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WOMAN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

By
M. K. GANDHI



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WOMAN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

By
M. K. GANDHI

Compiled by
R. K. PRABHU

DATA ENTERBI



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CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1 WOMAN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY	3
2 EQUALITY OF SEXES	5
3 WOMAN NOT THE WEAKER SEX	8
4 WOMAN'S SPHERE OF ACTIVITY	10
5 EDUCATION OF WOMEN	11
6 THE MARRIAGE IDEAL	13
7 IDEAL HUSBAND AND WIFE	16
8 SEX RELATIONS	18
9 SEX EDUCATION	20
10 MOTHERHOOD	22
11 BIRTH-CONTROL	23
12 DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE	25
13 PROSTITUTION	27
14 DEVADASIS	29
15 WOMAN'S HONOUR	31
16 DOWRY SYSTEM	32
17 JEWELLERY	33
18 CHILDREN	34
19 THE MODERN GIRL	35



WOMAN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY



CHAPTER 1

WOMAN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

My opinion is that, just as fundamentally man and woman are one, their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help.

‘ But somehow or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's interested teaching that she is inferior to him. But the seers among men have recognized her equal status. ’

Nevertheless there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct.

In my opinion it is degrading both for man and woman that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end. In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down. The sin will be on man's head for tempting or compelling his companion to desert her special calling. There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there is in defending it against attack from without.

My contribution to the great problem lies in my presenting for acceptance truth and Ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this woman will be the unquestioned leader and, having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex. If she is able to do this successfully, she must resolutely refuse to believe in the modern teaching that everything is determined and regulated by the sex impulse. I fear I have put the proposition rather clumsily. But I hope my meaning is clear. I do not know that the millions of men who are taking an active part in the war are obsessed by the sex spectre. Nor are the peasants working together in their fields worried or dominated by it. This is not to say or suggest that they are free from the instinct implanted in man and woman. But it most certainly does not dominate their lives as it seems to dominate the lives of those who are saturated with the modern sex literature. Neither man nor woman has time for such things when he or she is faced with the

hard fact of living life in its grim reality.

‘I have suggested...that woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure?’ She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Who, again, suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of man’s lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar.

Harijan, 24-2-1940

CHAPTER 2

EQUALITY OF SEXES

Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of men; and man has not always been fair and discriminating in performing that self-appointed task. The largest part of our effort, in promoting the regeneration of women, should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our *shastras* as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women. Who will attempt this and how? In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt we will have to produce

women, pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. If we do produce them, such modern sisters will have the same authority as the *shastras*. We will feel ashamed of the stray reflections on them in our *Smritis*, and will soon forget them. Such revolutions have occurred in Hinduism in the past, and will still take place in the future, leading to the stability of our faith.

Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not as a result only of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop half way because of the condition of our women. Much of our work does not yield appropriate results; our lot is like that of the penny wise and pound foolish trader who does not employ enough capital in his business.

Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, pp. 424-25

Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand.¹ In a plan of life based on non-violence, woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his. But as every right in a non-violent society proceeds from the previous per-

formance of a duty, it follows that rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. They can never be imposed from outside. Men have not realized this truth in its fulness in their behaviour towards women. They have considered themselves to be lords and masters of women instead of considering them as their friends and co-workers. Women are in the position somewhat of the slave of old who did not know that he could or ever had to be free. And when freedom came, for the moment he felt helpless. Women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. It is up to Congressmen to see that they enable them to realize their full status and play their part as equals of men.

Constructive Programme, pp. 17-18, Edn. 1948

I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by men. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality. 1

Young India, 17-10-1929

Equality of sexes does not mean equality of occupations. There may be no legal bar against a woman hunting or wielding a lance. But she instinctively recoils from a function that belongs to man. Nature has created sexes as complements of each other. Their functions are defined as are their forms.

Harijan, 2-12-1939

CHAPTER 3

WOMAN NOT THE WEAKER SEX

‘Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.’

