M. K. GANDHI

WOMEN and SOCIAL INJUSTICE

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WOMEN
AND
SOCIAL INJUSTICE

BY

M. K. GANDHI

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FOREWORD

No leader in history has commanded such a large following during his lifetime either in his own country or the world as Gandhiji. And certainly no man has evoked such whole-hearted devotion from women. The reason is not far to seek. Gandhiji has the enviable capacity of being able to put himself into the shoes of another person, more especially when that person is the under-dog.

In spite of the unrivalled culture and high ideals of society that ancient India placed before us, we have to bear witness to the tragic fact that we have fallen ever so far from that happy estate, and perhaps in no sphere of life has that fall been so great as in that of woman. From being man's co-equal and co-sharer and helpmeet she has become his subordinate — a mere chattel to be used at will for satisfying his wants with no rights or will of her own. Custom and usage have dealt harshly with her. As a matter of fact this subordination has been a world factor, for it is only in very recent times that the women of the "advanced" Western hemisphere have come into their own after a struggle, and even there they have not gained all they want for in some countries many disabilities still attach to them.

A passionate lover of humanity, an implacable foe of injustice in whatsoever form or sphere, it is small wonder that Gandhiji early espoused the woman's cause. And as in everything that he has preached, he began the reform in his own home. Being as harsh as truth and a merciless critic of himself, the moment he realized he was a 'slave-holder' as he has called himself, his attitude to his wife changed, and with that change began his work for the emancipation of womankind as a whole. With his masterly pen and from every platform he has, throughout his long life of service, preached against the wrongs done to women in the name of law, tradition and even religion. He has spoken out fearlessly against enforced widowhood,

purdah, the dedication of girls to temples, prostitution, early marriage, the dowry system, the economic bondage and marital slavery of women. "Man and woman are equal in status." "I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality." "It is sad to think that the Smritis contain texts which can command no respect from men who cherish the liberty of woman as their own and who regard her as the mother of the race." "The saying attributed to Manu that 'for woman there can be no freedom' is not to me sacrosanct."—are but a few lines from the many he has written on behalf of suppressed woman and are enough witness, if witness were needed, of his burning desire to see woman restored to her natural and rightful place in society.

In his own institutions and programme of work he has paid equal attention and given equal place to girls and women. There is an air of freedom and self-confidence in the girls and women that have lived with him or been under his care whether in Sabarmati or Sevagram or elsewhere, which is a joy to behold and rarely visible in Indian society elsewhere. Nothing delights him more than the success of women in any sphere of life. The Spinners' Association, the child of his creation which is perhaps nearest his heart, is in essence a woman's association. It is not for nothing that he named it thus. Those of us who have been privileged to come close to him and serve him have found in him not only a "Bapu"—a wise father, but what is far more precious, a mother, before whose all-embracing and understanding love all fear and restraint vanish.

He has paid the best tribute our sex could wish when he says, "Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering." But with all his championship of our cause and his appreciation of our difficulties he has not withheld just criticism of our many defects. In the matter of birth control Gandhiji's writings have found a good deal of opposition from many of the leaders of the women's movement. But he has put the question on a high moral plane and appealed

to woman not to sell her birthright for a mess of pottage. It is not for lack of sympathy with the sufferings of women because of frequent giving birth to children that he has voted unequivocally against the use of contraceptives but because in every sphere of life he wants to protect woman from losing that moral force which is at once her crowning glory and her fortress against all attack and temptations. For, while he has praised us much, he expects much of us too — especially of those who are educated. He is of opinion that subservience to man or any power on earth need not be if we realize our inner strength. We have consented to be called the weaker sex, we have considered ourselves unable to stand without man's protection, we have tacitly acknowledged that we cannot compete with him intellectually, we have been flattered by man's tributes to woman's physical beauty and powers of attraction and have thereby lowered our own status and standard. In fact we have willingly subscribed to the doctrine that 'might is right.' Inasmuch as the spring of all Gandhiji's thought and action is non-violence, he has naturally pointed the way of *ahimsa* as the way of freedom for women not only from their own shackles but for the permanent removal of the world's ills. "If only women will forget that they belong to the weaker sex, I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than men against war," he said to women in Paris in 1932; and again in Switzerland, "I do not know if I have the courage to give a message for the women of Europe that you have asked for. If I am to do so without incurring their wrath, I would direct their steps to the women of India who rose in one mass last year, and I really believe that if Europe will drink in the lesson of non-violence, it will do so through its women." Alas! that this advice fell on stony ground with the result that Europe today is bathed in blood and is being consumed in the hideous fire of hatred and revenge. There is no doubt that of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none has been so potent as the field of non-violent action which Gandhiji offered to women in his 'war' against British domination of India. It brought them out in their hundreds from sheltered homes

to stand the furnace of a fiery trial without flinching. It proved to the hilt that woman was as much able as man to resist evil or aggression. To the thinking mind it has also proved that resistance without arms was not only equally efficacious but more ennobling for the resisters as also for those who were being resisted. In any event it gave woman a definite place so far as the salvation of India was concerned.

Today the question of violence versus non-violence is a vital one. Gandhiji's message is a clarion call for those who believe in non-violence as the strait and narrow road that leads to heaven to muster strong on his side. Only the other day when talking to some friends about the constructive programme which he has put before the nation as a concrete plan for the attainment of Swaraj, he said in regard to women's part in it: "But my greatest hope is in the women. They want a helping hand to lift them out of the well in which they have been kept. The slightest thing will work wonders. They made a record contribution during the *satyagraha* of 1931-32, and even now they are playing their part nobly but not to the utmost advantage. So little work has been done among them. They are waiting to be organized. They have the capacity for suffering evoked by non-violent effort, and they will suffer silently." Are we going to fulfil that hope is the question before those of us who are in a position to lend that helping hand for our own souls' sake no less than for the country and the world.

While Gandhiji's utterances and writings on behalf of the woman's cause should evoke a responsive chord in every well-wisher of humanity and even in the most hardened conservative, they are meant primarily for women, for they touch on every department of her life and can serve as an unerring guide to her in times of stress and strain. Above all they call to her for service — utter and devoted — for her own kind, for the country and for humanity at large. It is in this spirit that every woman should read this book. We stand to make an epoch-making decision. May we be given the wisdom and strength to

choose the better part so that there may, as Gandhiji once said, rise up from among us "women pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi" who will command the homage of society as have done through the ages these immortal heroines of yore.

Bardoli, January, 1942 AMRIT KAUR

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WOMEN AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

1

REGENERATION OF WOMEN

[An annual gathering of the Bombay Bhagini Samaj was held on February 20, 1918, under the presidentship of Gandhiji. The following is a free English rendering of his presidential address delivered in Gujarati.]

It is necessary to understand what we mean when we talk of the regeneration of women. It presupposes degeneration, and, if that is so, we should further consider what led to it and how. It is our primary duty to have some very hard thinking on these points. While travelling all over India I have come to realize that all the existing agitation is confined to an infinitesimal section of our people who are really a mere speck in the vast firmament. Crores of people of both the sexes live in absolute ignorance of this agitation. Full eightyfive per cent of the people of this country pass their innocent days in a state of total detachment from what is going on around them. These men and women, ignorant as they are, do their bit in life well and properly. Both have the same education or rather absence of education. Both are helping each other as they ought to do. If their lives are in any sense incomplete, the cause can be traced to the incompleteness of the lives of the remaining fifteen per cent. If my sisters of the Bhagini Samaj will make a close study of the lives of these 85 per cent of our people, it will provide them with ample material for an excellent programme of work for the Samaj.

