



Ready for a Visit to the Zenanas

Vera C. Chilton, in her ricksha, starting out to call upon native women.

From the frontispiece to Vera C. Chilton's book, *The Sigh of the Orient*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1924. Courtesy of Michael W. Campbell.

## Chilton, Charlotte "Vera" (1873–1965)

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Miss Vera Chilton, a Bible worker in India, persevered in ministry to zenana women longer than any other person, extending her 32 years of active service another 10 years beyond retirement.

Born in Durham, England,<sup>1</sup> in 1873,<sup>2</sup> Vera came to India in 1907 as a governess (a woman employed to teach children in a private household).<sup>3</sup> She was born to James (1834-1915) and Mary Ann Chilton (1836-1919).<sup>4</sup> She became a “firm adherent” of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) under the auspices of the Church of England.<sup>5</sup> After she became ill from typhoid in 1910, she was taken to the Mussoorie Sanitarium<sup>6</sup> where the care by Adventist nursing staff and Dr. H. C. Menkel, touched her heart. “While there she became interested in the [Adventist] message and took her stand for the truth.”<sup>7</sup> She was baptized later that year.<sup>8</sup> On September 26, 1910, Vera began work among the Muslim and Hindu women of Lucknow, what she termed “educational and evangelistic work.”<sup>9</sup> Within a year she was actively working with about 50 Muslim purdah women. An early note described her work in 1912:

Miss Vera Chilton, who is working in Lucknow, has fifty zenana students receiving instruction weekly. She teaches Bible, reading, writing, vernacular dictation, and simple arithmetic and English to some of the more advanced. The ages of her pupils range from twelve to more than thirty years. She also teaches sewing and knitting when desired. To prepare lessons in Urdu for so many pupils is a very heavy and strenuous work in the hot months.<sup>10</sup>

In 1920-21, Vera spent a year in Australia as a guest of the Australasian Union Conference where she was tasked with writing a book to interest people in missionary work in India.<sup>11</sup> On Oct. 31, 1921, Vera Chilton returned to India after a furlough in Australia.<sup>12</sup> Her book was titled *The Sigh of the Orient* (Review and Herald, 1924). She noted that there was an estimated 30 million Muslim women who needed to be reached beyond the boundary of the purdah (or the curtain) that separated the women’s apartments (zenana) from the outside world.

And almost the only channel for the Moslem [sic] woman to receive Christ is through the zenana worker. Cut off from the world and all intercourse from without, and unable to read, she has no chance of hearing the missionary who may have access to her husband, and has no hope of hearing anything from him.<sup>13</sup>

The title of Chilton’s book is derived from her expressed concern that there be more women (and men) to coordinate missionary work together so that both men and women, and “whole families . . . won for Christ.”<sup>14</sup> This was tantamount to an invitation to “redress” their “wronged natures” ultimately “calling for that liberty and freedom which are the birthright of all of God’s creatures.”<sup>15</sup> Until then, the sorrows of these Indian “women seem beyond words. There is no audible lament, no strong crying, no striving, no complaint,—just one long, agonizing, deep-drawn sigh.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the 1911 Census of India, the total population of India at that time was 300 million including 140 million women. An estimated 40 million women lived in zenanas with an additional 26 million women who were widows. Nine million were child-wives.<sup>17</sup>

One of Chilton’s early students was a Muslim woman, a mother of two boys, who desired to become a Christian. She, however, faced a dilemma about having to leave her home if she became a Christian.<sup>18</sup> Without

denominational facilities to rehabilitate such women if they left their home, and facing severe persecution, Chilton described it as closed doors just at the verge of conversion.<sup>19</sup>

Vera tirelessly continued her work. Eight years after beginning such ministry, a Muslim woman who accepted Christ and had kept the Sabbath for four years eventually won her husband by her changed character. Both were baptized the same day. She was baptized in her own home while her husband was being baptized in the river. M. M. Mattison, mission president, was allowed to enter the house to say the benediction for her baptism but was not permitted to see her face.<sup>20</sup>

