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In this issue...

This issue of the CMHS Bulletin explores the lives of several California Mennonite Brethren women who served as missionaries in India. Kathy Wiest interviewed Elsie Ann Kroeker of Fresno who went to India in her retirement years from 1993 through 2001; Fran Martens Friesen interviewed Ruth Friesen of Reedley (90 this year, pictured above in 1947) who went to India in 1952, raised her family there, and returned to the United States in 1972. Through their experiences, they forged a lifetime of memories of the strong friendships and warm hospitality of Christian sisters and brothers in India. In addition, their encounters with Indian food have influenced them to create amalgamated customs, such as occasionally substituting biryani and curries for borscht and verenika on special occasions. The issue concludes with some India-related manuscript collections held by the Mennonite Library and Archives.



Chandraleela, cook at the guest house of the Mennonite Brethren mission compound in Shamshabad, became a dear friend to Elsie Ann. 1997.
Credit: Elsie Ann Kroeker

New Roles, Exceptional Women: **Elsie Ann Kroeker in Shamshabad, India**

by Kathy Heinrichs Wiest

Elsie Ann Kroeker arrived in Shamshabad, India, in 1993 with some helpful background for life and ministry in India. As a young child growing up on a farm she had learned how to use an outhouse, haul water, and read by kerosene lantern. From a career as a professional cook and baker she knew how to function in a kitchen and improvise as needed. In church she had led Bible studies and inaugurated a mentoring program for women. She and her pastor husband, Werner, knew how to extend hospitality, having hosted hundreds of people in their home

over forty years in the pastorate.

Elsie Ann was prepared for many aspects of life and ministry in India, but nothing prepared her for the picture that met her eyes on their arrival to Bombay. Outside the door a construction crew was digging a deep hole. Laborers, mostly women, were carrying pans of dirt out of a pit. Among them was a young mother, visibly pregnant, with a baby at her breast. The baby strapped to her front, and a pan of dirt balanced on her head, the woman was trudging up rough hand-cut steps with her load. "How in the world



Arenla came to study at the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College where Elsie Ann taught English. She became the first woman to address a commencement at the college. 1995. Credit: Elsie Ann Kroeker

can they do this to her!" was Elsie Ann's reaction. "It still haunts me," she says. "I remember breaking down and crying."

Several hours later the Kroekers arrived at the bungalow they would call home for the next six months, located in the Mennonite Brethren mission compound in Shamshabad. Although it was 11 o'clock at night, Chandraleela, their household cook, was there with a pot of chicken soup insisting that they eat after their long day of travel. At that point the Kroekers were more interested in finding a bed than eating chicken soup, but as Elsie Ann remembers it, Chandraleela's insistence "kind of made us feel at home."

The contrasting images of women, sometimes oppressed yet strong and loving, remain an enduring theme in Elsie Ann's memory of their time spent in India. Beginning with a six-month fraternal visit to Mennonite Brethren Churches in the villages of southern India, the Kroekers spent most of the first seven years of their retirement serving with the Indian Mennonite Brethren Church.

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The low status of women in India came as a shock to Elsie Ann. "Traditionally a woman in childhood is under the control of her father; in youth, the control of her husband; in widowhood, under the control of her son," she learned. "A woman is viewed as the property of the male, in the same way as a field is the property of the man." While women were treated with more respect in the Christian community, vestiges of those cultural norms still limited options for women in the church.

With her experience in women's ministry, Elsie Ann came to India hoping to mentor and lead women in Bible study, but that idea was quickly dismissed. Teaching English, however, was something Elsie Ann could do, said the school leaders at the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College. So, although she had no experience, Elsie Ann agreed to teach the "Orientation English" class. "I really didn't know their method of teaching," she says. "It was just with the Lord's help that I was able to do it."

Elsie Ann recognized that education was an important key to women's achievement. Her position as English teacher in the school became a contact point from which she could observe and nurture the leadership gifts of the young women and mentor them.

Arenla, who came from northern India to study at the Bible college, caught Elsie Ann's eye as a woman with great potential. At 25 she was still unmarried and discouraged about her prospects. But Elsie Ann recognized the young woman's gifts in leadership, and they began studying the Bible together. Arenla blossomed under Elsie Ann's mentoring and became the first woman to represent her graduating class with an address at the college's commencement.

Arenla eventually married and started a family, but in the years that followed she didn't lose sight of what she had learned from Elsie Ann about her own leadership gifts and calling. While raising her children, Arenla began to reach out to other children living in the impoverished neighborhoods around them. The playtime she started grew into a preschool that became part of the school where she and her husband currently teach. Their first preschool students are now graduating from grammar school.

"She feels so good about accomplishing something in life," notes Elsie Ann, who keeps in touch with Arenla via Facebook. "She is a very humble person and always gives the credit to God, but she has done something that makes a difference."

Another example Elsie Ann observed of the humility of Indian women leaders was the work of Karuna Shri Joel who, as president of the women's conference, was a bridge between two factions of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

In a gathering of women from both groups, Karuna advocated for a single unified leadership body in place of two rival bodies that had developed. When the women voted overwhelmingly to unite, Karuna voluntarily stepped down from the presidency so the women could elect someone to lead the joint leadership team. A member from the rival faction stood up and declared that Karuna had given good leadership and should continue in her role.

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"She could have easily said, 'as president I will stay as president,'" comments Elsie Ann, "In India it's a real honor to be in charge. But in humility Karuna said, 'It is more important that we are one group than for me to be president.'"

Sadly, Karuna was killed in a drowning accident the following year, but her example has been an inspiration to others. Though Elsie Ann hasn't returned to India since 2006, she carefully monitors the progress of women and celebrates the signs of growth she gleans from news and her contacts there.

"At the last big conference they had there were a lot of women who were ordained," Elsie Ann reports, "and a lot of the women they chose were good leaders."

Elsie Ann takes satisfaction in having a part in the changes she

is seeing, first helping women recognize their own and each other's gifts, and eventually seeing the men acknowledge and tap into the gifts of capable women working behind the scenes. "Old systems take a long time to get rid of," she acknowledges, "but there are a lot of exceptional women there who are constantly taking on new roles that they've never had before."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kathy Heinrichs Wiest lives in Kingsburg, California, and is part of Kingsburg Mennonite Brethren Church. Besides keeping books for the family business, she dabbles in freelance writing, grows some food and is trying to get a fair trade non-profit started in Fresno. She and her husband, Steve, have two grown daughters.



Elsie Ann learns how to make curry powder. Here she helps sort dried chili pods, preparing them to be stemmed and pounded for powder. Credit: Elsie Ann Kroeker



An Indian woman and her child grind spices to become curry. Credit: Elsie Ann Kroeker