Young India, 15-9-1921

Man the law-giver will have to pay a dreadful penalty for the degradation he has imposed upon the so-called weaker sex. When woman, freed from man’s snares, rises to the full height and rebels against man’s legislation and institutions designed by him, her rebellion, no doubt non-violent, will be none the less effective.

Young India, 16-4-1925

‘If I was born a woman, I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything.’

Young India, 8-12-1927

‘To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be.) If non-violence is the law of our

being, the future is with woman. . . . Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?

Young India, 10-4-1930

Had not man in his blind selfishness crushed woman's soul as he has done or had she not succumbed to 'the enjoyments', she would have given the world an exhibition of the infinite strength that is latent in her.

Young India, 7-5-1931

Woman, I hold, is the personification of self-sacrifice, but unfortunately today she does not realize what a tremendous advantage she has over man. As Tolstoy used to say, they are labouring under the hypnotic influence of man. If they would realize the strength of non-violence they would not consent to be called the weaker sex.

Young India, 14-1-1932

'Women are special custodians of all that is pure and religious in life. Conservative by nature, if they are slow to shed superstitious habits, they are also slow to give up all that is pure and noble in life.'

Harijan, 25-3-1933

'Man has regarded woman as his tool. She has learnt to be his tool, and in the end found it easy and pleasurable to be such, because when one drags another in his fall the descent is easy.'

Harijan, 25-1-1936

CHAPTER 4

WOMAN'S SPHERE OF ACTIVITY

I do not envisage the wife, as a rule following an avocation independently of her husband. The care of the children and the upkeep of the household are quite enough to fully engage all her energy. In a well-ordered society the additional burden of maintaining the family ought not to fall on her. The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the woman to household management, the two thus supplementing and complementing each other's labours.

Harijan, 12-10-1934

In the new order of my imagination, all will work according to their capacity for an adequate return for their labour. Women in the new order will be part-time workers, their primary function being to look after the home. Since I do not regard the rifle as a permanent feature in the new order, its use will be progressively restricted even so far as men are concerned. It will be tolerated as a necessary evil while it lasts. But I would not deliberately contaminate women with the evil.

Harijan, 16-3-1940

More often than not a woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. 'To me this domestic slavery of woman is a symbol of our barbarism.' It is high time that our womankind was freed from this

incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time."

Women, p. 25, Edn. 1958

Today few women take part in politics and most of these do not do independent thinking. They are content to carry out their parents' or their husbands' behests. Realizing their dependence, they cry out for women's rights. Instead of doing this, however, women workers should enroll women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel men to realize woman's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honour. If they will do this, they will purify the present unclean atmosphere.

Harijan, 21-4-1946

CHAPTER 5

EDUCATION OF WOMEN

' Man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being complementary to one another; each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived; and therefore it follows as a necessary corollary from these facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of them both.' In framing any scheme of women's education this cardinal truth must be constantly kept in mind. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married couple, and, therefore, it is in the fitness of

things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand, home life is entirely the sphere of woman, and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, woman ought to have more knowledge. Not that knowledge should be divided into watertight compartments, or that some branches of knowledge should be closed to anyone, but unless courses of instruction are based on a discriminating appreciation of these basic principles, the fullest life of man and woman cannot be developed.

Women and Social Injustice, pp. 5-6, Edn. 1947

I believe in the proper education of women. But I do believe that woman will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with men. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man.'

Harijan, 27-2-1937

Education in English

Girls are taught English as a passport to marriage. I know several instances of women wanting to learn English so that they may be able to talk to Englishmen in English. I know husbands who are sorry that their wives cannot talk to them and their friends in English. I know families in which English is being *made* the mother tongue. . . . The canker has so eaten into the society that, in many cases, the only meaning of education is a knowledge of English. All these are for me signs of our slavery and degradation. It is unbearable to think that the vernaculars should be crushed and starved as they have been. I cannot tolerate the idea

of parents writing to their children, or husbands writing to their wives, not in their own vernaculars but in English.