In the observations that I am going to make I will confine myself to the 15 per cent above-mentioned, and even then it would be out of place to discuss the disabilities that are common both to men and women. The point for us to consider is the regeneration of our women relatively to our men. Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of man; and man has not always been fair and discriminate 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 receive the same homage from Hindu society as is being paid to their prototypes of yore. Their words 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. I pray to God that this Association may soon produce such women.

We have now discussed the root cause of the degeneration of our women, and have considered the ideals by the realization of which the present condition of our women can be improved. The number of women who can realize those ideals will be necessarily small, and therefore we will now consider what ordinary women can accomplish if they will try. Their first attempt should be directed towards awakening in the minds of as many women as possible a consciousness of their present condition. I am not one of those who believe that such an effort can be made through literary education only. To work on that basis would be to postpone indefinitely the accomplishment of our aims; I have experienced at every step that it is not at all necessary to wait so long. We can bring home to our women the sad realities of their present condition without, in the first instance, giving them any literary education. Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. 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 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 invest enough capital in his business.

But although much good and useful work can be done without a knowledge of the three Rs, it is my firm belief that we cannot always do without such knowledge. It developes and sharpens one's intellect, and it increases our capacity of doing good. I have never placed an unnecessarily high value on the knowledge of three Rs. I am only attempting to assign its proper place to it. I have pointed out from time to time that there is no justification for men to deprive women of, or to deny to them, equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy. But education is essential for enabling women to assert these natural rights, to exercise them wisely, and to work for their expansion; again, the true knowledge of self is unattainable by the millions who lack such education. Many a book is full of innocent pleasure, and this will be denied to us without education. It is no exaggeration to say that a human being without education is not far removed from an animal. Education, therefore, is necessary for women as it is for men. Not that the methods of education should be identical in both cases. In the first place our State system of education is full of error and productive of harm in many respects. It should be eschewed by men and women alike. Even if it were free from its present blemishes, I would not regard it as proper for women from all points of view. 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 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.

I should like to say a word or two as to whether English education is or is not necessary for our women. I have come to the conclusion that in the ordinary course of our lives neither our men nor our women need necessarily have any knowledge of English. True, English is necessary for making a living and for active association in our political movements. I do not believe in women working for a living or undertaking commercial enterprises. The few women who may require or desire to have English education can very easily have their way by joining the schools for men. To introduce English education in schools meant for women would only prolong our helplessness. I have often read and heard people saying that the rich treasures of English literature should be opened alike to men and women. I submit in all humility that there is some misapprehension in assuming such an attitude. No one intends to close these treasures against women while keeping them open for men. There is none on the earth able to prevent you from studying the literature of the whole world, if you have a liking for it. But when courses of instruction have to be framed with the needs of a particular society in view, you cannot supply the requirements of the few who have cultivated a literary taste. In asking our men and women to spend less time in the study of English than they are doing now, my object is not to deprive them of the pleasure which they are likely to derive from it. But I hold that the same pleasure can be obtained at less cost and trouble, if we follow a more natural method. The world is full of many a gem of priceless

beauty; but these gems are not all of English setting. Other languages can well boast of productions of similar excellence; all these should be made available for our common people, and that can only be done if our own scholars undertake to translate them for us in our own languages.

Merely to have outlined a scheme of education as above is not to have removed the bane of child marriage from our society or to have conferred on our women an equality of rights. Let us now consider the case of our girls who disappear, so to say, from view after marriage. They are not likely to return to our schools. Having once committed the sin of marrying their daughters at a very early age, the mothers cannot educate them or otherwise make their dry life a cheerful one, even if later on they realize the sinfulness of their action. The man who marries a young girl does so not out of any altruistic motives but through sheer lust. Who is to rescue these girls? A proper answer to this question will also lead to a solution of woman's problem. The answer is no doubt difficult, but it is the only one possible. There is of course none to champion her cause but her husband. It is useless to expect a child-wife to be able to bring round the man who has married her. The difficult work must, therefore, for the present at least, be left to man. If I could, I would take a census of child-wives and would find the husbands, and I would try to bring home to them the enormity of their crime in linking their fortunes with child-wives, and would warn them that there is no expiation for that sin unless and until they by education make their wives fit, not only to bear children but also to bring them up properly, and unless in the meantime they live a life of absolute celibacy.

Thus there are many fruitful fields of activity before the members of the Bhagini Samaj for devoting their energies to. The field for work is so vast that, if resolute application is brought to bear thereon, the wider movements for reform may for the present be left to themselves and great service can be done to the cause of Home Rule without so much as even a verbal reference to it. When printing presses were non-existent and scope for speech-making was very

limited, when one could hardly travel twentyfour miles in the course of a day instead of a thousand miles as now, we had only one agency for propagating our ideals, and that was our acts; and acts had immense potency. We are now rushing to and fro with the velocity of air, delivering speeches, writing newspaper articles, and yet we are far from our goal, and a cry of despair fills the air. I, for one, am of opinion that as in old days our acts will have a more powerful influence on the public than any number of speeches and writings. It is my earnest prayer to your Association that its members should give prominence to quiet and unobtrusive work in whatever they do.

2

LIBERATE THE WOMAN

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the well-known social worker of Madras, has written a long letter based on one of my Andhra speeches, from which I take the following interesting extract:

"Your observations on the urgent need for reforms and for a healthy change in the daily habits of our people, during your journey from Bezwada to Guntur, have appealed to me very much indeed.

I may humbly submit that I as a medical woman fully concur with you. But will you kindly permit me to say that, if education is really going to bring in its train social reform, better sanitation, and improved public health, it is going to achieve this result only through the education of our women?

Under the present social system, don't you think that very few women are given sufficient opportunities for education, full development of body and mind, and self-expression?

Don't you think that their very individuality is being recklessly crushed under the burden of customs and conventions?

Does not early marriage strike at the root of all development — physical, intellectual, and even spiritual?

Do not the pangs of child-wives and child-mothers, and the unmitigated sorrows of our widows and deserted wives demand an immediate remedy ?

Is the Hindu society justified in tolerating or conniving at a custom that in the name of religion condemns innocent young girls to a life of degradation and vice ?

Don't you think that, as the result of social tyranny, Indian women, with a few exceptions have lost the spirit of strength and courage, the power of independent thinking and initiative, which actuated the women of ancient India, such as Maitreyi, Gargi and Savitri, and even today actuate a large number of our own women belonging to the liberal creeds like the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophy, which is only Hinduism freed of all its meaningless customs, rites and rituals ?

Should not the members of the nationalist party, we mean the Congress, burn with a desire and enthusiasm to find an immediate remedy for all these social evils, the source of our national weakness and the cause of our present degradation, or at least educate the masses to liberate their women from the servile bondage to which they are subject, so that they may develop to their full physical, mental, moral and spiritual height, may set an example of courage and wisdom, and above all may as wives and mothers rightly and truly fulfil the sacred task of training, guiding and forming the daily habits and character of the future administrators of India ?

If the members of the Congress believe that freedom is the birth-right of every nation and individual, and if they are determined to achieve that at any cost, should they not first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restrict their all-round healthy growth, which remedy lies in their own hands ?

