to pray him into heaven after death. He believes that if he leaves no sons he and his ancestors will suffer tortures forever. One can readily see, therefore, the desirability of having many sons, especially if one's life is not above reproach. A woman's only hope of ever entering heaven depends on the posses-

# Women of India the Ideal Wives

Miss Elizabeth Benthien



## All Want to Wear Jewelry.

Beside husband and children, the Mahratti woman has a third interest in life—her jewelry. Even the poorest—and in America we have no conception of what poverty means in India—wear all the trinkets they can obtain. Crude and tawdry beyond words are the great earrings, nose rings, necklaces, and bracelets worn by these women. Miss Benthien has a necklace made of cloves and bits of brass wire that an American child might put on her doll, which has been seriously cherished as an ornament by a grown woman.

They even have jewelry made of iron. Wooden bracelets are worn with pride, though several are exchanged for one

of glass or silver as soon as the owner can afford it. They put nearly all their savings into jewelry. One of the chief hardships of the widows is the fact that they are never allowed to wear any jewelry. It is the religious duty of the mother and sisters of the newly made widow to tear off her ornaments.

The Mahratti woman knows no change of fashion. Her dress is not altered from year to year. It consists of a strip of silk or cotton eight or ten yards long, so adjusted as to make a complete costume, including a headress. This all enveloping garment is called a sari. The only undergarment worn is a short waist buttoned in the back. The dress has neither seams, hooks, nor buttons. It is simply a long rectangle, so skillfully adjusted as to make a complete covering. One wonders how a woman could work while so swathed about. The answer is that they never work as we do, but slowly and languidly, like the sound of the word "sanana."

## Life Is Without Individual Romance.

In this land, where woman's interests are entirely domestic, where her intellectual life is a minus quantity, there is absolutely no romance. There is no such thing as courtship or romantic attachment between men and women.

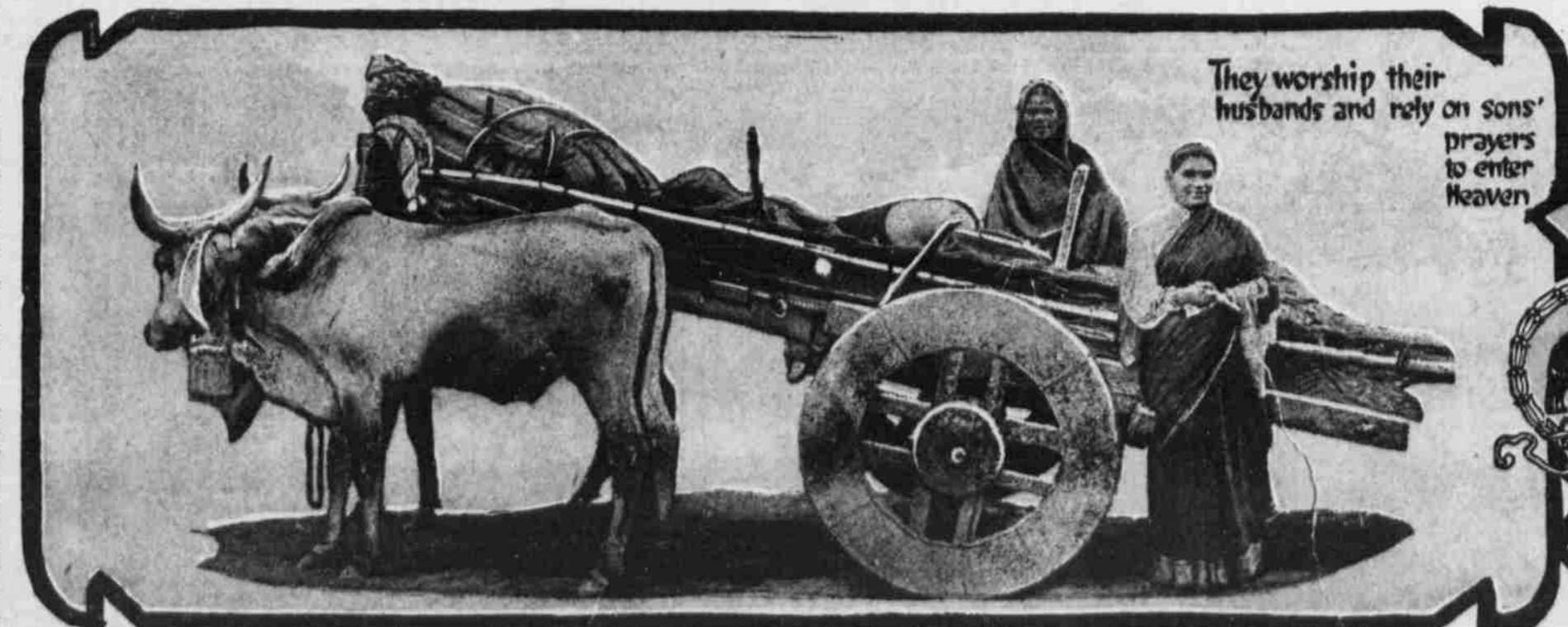
Young men and maidens are betrothed by their parents in infancy, and the bridegroom sees the face of his bride for the first time after the marriage ceremony. Anything like love between husband and wife is rare indeed. Once in ten thousand times two people who are congenial may happen to find themselves husband and wife, but congeniality is not considered or looked for in marriage. So the question, "Is marriage a failure?" is never discussed in India.

Women worship their husbands because it is a religious duty enjoined on them from their earliest youth. Individual character has nothing to do with it. The personal adoration that is worship of the individual, the actual enslavement of the heart, they know nothing of. They worship their husbands in fear and bondage, as they worship their idols.

## Family Attachment All Due to Religion.

With these Hindus all is religion. All is immutable custom. The motive for every action in life can be traced to the belief: "It always has been so; it always will be so." Nothing is spontaneous, free, individual. Even the love of parents for their children is not simple, natural affection. A man's entrance into heaven depends upon his possession of sons. That is the philosophy of his wish for children. The wife who has been married in childhood and sent away to slave for her mother-in-law when she is only 8 years old worships her husband because that is the attitude demanded by her religion. And patient, sheep like, she clings to the belief of her people: "It always has been so, it always will be so."

Such is the ideal wife among the Hindus of western India.



They worship their husbands and rely on sons' prayers to enter Heaven



A type of the women who make ideal wives