

Essay on An Ideal Indian Woman: Krishna Bhabini

There are certain ideas which are universal; others which are the distinguishing characteristic of a people, a noble heritage handed down through the ages. The truth of this will clear if we try to understand the ideal of Indian womanhood. That ideal has always been selflessness, – living for others, even at the sacrifice of one's personal happiness and comforts. Therefore she represents this ideal best, in whose life this virtue of self-sacrifice shines radiant and clear. She must be one who lives for others from day to day, not to court applause or appreciation, nor to gain worldly happiness or spiritual salvation, but out of an inner sense of duty as the essential element of her existence. And we must not seek her among the great and the famous women of history, but among those who have lived among the common people of her land, 'unknown to name and fame', seeking no reward except the good of others.

The woman's who is to be the subject of this essay was born in an obscure middle-class family of Bengal in the early sixties of the last century. Her name was Krishna Bhabini and she spent her childhood in her village home where she learned the three r's- reading, writing and arithmetic, – which used to be the usual subjects taught to girls in those days. Nor would there be time to learn anything more, for marriage, in those days, would come before a girl had passed her girlhood years. To Krishnabbabini also marriage came before she had barely passed her ninth year. She was, however, fortunate in her marriage. Her husband, Debendranath das was the son of a wealthy and distinguished citizen of Calcutta. But more than that, he possessed a yearning for knowledge and a spirit of independence that rarely go together. Himself a student, he becomes the teacher of his girl-wife and gave her the taste for learning which was to become with her a life-long passion in the years to

come. When Devendranth went to England to compete for the civil service examination, his wife remained at home improving her mind by constant reading in order to be the worthy spouse of her husband. Devendranath was unsuccessful in the competitive examination but he found his vacation in London by accident. As a scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, Devendranath joined a tutorial college in the metropolis to coach students in Sanskrit, history, and other subjects for the Indian civil service. The work was so congenial to him that he now made up his mind to bring his wife over to England – an inconceivable project in those benighted days.

Any other Hindu woman would have quailed at the thought of going to England, but Krishna Bhabini lived for her husband. She faced her scandalized relatives without flinching; no threat could stop her from her resolve. They refused to let her take with her, her little daughter; this was a cruel disappointment, but even this left her unmoved. We see here the old spirit of Indian womanhood, – the spirit that made sita forsake the comforts of a place for the privations of an exile's lot.

Krishna Bhabini lived for nearly a decade in London. Outwardly she had become Anglicized, for both she and her husband had adopted European costume. But she remained a true Indian woman at heart. She made a home for her husband in the heart of London, and at the same time, she acquired considerable learning in many subjects.

When at last the pair returned to India, fate dealt with her cruelly indeed. Her daughter had been married early against her wishes and was now a widow. The death of this daughter overwhelmed her with grief. But he found solace in helping her husband in all his activities; she even took a few classes in the century college which her husband and founded and ennobled, and as she had sacrificed herself so long for the good of those whom she loved most now she

sacrificed for the thousands of women in our country who lived in ignorance in the seclusion of their households. She threw herself heart and soul into the work of educating those women of Bengal whose opportunities for learning had been cut short by early marriage and motherhood.

It was a noble mission. She was the life and soul of the Calcutta branch of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal (association of Indian women). In the scorching heat of summer, or the heavy rains of the monsoon months, she would go from house to house bare-footed and often without an umbrella, persuading women to learn what they could, engaging the services of itinerant teachers for a bare pittance, coaxing parents and husbands to spend a few rupees for the education of the daughters and wives, and begging subscription from all who would give her anything. She had many disappointments: often she had to hear hard and ungenerous criticisms; but not for once did she breathe a word of complaint or lose confidence in the success of her mission. Once when a teacher asked her permission to resign her job for a better offer, she burst into tears at her inability to pay her teachers adequately, and the resignation was not only withdrawn, but it was never again tendered. When a promising girl would be married off and her education stopped, Krishna Bhabini wept at this frustration of a life; she was known to visit the new home of the bride to coax her parents-in-law to allow her education to continue. Her selflessness won her friends among the great: Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Bose, Abanindranath Tagore, Sarala Devi, Hemlata Tagore, Swarnamayee Devi, and many others came to her help and at last, she seemed to see glimmerings of light where there had been only darkness before.

But she was not destined to see the fruition of her mission. She had given herself away too freely for the cause, and when illness struck her down she had no reserve of strength to fall back upon. She did

not suffer long, patiently bore with her sufferings. When someone offered her fruit-juice, she gently protested, –

“Was it for such as me to have these luxuries?”

She died on February 27, 1918. The tragedy lay in the untimeliness of her death, for she was then not fifty-five years. When those whom she had drawn to her as workers and friends learned of her death, great indeed was their sorrow. Hemlata Tagore was grieved to learn that one, whose funeral procession ought to have been attended by thousands, went unattended in her last journey except by her nearest relatives.

And yet it was fitting that it should be so. For it Krishna Bhabini had wanted fame and honor, she could have had it in plenty in her lifetime. She had been a tireless worker, an indefatigable writer on woman's cause in many journals of her time, a heroic fighter for the ideal she held so dear. But to her, fame was true 'the last infirmity of noble minds'; to hanker after fame was not her way; indeed that was not the Indian way. She lived and died a true Indian for whom the desire for the personal honor was accounted an act of impiety. She was unique in many ways, and it was not difficult for her to have been always in the limelight, had she cared to have been the center of popular movements. But it was the Indian woman in her that helped her conceal her uniqueness in the garb of the everyday simplicity of an ordinary Indian woman. This it is that makes her a true representative of Indian womanhood.

Krishna Bhabini's life was cut short, but her mission has more than succeeded. The seed that she had sown in many an orthodox household in Calcutta has yielded a rich harvest indeed. As we see today the thousands of girls who flock to the schools and colleges and pass the

higher examinations of the universities, and watch their joyous faces and free unrestricted movements, and watch their joyous faces and free unrestricted movements, we recall with gratitude the selfless woman who had toiled and struggled for the cause, unknown and often alone, and had toiled and struggled for the cause, unknown and often alone, and had lighted a torch that would never again be put out. Truly did Hemlata Devi write: "it would not be too much to say that such a comprehensive manifestation of reverence for womanhood has never been seen before as was seen in this lady of our country."