Our poets, saints and sages have sung in the same tune. Swami Vivekanand has said, 'That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future. The principal reason why your race is so much degraded is that you had no respect for these living images of Shakti. If you do not raise the women who are the living embodiments of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other way to rise.'

The late Subrahmanya Bharati, the gifted Tamil poet, has echoed the same idea.

So, would you kindly, in your tour, advise our men to follow the right and the surest way to attain freedom ? "

Dr. Muthulakshmi has a perfect right to expect Congressmen to shoulder this responsibility. Many Congressmen are doing great work in this direction individually as also corporately. The root of the evil, however, lies far deeper than would appear on superficial observation. It is not the education merely of women that is at fault. It is the whole of our educational system that is rotten. Again it is not this custom or that which needs condemnation, it is the inertia which refuses to move even in the face of an admitted evil that needs to be removed. And lastly, the condemnation is true only of the middle class, the town-dwellers, i. e. barely 15 per cent of the vast millions of India. The masses living in the villages have no child marriage and no prohibition against widow remarriage. It is true that they have other evils which impede their growth. Inertia is common to both. What is, however, necessary is to overhaul the educational system and to devise one in terms of the masses. No system will be even passable that does not lay stress on adult education equally with that of children. Moreover, no system will touch even the fringe of the question that does not give the vernaculars their natural place of supremacy. This work can only be done through the existing educated class such as it is. Before, therefore, reform on a large scale takes place, the mentality of the educated class has to undergo transformation. And may I suggest to Dr. Muthulakshmi that the few educated women we have in India will have to descend from their Western heights and come down to India's plains ? Men are undoubtedly to blame for their neglect, nay their ill use of women, and they have to do adequate penance; but those women who have shed superstition and have become conscious of the wrong have to do the constructive work of reform. These questions of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of the economic condition of the masses and the like resolve

themselves into penetration into the villages, reconstruction or rather reformation of the village life.

Young India, 23-5-1929

3

POSITION OF WOMEN

A fair friend, who has hitherto successfully resisted the matrimonial temptation, writes:

"There was a women's conference yesterday at the Malabari Hall, at which many sound speeches were made and many resolutions passed. The question of the evening was the Sarda Bill. We are so glad you uphold the age of 18 for girls. Another important resolution dealt with the laws of inheritance. What a help it would be, if you wrote a strong article on this subject in *Navajivan* and *Young India*? Why should women have either to beg or to fight in order to win back their birthright? It is strange — and also tragically comic — to hear man born of woman talk loftily of 'the weaker sex' and nobly promising 'to give' us our due! What is this nonsense about 'giving'? Where is the 'nobility' and 'chivalry' in restoring to people that which has been unlawfully wrested from them by those having brute power in their hands? Wherein are women less important than men? Why should their share of inheritance be less than that of men? Why should it not be equal? We were discussing this very heatedly with some people a couple of days ago. A lady said, 'We don't need any change in the law. We are quite content. After all, it is but fair that the son, who carries on the name and family traditions, should have the greater share. He is the mainstay of the family.' We said, 'And what about the girl?' 'Oh,' intervened a strapping young man who was there, 'the other fellow will look after *her*!' There you are. The 'other fellow'! Always the other fellow! This other fellow is an absolute nuisance! *Why* should there be another fellow? Why should it be taken for granted that there *will* be another fellow? They talk as though a girl were a bale of goods to be tolerated in the parental house until 'the other fellow' comes round, and then coolly handed over to him

with a sigh of relief. Really wouldn't you be wild, if *you* were a girl ?"

I do not need to be a girl to be wild over man's atrocities towards woman. I count the law of inheritance among the least in the list. The Sarda Bill deals with an evil far greater than the one which the law of inheritance connotes. But I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality. As women begin to realize their strength, as they must in proportion to the education they receive, they will naturally resent the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected.

But to remove legal inequalities will be a mere palliative. The root of the evil lies much deeper than most people realize. It lies in man's greed of power and fame, and deeper still in mutual lust. Man has always desired power. Ownership of property gives this power. Man hankers also after posthumous fame based on power. This cannot be had, if property is progressively cut up in pieces, as it must be if all the posterity become equal co-sharers. Hence the descent of property for the most part on the eldest male issue. Most women are married. And they are co-sharers, in spite of the law being against them, in their husbands' power and privileges. They delight in being ladies this and what not simply for the fact of being the wives of particular lords. Though, therefore, they may vote for radical reform in academic discussions over inequalities, when it comes to acting up to their vote they will be found to be unwilling to part with the privileges.

Whilst, therefore, I would always advocate the repeal of all legal disqualifications, I should have the enlightened women of India to deal with the root cause. Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering, and her advent to public life should, therefore, result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property. Let them know that millions of men have no property to transmit to posterity. Let us learn from them that it is better for the few to have no ancestral property

at all. 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. The upbringing of minor children will then naturally devolve upon the major descendants. Much of the present imbecility of the children of the wealthy will go, if the latter can but substitute the worthy ambition of educating their children to become independent for the unworthy ambition of making them slaves of ancestral property, which kills enterprise and feeds the passions which accompany idleness, and luxury. The privilege of the awakened women should be to spot and eradicate age-long evils.

That mutual lust too has played an important part in bringing about the disqualifications of the fair sex hardly needs any demonstration. 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 *Bharata 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, steadying 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

WOMEN IN THE SMRITIS

A correspondent sends me an issue of *Indian Swarajya* published at Bezwada. It contains an article on the place of woman in the Smritis. From it I copy the following few extracts without any alteration :

"The wife should ever treat the husband as God, though he be characterless, sensual and devoid of good qualities (*Manu* 5-154).

Women should follow the word of their husbands. This is their highest duty (*Yajnavalkya* 1-18).

A woman has no separate sacrifice, ritual or fasting. She gains a high place in heaven by serving the husband (*Manu* 5-145).

She who fasts and performs rituals, while the husband lives, cuts off the life of the husband. She goes to hell. A woman who is after the sacred waters should wash the feet or the whole body of the husband and drink the water; and she attains the highest place (*Atri* 136-37).

There is no higher world for the woman than that of the husband. She who displeases the husband cannot go to his world after death. So she should never displease the husband (*Vasishtha* 21-14).

That woman who prides in her father's family and disobeys the husband should be made by the king a prey to the dogs in the presence of a big assembly of people (*Manu* 8-371).

None should eat the food offered by woman who disobeys the husband. Such a woman is to be known as a sensualist (*Angiras* 69).

If the wife disobeys the husband when he is given to bad habits or becomes a drunkard or is suffering from physical ailment, then for three months she should be deprived of her valuable clothes and jewels and kept away (*Manu* 10-78)."

It is sad to think that the Smritis contain texts which can command no respect from men who cherish the liberty

of woman as their own and who regard her as the mother of the race; sadder still to think that a newspaper published on behalf of orthodoxy should publish such texts as if they were part of religion. Of course, there are in the Smritis texts which give woman her due place and regard her with deep veneration. The question arises as to what to do with the Smritis that contain texts that are in conflict with other texts in the same Smritis and that are repugnant to the moral sense. I have already suggested often enough in these columns that all that is printed in the name of scriptures need not be taken as the word of God or the inspired word. But everyone cannot decide what is good and authentic and what is bad and interpolated. There should, therefore, be some authoritative body that would revise all that passes under the name of scriptures, expurgate all the texts that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religion and morality, and present such an edition for the guidance of Hindus. The certainty that the whole mass of Hindus and the persons accepted as religious leaders will not accept the validity of such authority need not interfere with the sacred enterprise. Work done sincerely and in the spirit of service will have its effect on all in the long run, and will most assuredly help those who are badly in need of such assistance.