Chilton at times faced significant opposition. When a young girl ran away to the Adventist school and requested baptism, some influential community members tried to ruin her work. Fortunately, some other community leaders defended Vera. When Shah Jehan Begum, a high-class Muslim woman, converted to Adventism, she assisted Vera in her efforts enabling her to freely visit purdah women. Begum also opened a night school to teach Bible and offer other instruction. Vera was completely self-supporting and never received a salary from the mission for all the effort she put into her ministry.<sup>21</sup>

Vera wrote about her mission experience in numerous articles and letters. In some of them she thanked them for gifts of picture rolls or funds that she would then tell the donors how the funds would benefit people she ministered to. In one such account in 1934, she recounted how her home, despite some significant damage, survived a catastrophic earthquake.<sup>22</sup>

Vera typified the kind of missionary “new woman” who was strong and independent in conducting missionary work. Vera carried missionary credentials, and even into old age, retained “honorary” missionary credentials for her lifetime of service. She retired in 1942 but carried on her unique witness in Lucknow for another 10 years before moving to settle in Kodaikanal, India,<sup>23</sup> where she died and was buried on January 3, 1965.<sup>24</sup>

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## SOURCES

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## NOTES

1. General Conference Autobiographical Information Sheet, July 3, 1912.
2. There is some debate that exists about the exact year when Elizabeth was born. While some ship records on her trip to Australia point to 1875, her family and the 1881, 1891, and 1901 England Census records point to her birth as being in 1873. The General Conference Autobiographical Blank makes it clear that her relatives come from the town of Seaham make this definite link in terms of dating her birth. In a letter dated 3-16-52, addressed to Mrs. Ashlock at the Southern Asia Division office, Vera gives the name of Elizabeth (b. 1871) as her closest relative.
3. Her obituary states that she came to India as a governess. Her departure for India appears to have taken place on January 22, 1907, from England traveling through Africa to India. See UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960, accessed from Ancestry.com 1/19/22. In her biographical information for date of arrival in India she writes "probably 1908."
4. See genealogical tree on Ancestry.com available at: <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/178548668/person/242316627720/story>, accessed October 19, 2021.
5. S. A. Wellman, "The North India Mission," *ARH*, May 4, 1911, 10.
6. Vera's obituary states that she was converted while being treated at the Simla Sanitarium. However, the Sanitarium was moved from Mussoorie to Simla only around 1915 while Dr. Menkel was on furlough.
7. S. J. Abegg, "Portland Branch Notes," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, March 27, 1924, 12.
8. Ibid.
9. Worker's Questionnaire, Southern Asia Division Archives, 2.
10. See note on back page, *The Eastern Tidings*, September 1912, 4.
11. "A Letter from Sister Chilton," *Eastern Tidings*, October 1, 1920, 8-9.
12. See note in *Australasian Record*, Nov. 14, 1921, 8.

13. Vera C. Chilton, *The Sigh of the Orient* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1924), 22.
  14. *Ibid.*, 25.
  15. *Ibid.*, 21.
  16. *Ibid.*, 27.
  17. E. E. Bruce, "Our Indian Sisters," *ARH*, February 16, 1911, 8; see also V. S. Azariah, "Behind the Purdah," *Eastern Tidings*, January 1913, 27.
  18. V. Chilton, "Out of the Depths Have I Cried," *ARH*, October 9, 1913, 18.
  19. V. Chilton, "Among the Zenanas, India," *ARH*, February 26, 1914, 12.
  20. "Zenana Work—Lucknow," *IUT*, May 1, 1919, 2.
  21. O. Montgomery, "Zenana Work in India," *ARH*, May 23, 1929, 17; A. H. Williams, "Working for the Women of India," *ARH*, July 10, 1930, 19.
  22. See note in *Australasian Record*, March 5, 1934, 8.
  23. Worker's Questionnaire, Southern Asia Division Archives, 2.
  24. "Obituary," *Southern Asia Tidings*, February 1965, 13.
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