Young India, 1-6-1921

Co-education

I cannot definitely state as yet whether it will be successful or not. It does not seem to have succeeded in the West. I tried it myself years ago when I even made boys and girls sleep in the same verandah with no partition between them, Mrs. Gandhi and myself sharing the verandah with them. I must say it brought undesirable results.

... co-education is still in its experimental stage and we cannot definitely say one way or the other as to its results. I think we should begin with the family first. There boys and girls should grow together freely and naturally. The co-education will come of itself.

Amrita Bazar Patrika, 12-1-1935

CHAPTER 6

THE MARRIAGE IDEAL

If marriage is, as it ought to be, a sacrament, an entrance into a new life, the girls to be married should be fully developed, should have some hand in the choice of companions for life, and should know the consequences of their acts.

Young India, 19-8-1926

Marriage must be considered to be a sacrament imposing discipline upon the partners, restricting them

to the physical union only among themselves and for the purpose only of procreation when both the partners desire and are prepared for it.

Young India, 16-9-1926

For me, the married state is as much a state of discipline as any other. Life is duty, a probation. Married life is intended to promote mutual good, both here and hereafter. It is meant also to serve humanity. When one partner breaks the law of discipline, the right accrues to the other of breaking the bond. The breach here is moral and not physical. It precludes divorce. The wife or the husband separates but to serve the end for which they have united. Hinduism regards each as absolute equal of the other. No doubt a different practice has grown up, no one knows since when. But so have many other evils crept into it. This, however, I do know that Hinduism leaves the individual absolutely free to do what he or she likes for the sake of self-realization, for which and which alone he or she is born.

Young India, 21-10-1926

The ideal that marriage aims at is that of spiritual union through the physical. The human love that it incarnates is intended to serve as a stepping-stone to divine or universal love.

Young India, 21-5-1931

Spiritual development ought to be given the first place in the choice for marriage. Service should come next, family considerations and the interest of the social order should have the third place and mutual attraction or 'love' the fourth and the last place. This

means that 'love' alone, where the other four conditions are not fulfilled, should not be held as a valid reason for marriage. At the same time, marriage where there is no love should equally be ruled out even though all the other considerations are fully complied with. I should score out the condition of eugenic fitness, because the begetting of offspring being the central purpose of marriage, eugenic fitness cannot be treated merely as a 'condition', it is the *sine qua non* of marriage.

Harijan, 5-6-1937

· Marriage for the satisfaction of sexual appetite is no marriage. It is *vyabhichara*—concupiscence.

Harijan, 24-4-1937

Rightly speaking, the true purpose of marriage should be and is intimate friendship and companionship between man and woman. There is in it no room for sexual satisfaction. That marriage is no marriage which takes place for the satisfaction of the sex desire. That satisfaction is a denial of true friendship.

Harijan, 7-7-1946

Marriage is a natural thing in life, and to consider it derogatory in any sense is wrong. . . . The ideal is to look upon marriage as a sacrament, and therefore, to lead a life of self-restraint in the married state.

Harijan, 22-3-1942

IDEAL HUSBAND AND WIFE

The wife is not the husband's bondslave, but his companion and his helpmate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows —as free as the husband to choose her own path.

An Autobiography, p. 18, Edn. 1958

My ideal of a wife is Sita and of a husband Rama. But Sita was no slave of Rama. Or each was slave of the other. Rama is ever considerate to Sita. Where there is true love, the question asked does not occur. Where there is no true love, the bond has never existed. But the Hindu household of today is a conundrum. Husbands and wives when they are married know nothing of one another. Religious sanction fortified by custom and the even flow of the lives of the married people keep the peace in the vast majority of the Hindu households. But when either wife or husband holds views out of the ordinary, there is danger of jars. In the case of the husband he has no scruples. He does not consider himself under any obligation to consult his partner's wishes. He regards his wife as his property. And the poor wife, who believes in the husband's claim, often suppresses herself. I think there is a way out. Mirabai has shown the way. The wife has a perfect right to take her own course and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right and when her resistance is for a nobler purpose.