Harijan, 28-11-1936

5

WOMEN AND VARNA

An esteemed friend writes:

"From your recent writing on *varna* in *Harijan* it seems that the principle of *varna* adumbrated by you is intended to apply only to men. What, then, about women? What would determine a woman's *varna*? Perhaps you will answer that before marriage a woman would take her *varna* from her father; after marriage from her husband. Should one understand that you support Manu's notorious dictum that there can be no independence for woman at any stage of her life, that before marriage she must remain under the tutelage of her parents, after marriage under that of her husband, and, in the event of her widowhood, under that of her children?

Be that as it may, the fact remains that ours is an era of woman suffrage, and that she has definitely entered the lists with men in the pursuit of independent avocations. It is thus the commonest thing nowadays to find a woman serving as a schoolmistress, while her husband is doing business as a money-lender. To what *varna* would the woman under these circumstances belong? Under the *varnashrama* dispensation a man would normally take up the avocation and, therefore, also the *varna* of his parents, while a woman would adopt that of her parents; and they may well be expected to stick to their respective avocations after their marriage. To what *varna* between these would their children belong? Or would you leave the question to be decided by the children themselves, by their free, independent choice? In the latter case, what becomes of the heredity basis of *varna* which the *varna dharma*, as expounded by you, postulates?"

In my opinion the question raised is irrelevant in the circumstances prevailing today. As I have pointed out in the writing referred to, owing to the confusion of the *varnas* today there are in reality no *varnas*, the *varna* principle has ceased to operate. The present state of Hindu

society may be described as that of anarchy; the four *varnas* today exist in name only. If we must talk in terms of *varna*, there is only one *varna* today for all, whether men or women: we are all *Shoodras*.

In the resuscitated *varna dharma*, as I conceive it, a girl before her marriage will belong to the *varna* of her father, just like her brother. Intermarriages between different *varnas* will be rare. A girl will, therefore, retain her *varna* unimpaired even after her marriage. But should the husband belong to a different *varna*, then, on marriage, she would naturally adopt his *varna* and relinquish that of her parents. Nor need such a change of *varna* be understood to imply a slur against anybody's susceptibilities since the institution of *varna* in the age of resuscitation would imply absolute social equality of all the four *varnas*.

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.

Nor do I see in this any invasion of woman's rights or suppression of her freedom. The saying attributed to Manu that "for woman there can be no freedom" is not to me sacrosanct. It only shows that probably, at the time when it was promulgated, women were kept in a state of subjection. The epithets used in our literature to describe a wife are *ardhangana*, 'the better half', and *sahadharmini*, 'the helpmate'. The husband addressing the wife as *devi* or goddess does not show any disparagement. But, unfortunately, a time came when the woman was divested of many of her rights and privileges and was reduced to a status of inferiority. But there could be no question of depreciation of her *varna*. For, *varna* does not connote a set of rights or privileges; it prescribes duties or obligations only. And no one can divest us of our duty, unless we ourselves choose to shirk it. The woman who knows and

fulfils her duty realizes her dignified status. She is the queen, not the slave, of the household over which she presides.

I need hardly say after this that, if the position set forth by me with regard to the role of woman in society is accepted, the question of the *varna* of the children will cease to present any problem, as there will be no more any discrepancy as between the *varnas* of the husband and the wife.

Harijan, 12-10-1934

6

WOMEN AND MILITARISM

At various meetings the question was pointedly asked as to how women might help in fighting militarism. In Italy at a private meeting Gandhiji was asked to tell the women of Italy something they could learn from the women of India.

"If only women will forget that they belong to the weaker sex," he said in Paris, "I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than men against war. Answer for yourselves what your great soldiers and generals would do, if their wives and daughters and mothers refused to countenance their participation in militarism in any shape or form."

"I do not know," he said at Lausaune, "if I have the courage to give the message for the women of Europe that you asked for. If I am to do so without incurring their wrath, I would direct their steps to the women of India who rose in one mass last year, and I really believe that, if Europe will drink in the lesson of non-violence, it will do so through its women. 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."

Speaking to a group of women in Italy he said, " The beauty of non-violent war is that women can play the same part in it as men. In a violent war women have no such privilege, and Indian women played a more effective part in our last non-violent war than men. The reason is simple. Non-violent war calls into play suffering to the largest extent, and who can suffer more purely and nobly than women ? The women in India tore down the purdah and came forward to work for the nation. They saw that the country demanded something more than their looking after their homes. They manufactured contraband salt, they picketed foreign cloth shops and liquor shops and tried to wean both the seller and the customer from both. At late hours in the night they pursued the drunkards to their dens with courage and charity in their hearts. They marched to jails, and they sustained lathi blows as few men did. If the women of the West will try to vie with men in becoming brutes, they have no lesson to learn from the women of India. They will have to cease taking delight in sending their husbands and sons to kill people and congratulating them on their valour."

M. D.

Young India, 14-1-1932

7

WOMAN'S SPECIAL MISSION

The Editor, *Harijan*

Sir,

I have read your articles on the recent European crisis with great joy. It was only natural that you should speak to Europe now. How could you restrain yourself when humanity was on the very verge of destruction ?

Will the world listen ? That is the question.

There is no doubt—judging from letters from friends in England — that people there went through absolute agony during that ghastly week. I am sure the same applies to the whole world. The mere thought of war — modern warfare — with its devilish ingenuity and consequent pitiless butchery and beastiality — definitely made people think as they had never thought before. " The sigh of relief that was breathed and the gratitude to God that went up from every heart when the news came through that war had been averted are something that I can never forget as long as I live, " writes an English friend. And yet is it just the fear of unspeakable suffering, the dread of losing one's nearest and dearest, of seeing one's country humiliated, that cause one to detest war ? Are we glad war has been averted even at the humiliation of another nation ? Would we have felt differently, if the sacrifice of honour had been demanded of us ? Do we hate war because we realize it is the wrong way to settle disputes, or is our hatred of it part and parcel of our fear ? These are questions that must be answered in the right way, if war is really to vanish from the earth.

The crisis over, however, what do we see ? A more strenuous race than before for armaments, a more comprehensive and intensive organization than ever of all the resources available — of men, women, money, skill and talent — in the event of war ! No avowed declaration that " war shall not be " from anywhere ! Is this not a recognition that war—however averted today—is still hanging over our heads as the proverbial sword of Democles ?

To me as a woman it is painful to realize that my sex has not contributed to world peace the quota that should be

ours by instinct and prerogative to contribute. It pains me to read and hear of women's auxiliary corps being organized, of women being commandeered and volunteering to take their full share in the actual field as well as behind the lines. And yet, when war comes, it is the women's hearts that are wrung in agony—it is their souls that are scarred beyond repair. It is all so inexplicable. Why is it that we have not chosen the better part through all the ages? Why have we, without murmur, bowed the knee to hideous, soulless, brute force? It is a sad commentary on our spiritual development. We have failed to understand our high calling. I am quite convinced that, if women could only have a heart-understanding of the power and glory of non-violence, all would be well with the world.

Why cannot you inspire and organize us women of India? Why will you not concentrate on having us as your 'sword arm'? How often have I longed for you to undertake an all India tour just for this purpose? I believe that you would have a wonderful response, for the heart of Indian womanhood is sound, and no women, perhaps, in the world have finer traditions of sacrifice and self-effacement behind them as we. Perhaps if you would make something of us, we may, in howsoever humble a manner, be able to show the way of peace to a sorrowing and stricken world. Who knows?

22-10-'38 *A Woman*

I publish this letter now without hesitation. The correspondent's faith in my ability to stir the woman heart flatters me. But I am humble enough to recognize my limitations. It seems to me that the days of my touring are over. Whatever I can do by writing I must continue. But my faith is increasing in the efficacy of silent prayer. It is by itself an art — perhaps the highest art — requiring the most refined diligence. I do believe that it is woman's mission to exhibit *ahimsa* at its highest and best: But why should it be a man to move the woman heart? If the appeal is addressed exclusively to me not as man but as the (supposed to be) best exponent of *ahimsa* to be practised on a mass scale, I have no urge in me to go about preaching the doctrine to the women of India. I can

assure my correspondent that there is no want of will in me that deters me from responding to her appeal. My feeling is that, if men of the Congress can retain their faith in *ahimsa*, and prosecute the non-violent programme faithfully and fully, the women would be automatically converted. And it may be that there shall arise one among them who will be able to go much further than I can ever hope to do. For woman is more fitted than man to make explorations and take bolder action in *ahimsa*. For the courage of self sacrifice woman is any day superior to man, as I believe man is to woman for the courage of the brute.

Bannu, 25-10-'38
Harijan, 5-11-1938

8

WOMAN'S ROLE

The Standing Committee of the all India Women's Conference met recently at Abbottabad. This was their first venture in the Frontier Province. The members, I understand, had a very happy experience. There were no caste distinctions, no religious differences. Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women freely mixed together. The Standing Committee passed the following three resolutions :

"1. The members of the Standing Committee of the all India Women's Conference assembled at Abbottabad desire to place on record their immense grief and despair at the continuance of war in Europe and the Far East. They are in deep sympathy with all those countries which have lost their independence and are under the iron heel of Nazi and Fascist domination against which all sections of India have expressed their opinion in no uncertain terms. They appeal again to the women of the world to realize the utter futility of trying to settle disputes and grievances by means of war and to throw their whole weight into the cause of peace.

"2. The Standing Committee reaffirm their belief in non-violence as the only effective means of ensuring a lasting peace in the

world by the formation of a brotherhood of nations. They realize how difficult of attainment this ideal is, and therefore they appeal to Indian women to try to develop the practice of non-violence in their individual and collective lives, for they feel that with their traditional inheritance of service and sacrifice they could give a lead to the women of the world in this respect.

"3. The members reiterate the opinion of the A. I. W. C. that the recognition of India's free status would be the first and logical step towards the attainment of the goal for which Britain is at war—namely, the freedom of all nations and a world democracy."

Evidently the sisters who met at Abbottabad believe like me that in the war against war women of the world will and should lead. It is their special vocation and privilege. Therefore the Committee have reaffirmed their belief in non-violence. Let me hope that the women who are under the influence of the Conference share the Committee's belief, and that they will work to that end.

Sevagram, 27-7-'40

Harijan, 4-8-1940

9

WHAT IS WOMAN'S ROLE?

With certain omissions I quote below the following from a highly educated sister:

"You have shown the world, through *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* the dignity of the soul. These two words are the only solution to the problem of how to overcome man's baser nature.

Education through crafts is not only a great idea, but the only right way of teaching, if we want our children to have self-reliance. It is you who have said it, and solved in one sentence the whole vast educational problem. The details could be worked out according to circumstances and experience.

I beg you to solve the problem of us, the women. Rajaji says that there is no women's problem. Perhaps not in the political sense. Perhaps it could be made by legislation not to matter

in the professional sense, that is, all professions could be made equally open to men and women. But these things would not alter the fact that we are women and, as such, of a different quality from men. We need an additional set of principles besides *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* to overcome our baser qualities. A woman's spirit like a man's strives to attain better things. But just as there is need for *ahimsa* and *brahmacharya* for a man to get rid of his aggressive spirit, lust, brutish instincts of inflicting pain, etc., so there is for woman need of certain principles that would enable her to get rid of her baser qualities, which are different from men and commonly said to belong by nature to her. The natural qualities of her sex, the upbringing meted out to her because of her sex, and the environment which is created because of her sex, all are against her. And in her work these things, namely her nature, upbringing and surroundings always get in the way and hinder her and give occasion for the hackneyed phrase, 'She is only a woman, after all!' This is what I mean by sex hanging round one's neck. And I think that, if we only possess the correct solution, the correct method of improving ourselves, we could make our natural qualities, such as sympathy and tenderness, a help instead of a hindrance. The improvement, just as your solution in the case of men and children, must come from within us.

I said nature, upbringing and environment. I will give an example to make myself clearer.

Women by nature are intended to be soft, tender-hearted, sympathetic, to mother children. These things influence her to a great extent unconsciously. So when it comes to doing things, she becomes too emotional. When moving with men, she commits blunders. She is soft-hearted when she should not be so. She is temperamental, easily gets vain, and generally acts in a silly way.

When I came to see you, although I had desired the meeting very much and spent the previous night sleepless, thinking over it, when in your presence I was asked to sit down, I went and sat behind the broad back of Shri Desai. I could not hear and I prevented myself from seeing you! What a silly thing to do! Further, I found I could not explain myself, could not articulate. This I attribute to my being saddled with an emotional

nature which gets out of control easily. Of course, suitable training would have cured that particular fault, but I dare say I would commit some other equally silly act.

A friend of mine showed me the answers she has written to a questionnaire sent by the National Planning Sub-Committee for women's role. The questions, as you no doubt know, are numbered and are something like this: To what extent, in your part of the country, is woman entitled to hold, acquire, inherit, sell or dispose of property in her own right? What provision has been made, or facilities available, for the appropriate education and training of women for the several kinds of work and employment that women of different capacities may need to engage in? She has not replied to the questions, but has written: 'We cannot say with an ounce of truth that women were not getting any education as such in the good old ancient days,' and, 'in the Vedic period the wife, on her marriage, was at once given an honoured position in the house and she was mistress in her husband's home,' etc., and has quoted Manu. I asked her what necessity there was to write about ancient customs when the questionnaire was about present-day ones. She murmured something about thinking that a reply in the form of an essay would be nice, and brightened up saying Mrs. Someone-else's reply was worse than hers. I think this mistake of my friend is due to lack of proper training, which was denied to her because she is a woman. Even a clerk would know that when one is asked a question one should not write an essay on a different matter in reply.

I do not think I need go on quoting examples and explaining myself. You with your vast experience of women of all kinds, would know whether I am right in saying that women lack the vital principle that would set them right.

Your advice to me was to read the *Harijan*. I do so eagerly. But so far I have not come across, well, the advice for the inner spirit. Spinning and fighting for the national freedom are only some aspects of the training. They do not seem to contain the whole solution. For, I have seen women who do spin and do try to work out the Congress ideals and still commit blunders which are attributed to the fact of their being women.

I do not want woman to become like man. But just as you have taught men *ahimsa* for their baser nature, do teach

us the thing that would remove our sillier qualities. Tell us, please, how to make the best use of our qualities, how to turn our disadvantages into advantages.