Young India, 21-10-1926

The wife is not the slave of the husband but his comrade, otherwise known as his better half, his colleague and friend. She is a co-sharer with him of equal rights and of equal duties. Their obligations towards each other and towards the world must, therefore, be the same and reciprocal.

Young India, 21-5-1931

Women do not know what influence for good they can exert on their husbands. They wield it unconsciously no doubt, but that is not enough. They must have that consciousness, and the consciousness will give them the strength, and show them the way to deal with their partners. The pity of it is that most wives do not interest themselves in their husbands' doings. They think they have no right to do so. It never occurs to them that it is their duty to become guardians of their husbands' character, as it is the latter's to be guardians of their wives' character. And yet what can be plainer than that husband and wife are equal sharers of each other's virtues and vices?

Harijan, 24-4-1937

I admit that between husband and wife there should be no secrets from one another. I hold that husband and wife merge in each other. They are one in two or two in one.

Harijan, 9-3-1940

CHAPTER 8
SEX RELATIONS

Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man. I cannot imagine Sita ever wasting a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charms.

Young India, 21-7-1921

Procreation is a natural phenomenon indeed, but within specific limits. A transgression of those limits imperils womankind, emasculates the race, induces disease, puts a premium on vice, and makes the world ungodly.

Young India, 29-4-1926

Every husband and wife can make the fixed resolve . . . never to share the same room or the same bed at night and to avoid sexual contact, except for the one supreme purpose for which it is intended for both man and beast. The beast observes the law invariably. Man having got the choice has grievously erred in making the wrong choice. . . . Both man and woman should know that abstention from satisfaction of sexual appetite results not in disease but in health and vigour, provided that mind co-operates with the body.

Young India, 27-9-1928

God has blessed man with seed that has the highest potency and woman with a field richer than the

richest earth to be found anywhere on this globe. Surely it is criminal folly for man to allow his most precious possession to run to waste. He must guard it with a care greater than he will bestow upon the richest pearls in his possession. And so is a woman guilty of criminal folly who will receive the seed in her life-producing field with the deliberate intention of letting it run to waste. Both he and she will be judged guilty of misuse of the talents given to them and they will be dispossessed of what they have been given. Sex urge is a fine and noble thing. There is nothing to be ashamed of it. But it is meant only for the act of creation. Any other use of it is a sin against God and humanity.

Harijan, 28-3-1936

The conquest of lust is the highest endeavour of a man or woman's existence. Without overcoming lust man cannot hope to rule over self. And without rule over self there can be no *Swaraj* or *Rama Raj*. Rule of all without rule of oneself would prove to be as deceptive and disappointing as a painted toy mango, charming to look at outwardly but hollow and empty within.

Harijan, 21-11-1936

Sexual intercourse for the purpose of carnal satisfaction is reversion to animality, and it should therefore be man's endeavour to rise above it. But failure to do so as between husband and wife, cannot be regarded as a sin or a matter of obloquy. Millions in this world eat for the satisfaction of their palate; similarly, millions of the husbands and wives indulge in the sex act for their carnal satisfaction and will continue to do so and also pay the inexorable penalty in the shape of numberless

ills with which nature visits all violations of its order. The ideal of absolute *brahmacharya* or of married *brahmacharya* is for those who aspire to a spiritual or higher life; it is the *sine qua non* of such life.

Harijan, 5-6-1937

Owing as I do all the good there may be in me to my mother, I have looked upon woman, never as an object for satisfaction of sexual desire, but always with the veneration due to my own mother. Man is the tempter and aggressor. It is not woman whose touch defiles man, but he is often himself too impure to touch her.

Harijan, 23-7-1938

CHAPTER 9

SEX EDUCATION

Sexual science is of two kinds—that which is used for controlling or overcoming the sexual passion, and that which is used to stimulate and feed it. Instruction in the former is as necessary a part of a child's education as the latter is harmful and dangerous and fit therefore only to be shunned.'

Harijan, 21-11-1936

It seems to me that it is necessary to impart such knowledge to a certain extent. At present they are often left to pick up such knowledge anyhow with the result that they are misled into abusive practices. We cannot properly control or conquer the sexual passion by turning a blind eye to it. I am therefore strongly in favour of teaching young boys and girls, the significance and

right use of their generative organs. And in my own way I have tried to impart this knowledge to young children of both sexes for whose training I was responsible.

But the sex education that I stand for, must have for its object the conquest and sublimation of the sex passion. Such education should automatically serve to bring home to children, the essential distinction between man and brute, to make them realize that it is man's special privilege and pride to be gifted with the faculties of head and heart both; that he is a thinking no less than a feeling animal, as the very derivation of the word मनुष्य shows, and to renounce the sovereignty of reason over the blind instincts is therefore to renounce a man's estate. In man, reason quickens and guides the feeling. In brute, the soul lies ever dormant. To awaken the heart is to awaken the dormant soul, to awaken reason, and to inculcate discrimination between good and evil.

Harijan, 21-11-1936

‘I hold that the right education in this country is to teach woman the art of saying ‘no’ even to her husband, to teach her that it is no part of her duty to become a mere tool or a doll in her husband's hands. She has rights as well as duties.’ Those who see in Sita a willing slave under Rama do not realize the loftiness of either her independence or Rama's consideration for her in everything. Sita was no helpless weak woman incapable of protecting herself or her honour.

Harijan, 2-5-1936

CHAPTER 10
MOTHERHOOD

The world depends for its existence on the act of generation, and as the world is the playground of God and a reflection of His glory, the act of generation should be controlled for the ordered growth of the world.

An Autobiography, p. 148, Edn. 1958

The desire for a child is perfectly natural and once the desire is satisfied there should be no union.

Harijan, 24-4-1937

Man and woman should regard it a sacred duty to keep apart from the moment of conception up to the time when the child is weaned. But we go on with our fatal merry-making blissfully forgetful of that sacred obligation. This almost incurable disease enfeebles our mind and leads us to an early grave, after making us drag a miserable existence for a short while. Married people should understand the true function of marriage, and should not violate *brahmacharya* except with a view to progeny.

Translated from the Gujarati booklet, *Arogya Vishe Samanya Jnan*, Chap. IX

It is a tragedy that generally speaking our girls are not taught the duties of motherhood. But if married life is a religious duty, motherhood must be so too. To be an ideal mother is no easy task. The procreation of children has to be undertaken with a full sense of responsibility. The mother should know what is her duty from the moment she conceives right up to the time the

child is born. And she who gives intelligent, healthy and well-brought-up children to the country is surely rendering a service.

Harijan, 22-3-1942

CHAPTER 11

BIRTH-CONTROL

Self-control is the surest and the only method of regulating birth-rate. Birth-control by contraceptives is race suicide.

Young India, 16-9-1926

Artificial methods are like putting a premium upon vice. They make man and woman reckless. And the respectability that is being given to the methods must hasten the dissolution of the restraints that public opinion puts upon one. Adoption of artificial methods must result in imbecility and nervous prostration. The remedy will be found worse than the disease.

Young India, 12-3-1925

I do contend that artificial methods, however proper they may be, are harmful. They are harmful not perhaps in themselves but because they increase the appetite which grows with every feed. The mind that is so tuned as to regard indulgence not only lawful but even desirable will simply feed itself on indulgence, and will at last become so weak as to lose all strength of will. I do maintain that every act of indulgence means loss of precious vitality so needful to keep a man or woman strong in body, mind and soul.

Young India, 2-4-1925

It is futile to hope that the use of contraceptives will be restricted to the mere regulation of progeny. There is hope for a decent life only so long as the sexual act is definitely related to the conception of precious life. This rules out perverted sexuality and to a lesser degree promiscuity. Divorce of sexual act from its natural consequence must lead to hideous promiscuity and condonation, if not endorsement, of natural vice.