This, the burden of my sex, is with me always. Every time I have someone say, 'She is a woman, after all!' in a sneering way, my soul winces, if, that is, a soul is capable of wincing. A man to whom I talked of these things laughed at me and said, 'Did you see that child at our friend's house ? He was playing at trains, and chugchugged along until he came against a pillar. Instead of going round it he just tried to push it aside with his shoulders, thinking, in his childish mind, that he could remove it. You remind me of him. What you say is a psychological thing. You make me laugh in your attempt to understand and solve it.' "

I had flattered myself that my contribution to the woman's cause definitely began with the discovery of *satyagraha*. But the writer of the letter is of opinion that the fair sex requires treatment different from men. If it is so, I do not think any man will find the correct solution. No matter how much he tries, he must fail because nature has made him different from woman. Only the toad under the harrow knows where it pinches him. Therefore ultimately woman will have to determine with authority what she needs. My own 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 also 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.

As I have watched millions of peasants in their natural surroundings and as I watch them daily in little Sevagram natural division of spheres of work has forced itself on my attention. There are no women blacksmiths and carpenters. But men and women work on the fields, the heaviest work being done by the males. The women keep and manage the homes. They supplement the meagre resources of the family, but man remains the main bread-winner.

The division to the spheres of work being recognized, the general qualities and culture required are practically the same for both the sexes.

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 in these columns 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 of 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. She can become the leader in *satyagraha* which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith.

My good nurse in the Sassoon Hospital, Poona, as I was lying on a sick-bed years ago, told me the story of a woman who refused to take chloroform because she would not risk the life of the babe she was carrying. She had to undergo a painful operation. The only anaesthetic she had was her love for the babe, to save whom no suffering was too great. Let not women, who can count many such heroines among them, ever despise their sex or deplore that they were not born men. The contemplation of that heroine often makes me envy woman the status that is hers, if she only knew. There is as much reason for man to wish that he was born a woman as for woman to do otherwise. But the wish is fruitless. Let us be happy in the state to

which we are born and do the duty for which nature has destined us.

Sevagram, 12-2-'40
Harijan, 24-2-1940

10

WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

Q. You say, "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." But what about the millions of female labourers in fields, factories, etc? They are forced to forsake the hearth and become 'bread-winners'. Would you abolish the industrial system and revert to the stone age? Would that not be a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end? What is the new order that you envisage where the sin of making women work will be absent?

A. If millions of women are forced to forsake their hearth and become bread-winners, it is wrong, but not so wrong as shouldering the rifle. There is nothing inherently barbarous in labour. I see no barbarity in women voluntarily working on their fields whilst they are looking after their homes. 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.

Sevagram, 12-3-'40
Harijan, 16-3-1940

11

WRONG APOTHEOSIS OF WOMEN

Gandhiji next dwelt on a topic on which he had spoken in the Subjects Committee, but could not have any resolution thereon as he did not find the proper atmosphere. The occasion was a letter addressed to him by the ladies in charge of a women's movement called the Jyoti Sangh. The letter enclosed copy of a resolution they had passed condemning the present-day tendencies in literature regarding the presentation of women. There was, Gandhiji felt, considerable force in the complaint, and he said: "The gravamen of their charge is that the present-day writers give an entirely false picture of women. They are exasperated at the sickly sentimentality with which you delineate them, at the vulgar way in which you dwell on their physical form. Does all their beauty and their strength lie in their physical form, in their capacity to please the lustful eye of men? Why, the writers of the letter justly ask, should we be eternally represented as meek, submissive women for whom all the menial jobs of the household are reserved, and whose only deities are their husbands? Why are they not delineated as they really are? We are, they say, neither etherial damsels, nor dolls, nor bundles of passions and nerves. We are as much human beings as men are, and we are filled with the same urge for freedom. I claim to know them and their minds sufficiently well. There was a time in South Africa when I was surrounded by numerous women; all their men-folk having gone to jails. There were some sixty inmates, and I had become the brother and father of all the girls and women. Let me tell you that they grew in strength and spirit under me, so much so that they ultimately marched to jails themselves.

"I am told that our literature is full of even an exaggerated apotheosis of women. Let me say that it is an altogether wrong apotheosis. Let me place one simple test before you. In what light do you think of them when you proceed to write about them? I suggest that before

you put your pens to paper, think of woman as your own mother, and I assure you the chastest literature will flow from your pens even like the beautiful rain from heaven which waters the thirsty earth below. Remember that a woman was your mother before a woman became your wife. Far from quenching their spiritual thirst some writers stimulate their passions, so much so that poor ignorant women waste their time wondering how they might answer to the description our fiction gives of them. Are detailed descriptions of their physical form an essential part of literature, I wonder? Do you find anything of the kind in the Upanishads, the Quran or the Bible? And yet do you know that the English language would be empty without the Bible? Three parts Bible and one part Shakespeare is the description of it. Arabic would be forgotten without the Quran. And think of Hindi without Tulsidas! Do you find in it anything like what you find in present-day literature about women?"

M. D.

Harijan, 21-11-1936

12

AGE OF CONSENT

Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajadasa has issued a circular letter upon a Bill before the Legislative Assembly, whose object is to raise the age of consent at least to 14. She has favoured me with a copy of the circular letter which I reproduce below:

"I am writing to ask you if you can use your influence to obtain support for the Children's Protection Act that is coming up in the Legislative Assembly during the next session. I think very strongly that, if India is to be a great nation, honoured and respected among the nations of the world, the blot of child motherhood must be removed from her.

"Last time the Bill came up, it received a very great deal of support in the country and in the Assembly, and I think that during the next session there will not be much difficulty

in passing it, if only we get a certain amount of expression of public opinion from the people. To my certain knowledge, there are quite a large number of meetings being held all over the country, especially by women, supporting this Bill, and I am sure that it is in line with the wishes of the majority of women that the age for the consummation of marriage for little girls should be raised to at least 14.

"I am sure that it would be a considerable help to the passage of the Bill, if you could express your opinion strongly in support of it, and also urge on men and women the importance of both supporting the Bill and living up to its principles in daily practice."

I must confess that I am ignorant of the Bill, but I am strongly in favour of raising the age of consent not merely to 14, but even to 16. Whilst, therefore, I can say nothing about the text of the Bill, I should heartily endorse any movement whose object is to save innocent girls of tender age from man's lust. A so-called marriage rite ought no longer confer legality upon an immoral and inhuman act, which consummation even at the age of 14, in my humble opinion, undoubtedly is. Sanskrit texts of doubtful authority cannot be invoked to sanctify a practice which is in itself immoral. I have witnessed the ruin of the health of many a child mother, and when to the horrors of an early marriage is added enforced early widowhood, human tragedy becomes complete. Any sensible legislation in the direction of raising the age of consent will certainly have my approval. But I am painfully conscious of the fact that even the existing legislation has proved abortive for want of public opinion to support it. The task before the reformer in this as in many other directions is most difficult. Constant and continuous agitation is necessary, if any real impression is to be made on the Hindu public. I wish every success to those who are engaged in the noble task of rescuing Indian girls from premature old age and early death, and Hinduism from being responsible for bringing into being rickety weaklings.