Harijan, 3-10-1936

It is dinned into one's ears that gratification of the sex urge is a solemn obligation like the obligation of discharging debts lawfully incurred, and that, not to do so would involve the penalty of intellectual decay. This sex urge has been isolated from the desire for progeny, and it is said by the protagonists of the use of contraceptives that conception is an accident to be prevented except when the parties desire to have children. I venture to suggest that this is a most dangerous doctrine to preach anywhere; much more so in a country like India where the middle class male population has become imbecile through the abuse of the creative function.

Harijan, 28-3-1936

Contraceptives are an insult to womanhood. The difference between a prostitute and a woman using contraceptives is only that the former sells her body to several men, the latter sells it to one man. Man has no right to touch his wife so long as she does not wish to have a child, and the woman should have the will-power to resist even her own husband.

Harijan, 5-5-1946

This little globe of ours is not a toy of yesterday. It has not suffered from the weight of over-population through its age of countless millions. How can it be that the truth has suddenly dawned upon some people that it is in danger of perishing of shortage of food unless birth-rate is checked through the use of contraceptives?

Harijan, 14-9-1935

CHAPTER 12

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The facility for divorce has proved no protection against a brutal husband for a pliant wife incapable of asserting and at times even unwilling to assert herself. . . . Hindu culture has erred on the side of excessive subordination of the wife to the husband, and has insisted on the complete merging of the wife in the husband. This has resulted in the husband sometimes usurping and exercising authority that reduces him to the level of the brute. The remedy for such excesses lies not through the law but through the true education of women as distinguished from unmarried girls, and through cultivating public opinion against unmanly conduct on the part of husbands. . . . She (the wife) may, therefore, without breaking the legal tie, live apart from her husband's roof and feel as if she had never been married. Of course, there are two legal remedies open even to a Hindu wife for whom a divorce is unobtainable, and that is to have the husband punished for common assault and to insist upon his supporting the wife. Experience tells me that this remedy is in most cases, if not in all, worse than useless, and it never

brings any comfort to a virtuous woman and makes the question of husband's reform more difficult if not impossible, which after all should be the aim of society, more so of every wife.

Young India, 3-10-1929

Widow Remarriage

Voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by a woman who has felt the affection of a partner adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion.

If we would be pure, if we would save Hinduism, we must rid ourselves of this poison of enforced widowhood. The reform must begin by those who have girl widows, taking courage in both their hands and seeing that the child widows in their charge are duly and well married—not remarried. They were never really married.

Young India, 5-8-1926

Intercommunal Marriages

If India is one and indivisible, surely there should be no artificial divisions creating innumerable little groups which would neither interdine nor intermarry. There is no religion in this cruel custom. It would not do to plead that individuals cannot make the commencement, and that they must wait till the whole society is ripe for the change. No reform has ever been brought about except through intrepid individuals breaking down inhuman customs or usages.

Harijan, 25-7-1936

PROSTITUTION

We may not make women a prey to our lust. The law of the protection of the weak applies here with peculiar force. To me the meaning of cow protection includes the protection of the chastity of our women. We will not have a regenerate India, unless we learn to respect our women as we respect our mothers, sisters and daughters. Let us cleanse ourselves of the sins that kill the man in us and make us brute.'

Young India, 13-4-1921

Prostitution is as old as the world, but I wonder if it was ever a regular feature of town life that it is today. In any case the time must come when humanity will rise against the curse and make prostitution a thing of the past, as it has got rid of many evil customs, however time-honoured they might have been.

Young India, 28-5-1925

"Prostitutes" is commonly supposed to apply to women of lewd character. But the men who indulge in vice are just as much, if not more, prostitutes than the women who, in many instances, have to sell their bodies for the sake of earning a livelihood. The evil practice should be declared illegal. But the law can only help to a point. The evil exists clandestinely in every country in spite of the law. Vigorous public opinion can help the law as it also hinders.

Harijan, 15-9-1946

If adultery and prostitution disappeared at least half the number of present doctors would find their occupation gone. So inextricably indeed has venereal disease caught mankind in its clutches that thoughtful medical men have been forced to admit, that so long as adultery and prostitution continue, there is no hope for human race, all the discoveries of curative medicine notwithstanding. The medicines for these diseases are so poisonous that although they may appear to have done some good for the time being, they give rise to other and still more terrible diseases which are transmitted from generation to generation.

Translated from the Gujarati booklet, *Arogya Vishe Samanya Jnan*, Chap. IX.

The proper method of dealing with brothels is for the women to carry on a double propaganda, (a) amongst women who sell their honour for a livelihood, and (b) amongst men whom they must shame into behaving better towards their sisters whom they ignorantly or insolently call the weaker sex. I remember years and years ago in the early nineties when the brave Salvation Army people, at the risk of their own lives, used to carry on picketing at the corners of the notorious streets of Bombay which were filled with houses of ill fame. There is no reason why some such thing should not be organized on a large scale.

Harijan, 4-9-1937

CHAPTER 14
DEVADASIS

Let the Indian man ponder over the fate of the thousands of sisters who are destined to a life of shame for his unlawful and immoral indulgence.¹ The pity of it is that the vast majority of men who visit these pestilential haunts are married men and therefore commit a double sin. They sin against their wives to whom they have sworn allegiance, and they sin against the sisters whose purity they are bound to guard with as much jealousy as that of their own blood sisters. It is an evil which cannot last for a single day, if we, men of India, realize our own dignity.

If many of the most respectable among us were not steeped in the vice, this kind of indulgence would be regarded as a greater crime than the stealing of a banana by a hungry man or the picking of a pocket by a youngster who is in need of money. What is worse or more hurtful to society — to steal property, or to steal the honour of a woman? Let me not be told that the public woman is party to the sale of her honour, but not the millionaire on the race course whose pocket is picked by a professional pick pocket. Who is worse — an urchin who picks a pocket, or a scoundrel who drugs his victim and then makes him sign away the whole of his property? Does not man by his subtle and unscrupulous ways first rob woman of her noblest instinct and then make her partner in the crime committed against

her? Or are some women, like the *panchamas*, born to a life of degradation? I ask every young man, married or unmarried, to contemplate the implications of what I have written. I cannot write all I have learnt about this social disease, this moral leprosy. Let his imagination fill in the rest, and then let him recoil with horror and shame from the sin, if he has himself been guilty of it. And let every pure man, wherever he is, do what he can to purify his neighbourhood. I know that the second part is easier written than practised. It is a delicate matter. But because of its very delicacy it demands the attention of all thoughtful men. Work among the unfortunate sisters must be left everywhere to experts. My suggestion has reference to work among the visitors to these houses of ill fame.

Young India, 16-4-1925

The tendency to see virtue in vice and excuse evil in the sacred name of art or some other false sentiment has clothed this debasing indulgence with a kind of subtle respectability which is responsible for the moral leprosy which he who runs may see. . . . Great as the evil is in this age of unbelief or a mere mechanical belief in God and an age of multiplicity of comforts and luxuries almost reminding one of the degradation to which Rome had descended when she was apparently at the zenith of her power, it is not easy to prescribe a remedy. It cannot be remedied by law.

Young India, 9-7-1925

By calling them *devadasis* we insult God Himself in the name of religion, and we commit a double crime in that we use these sisters of ours to serve our lust and

take in the same breath the name of God. To think that there should be a class of people given to this kind of immoral service, and that there should be another class who should tolerate their hideous immorality, makes one despair of life itself.

Young India, 22-2-1927

CHAPTER 15

WOMAN'S HONOUR

Let it be man's privilege to protect woman, but let no woman of India feel helpless in the absence of man or in the event of his failing to perform the sacred duty of protecting her. One who knows how to die need never fear any harm to her or his honour.

Young India, 15-12-1921

I have always held that it is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds in violating her. Take the case of Sita. Physically she was a weakling before Ravana, but her purity was more than a match even for his giant might. He tried to win her with all kinds of allurements but could not carnally touch her without her consent. On the other hand, if a woman depends on her own physical strength or upon a weapon she possesses, she is sure to be discomfited whenever her strength is exhausted.