Young India, 27-8-1925

13

CURSE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins has sent me notes of a tragic case that appears to have just occurred in Madras and has arisen out of a child marriage, the girl being 13 years and the 'husband' 26. Hardly had the pair lived together for 13 days when the girl died of burning. The jury have found that she committed suicide owing to the unbearable and inhuman solicitations of the so-called husband. The dying deposition of the girl would go to show that the 'husband' had set fire to her clothes. Passion knows no prudence, no pity.

But how the girl died is beside the point. The indisputable facts are :

1. that the girl was married when she was only 13;
2. that she had no sexual desire inasmuch as she resisted the advances of the 'husband';
3. that the 'husband' did make cruel advances;
4. and that she is now no more.

It is irreligion, not religion, to give religious sanction to a brutal custom. The *Smritis* bristle with contradictions. The only reasonable deduction to be drawn from the contradictions is that the texts that may be contrary to known and accepted morality, more especially to the moral precepts enjoined in the *Smritis* themselves, must be 'rejected as interpolations. Inspiring verses on self-restraint could not be written at the same time and by the same pen that wrote the verses encouraging the brute in the man. Only a man innocent of self-restraint and steeped in vice could call it a sin not to marry a girl before she reached the age of monthly periods. It should be held sinful to marry a girl for several years after the periods begin. There cannot be even the thought of marriage before the periods begin. A girl is no more fit to bear children on beginning the periods than a lad is to procreate as soon as he grows the first hair on his upper lip.

This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs we recede from God as well as Swaraj. A man who has no thought of the tender age of a girl has none of God. And undergrown men have no capacity for fighting battles of freedom or, having gained it, of retaining it. Fight for Swaraj means not mere political awakening but an all-round awakening—social, educational, moral, economic and political.

Legislation is being promoted to raise the age of consent. It may be good for bringing a minority to book. But it is not legislation that will cure a popular evil; it is enlightened public opinion that can do it. I am not opposed to legislation in such matters, but I do lay greater stress on cultivation of public opinion. The Madras case would have been impossible, if there had been a living public opinion against child marriages. The young man in question is not an illiterate labourer but an intelligent educated typist. It would have been impossible for him to marry or touch the girl, if public opinion had been against the marriage or the consummation of the marriage of girls of tender age. Ordinarily a girl under 18 years should never be given in marriage.

Young India, 26-8-1926

14

DEFENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

'A Reader of *Young India*' writes:

"I am very much pained to read the following sentence in your article on 'Curse of Child Marriage' published in *Young India* of the 26th August, 1926: 'Only a man innocent of self-restraint and steeped in vice could call it a sin not to marry a girl before she reached the age of monthly periods.'

"I fail to understand why you could not take a charitable view of those whose opinion differs from you. One can certainly say that the Hindu law-giver was entirely wrong in prescribing child marriage. But I think it improper to say that those who insist on child marriage are 'steeped in vice'. It seems to go beyond the limits of politeness in controversy. In fact this is the first time that I heard such an argument against child marriage. Neither the Hindu social reformers nor the Christian missionaries ever said so, so far as I am aware. Imagine, therefore, the shock which I received when I found this argument in a writing of Mahatma Gandhi whom I believed to be perfection itself, so far at least as charity towards opponents was concerned.

"You have condemned not one or two but probably every one of the Hindu law-givers. For, so far as I know, every *Smritikara* enjoins early marriage of girls. It is impossible to hold, as you have suggested, that passages enjoining early marriage are interpolations. The practice of early marriage is not confined to any province or class of society, but is practically a universal custom in India. It is also a very old practice dating from the time of the *Ramayana*.

"I shall try to give briefly what I consider might have been the reasons why the Hindu law-givers insisted upon early marriage of girls. They considered it very desirable that every girl should have a husband

as a rule. This is necessary no less for the peace of mind and happiness of the girls themselves than for the welfare of the society in general. If every girl has to be provided with a husband, the choice of husband should be made by the parents of the girl and not by the girls themselves. If the choice is left to the girls themselves, it will result in many girls not being married at all, not because they do not like marriage, but because it is very difficult for all girls to find out suitable husbands. It is also dangerous, for it might lead to flirtation and might cause looseness of morals. Youths who appear to be good might ruin the virtue of simple girls. Again, if the choice is to be made by the parents, the girls must be married young. When they are grown up, they may fall in love and may not like to marry the bridegroom selected by the parents. When a girl is married young, she becomes one with her husband and his family. The union is more natural and more perfect. It is sometimes difficult for grown-up girls with fixed ideas and habits to adapt themselves in a new home.

"The chief objection to early marriage is that it weakens the health of the girl and her children. But this objection is not very convincing for the following reasons: The age of marriage is now rising among the Hindus, but the race is becoming weaker. Fifty or a hundred years ago the men and women were generally stronger, healthier and more long-lived than now. But early marriage was then more in vogue. The physique of educated girls who are married late is not generally better than that of the girls who receive less education and are married early. From these facts it appears probable that early marriage does not cause as much physical deterioration as some people believe.

"You have good knowledge of both European society and Indian society. You will be able to say whether on the whole Indian wives are more devoted to their husbands than European wives; whether among the poor people the Indian husbands treat their wives more kindly than European husbands; whether there are fewer

cases of unhappy marriages among Indians than among Europeans; whether sexual morality is higher in Indian society than in European society. If in these respects the Indian marriages are more successful than European marriages, then early marriage, which is an essential feature of Indian marriages, should not be condemned.

"I cannot believe that the Hindu law-givers were actuated by any cosideration except the true welfare of society in general (including both the men and women) in laying down the injunction of early marriage of girls. I believe that early marriage of girls is one of the features of Hindu society which have maintained its purity and prevented its disruption in spite of very hostile environments. You may not believe all this. But may we not expect that you should discard your idea that all the great Hindu law-givers who insisted on early marriage of girls were innocent of self-restraint and were 'steeped in vice'?

"The Madras case reported by you seems to be very peculiar. The jury held that the girl committed suicide. But the girl said that her husband set fire to her clothes. In these conflicting circumstances, it is very difficult to hold that the facts which you consider to be indisputable are really so. There have been millions of cases of girl wives below 13. Not one case of suicide due to cruel advances of the husband has been heard before. Probably there were peculiar features in the Madras case and early marriage was not the principal cause of the death."

Well does the Poet say: "It costs very little to fashion a suitable philosophy in order to mitigate the rudeness of facts that secretly hurt ones' conscience." This 'reader of *Young India*' has gone a step further. He has not only fashioned a suitable philosophy but ignored facts and erected his argument on unsupported statements.

The charge of want of charity I must pass by, if only because I have not accused the law-givers but I have ventured to impute vice to those who could insist on marriage

at an age too tender for bearing the burden of motherhood. Want of charity comes into being only when you accuse a live person, not an imaginary being, and that too without cause, of impure motives. But is there any warrant for the writer saying that the original authors of the several *Smritis* who preached self-restraint wrote the verses enjoining marriage of little girls ? Is it not more charitable to assume that the *rishis* could not be guilty of impurity or gross ignorance of cardinal facts concerning the growth of the human body ?

But even if the text ordering child, as opposed to early (for early marriage means marriage well before 25), marriage be found to be authoritative, we must reject them in the light of positive experience and scientific knowledge. I question the accuracy of the statement that child marriage is universal in Hindu society. I should be sorry to find that 'millions of girls' are married, i. e. live as wives, whilst they are yet children. The Hindus would have died as a race long ago, if 'millions of girls' had their marriages consummated at, say, the age of eleven.