Harijan, 1-9-1940

When a woman is assaulted she may not stop to think in terms of *himsa* or Ahimsa. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind in order to defend her honour. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and, if need be, die in the effort. The man or woman who has shed all fear of death will be able not only to protect himself or herself but others also through laying down his (or her) life.

Harijan, 1-3-1942

CHAPTER 16

DOWRY SYSTEM

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Any young man who makes dowry a condition of marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.' There are many youth movements in the country. I wish that these movements would deal with questions of this character. Such associations often become self-adulation societies, instead of becoming, as they should be, bodies representing solid reform from within. . . . A strong public opinion should be created in condemnation of the degrading practice of dowry and young men who soil their fingers with such ill-gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. Parents of girls should cease to be dazzled by English degrees and should not hesitate to travel outside their little castes and provinces to secure true, gallant young men for their daughters.

Young India, 21-6-1928

The system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by the parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste. So long as the choice is restricted to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated. All this means education of a character that will revolutionize the mentality of the youth of the nation.

Harijan, 23-5-1936

CHAPTER 17

JEWELLERY

In this country of semi-starvation of millions and insufficient nutrition of practically eighty per cent of the people, the wearing of jewellery is an offence to the eye. A woman in India has rarely any cash which she can call her own. But the jewellery she wears does belong to her, though even that she will not, dare not, give away without the consent of her lord and master. It ennobles her to part with, for a good cause, something she calls her own. Moreover, most of this jewellery has no pretension to art; some of it is positively ugly and a harbinger of dirt. Such are anklets, heavy necklaces, clasps worn not for adjusting the hair, but purely as a decoration for unkempt, unwashed, and often evil-smelling hair, or row upon row of bangles from wrist to elbow. In my opinion, the wearing of expensive jewellery is a distinct loss to the country. It is so much

capital locked up or, worse still, allowed to wear away. And in this movement of self-purification, the surrender of jewellery by women or men I hold to be a distinct benefit to society. Those who give, do so gladly. My invariable condition is that on no account should the jewellery donated be replaced. Indeed, women have blessed me for inducing them to part with things which have enslaved them. And, in not a few cases, men have thanked me for being an instrument for bringing simplicity into their homes.

Harijan, 22-12-1933

It is difficult to break the chains of prisoners who hug them, mistaking them as ornaments, as girls and even grown-up women do regard their silver or golden chains and rings as ornaments.

Harijan, 20-3-1937

CHAPTER 18

CHILDREN

Children inherit the qualities of their parents, no less than their physical features. Environment does play an important part, but the original capital on which a child starts life is inherited from its ancestors. I have always seen children successfully surmounting the effect of evil inheritance. That is due to purity being an inherent attribute of the soul.

An Autobiography, p. 230, Edn. 1958

The real property that a parent can transmit to all equally is his or her character and educational

facilities. Parents should seek to make their sons and daughters self-reliant, well able to earn an honest livelihood by the sweat of the brow.

Young India, 17-10-1929

CHAPTER 19

THE MODERN GIRL

Woman has circumvented man in a variety of ways in her unconsciously subtle ways, as man has vainly and equally unconsciously struggled to thwart woman in gaining ascendancy over him. The result is a stalemate. Thus viewed, it is a serious problem the enlightened daughters of Bharat Mata are called upon to solve. They may not ape the manner of the West, which may be suited to its environment. They must apply methods suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment. Theirs must be the strong, controlling, purifying, steady-ing hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejecting what is base and degrading. This is the work of Sitas, Draupadis, Savitris and Damayantis, not of amazons and prudes.

Young India, 17-10-1929

I have a fear that the modern girl loves to be Juliet to half a dozen Romeos. She loves adventure. . . . The modern girl dresses not to protect herself from wind, rain and sun but to attract attention. She improves upon nature by painting herself and looking extraordinary. The non-violent-way is not for such girls.

Harijan, 31-12-1938