Nor does it follow that, if the parents are to continue to make the choice of husbands for their daughters, the marriage must be contracted and consummated early. It is still less true to maintain that, if girls have to make their choice, there must be courtship and flirtation. After all courtship is not universal in Europe and thousands of Hindu girls are married after fifteen and yet have their husbands selected by their parents. Mussalman parents invariably select husbands for their grown-up daughters. Whether the choice is to be made by girls or their parents is a separate question and is regulated by custom.

The correspondent has tendered no proof to support the statement that children of grown-up wives are weaker than those of child wives. In spite of my experience of both Indian and European society, I must refuse to enter into a comparison of their morals. Granting, however, for the sake of argument that the morals of European society are lower than those of Hindu society, will it naturally follow that

the lowness is due to the marriages taking place after full maturity ?

Lastly, the Madras case does not help the correspondent, but his use of it betrays his hasty judgment, based upon a total disregard of facts. If he will refer to the article again, he will discover that I have drawn my conclusion from proved facts. My conclusion is unaffected by the cause of death. It was proved (1) that the girl was of tender age, (2) that she had no sexual desire, (3) that the 'husband' made cruel advances and (4) that she is no more. It was bad enough if the girl committed suicide; it was worse if the husband murdered her because she could not yield to his inhuman lust. The girl was fit only to learn and play, not to play the wife and carry on her tiny shoulders the weight of household cares or the yoke of a lord and master.

My correspondent is a man occupying high position in society. The nation expects better things from those of her sons and daughters who have received a liberal education and who are expected to think and act in her behalf. We have many abuses in our midst, moral, social, economic and political. They require patient study, diligent research, delicate handling, accuracy of statement and clear thinking on them and sober impartial judgment. We may then, differ, if necessary, as poles asunder. But we shall surely harm the country, our respective religions and the national cause, if we do not toil to discover the truth and adhere to it, cost what it may.

Young India, 9-9-1926

15

SORROWS OF GIRL WIVES

'A Hindu lady from Bengal' writes:

"I don't know how to thank you for your speaking on behalf of the poor girl wives of our Hindu society. The Madras case is not a singular one. One year ago a similar incident took place in Calcutta. The girl was only 10 years old. After living two nights with her husband she refused to go to him at all. One day, however, she was sent by her mother to give some *pan* to the man. Perhaps the poor girl thought that she could return as soon as she had handed it over to the husband. But the man shut the door and she could not get out of the room. After a while a pitiable groaning was heard. The girl's mother ran up to the room. When the door was opened the girl was found dead — so severely was she struck on the head by the 'husband'.

"The man was tried in the court and was sentenced to death.

"Who knows how many unreported cases of that type take place in our society? I personally know such cases in which the girl wives, until they were grown up, tried to be away from their husbands.

"But who will speak on behalf of them? Our women always bear their burden of sorrow in silence, with meekness. They have no power left in them to fight against any evil whatsoever. And our men, with their unlimited power, always think of their own comfort and never think of the poor women.

"A Brahmin lady of my acquaintance was married at 10. She would not go to her husband. So the husband married another — a grown-up one. The poor lady — now in the prime of youth — stays at her father's house.

"I hear from a lady that in the villages, amongst the lower classes, the husbands often beat their girl wives because they try to be away from them and cannot be easily pushed into the husband's room at night.

"Where the sufferers have no voice and opportunity to speak for themselves it is very easy to defend the monstrous customs."

Whether the picture drawn here is true to life or overdrawn, the substance is surely true. I do not need to search for evidence in support. I know a medical man enjoying a large practice having married and taken to himself, an elderly widower, a girl who was young enough to be his daughter. They were living together as 'husband and wife'. Another, a sixty year old educationist, a widower, married a girl of nine years. Though everybody knew of the scandal and recognized it as such, he remained an Inspector outwardly, respected both by the Government and the public. It is possible for me to recall more such instances from my memory and that of friends.

The fair correspondent is correct in saying that 'there is no power of resistance left' in the women of India 'to fight against any evil whatsoever'. No doubt man is primarily responsible for this state of things. But may women always throw the blame on men and salve their consciences? Do the enlightened among them not owe it to their sex, as also to men whose mothers they are, to take up the burden of reform? What is all the education worth that they are receiving, if on marriage they are to become mere dolls for their husbands and prematurely engaged in the task of rearing would-be manikins? They may fight, if they like, for votes for women. It costs neither time nor trouble. It provides them with innocent recreation. But where are the brave women who would work among the girl wives and girl widows and who would take no rest and leave none for men, till girl marriages become an impossibility and till every girl feels in herself strength enough to refuse to be married except when she is of full age and to the person about whom she is given the final choice?

Young India, 7-10-1926

AWFULNESS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

The Anti-Child-Marriage Committee has published a useful and instructive bulletin on child marriage. I copy the main paragraphs below :

" The Census Report for India of 1931 gave the following figures of the number of girls who are married under the age of 15 by age groups :

Age group	Percentage married
0 to 1	·8
1 „ 2	1·2
2 „ 3	2·0
3 „ 4	4·2
4 „ 5	6·6
5 „ 10	19·3
10 „ 15	38·1

" Thus nearly one girl in 100 girls of less than one year of age is married and the same horrible fact is repeated in all the other age groups under 15.

" One consequence of this is the almost unbelievable number of child widows in the country. The figures are :

Age group	Actual number of widows
0 to 1	1,515
1 „ 2	1,785
2 „ 3	3,485
3 „ 4	9,076
4 „ 5	15,019
5 „ 10	105,482
10 „ 15	185,339

"The evil of child marriage is often said to be quantitatively small and the custom not universal; but even if the number of child widows revealed in these figures is one-hundredth of the actual figures, no humanitarian public or Government will wait a moment before preventing the source of this misery. In this connection let us

also remember that for most of these children remarriage is impossible.

"Another consequence of child marriage is the number of young mothers who die in child birth. 200,000 deaths is the yearly average for India. This works up to 20 deaths per hour, and a vast number of these deaths occur to girls in their teens. According to Sir John Megaw, 'of every 1,000 young mothers 100 are destined to die in child birth before they cease having babies.' We have no accurate figures for maternal mortality. It is estimated at 24·5 per thousand for India whereas it is only 4·5 for England.

"Lastly, child marriage affects not merely the mother but the child and, therefore, the race. In India, out of every 1,000 children born, 181 die. This is the average; there are places in India where the average goes up to 400 per 1,000. The very backward condition of India in this respect is evident by a comparison of figures for infant mortality in England and Japan which are 60 and 124 per *mille* respectively. The horror is indeed great when we remember that the evil is a preventible one, and that it is the lack of an educated social conscience which has allowed the evil to flourish unchecked.

"The most regrettable fact of all is that in all these respects progress is so slow even if it is existent. For example, in 1921 there were 9,066 wives under the age of 1, in 1931 there were 44,082 — an increase of nearly 5 times while the population increased only by one-tenth. Again, in 1921 there were 759 widows under 1, and in 1931 the corresponding number was 1,515. The successive census figures show the most microscopic improvement. The population is increasing far more rapidly than the progress in measures to check these evils. The call for active steps to educate them is, therefore, most urgent than ever, and the women's movement in India can have no higher or more urgent task than the rousing of the conscience of the public and the Government in this matter."

The figures should cause us all to hang our heads in shame. But that will not remedy the evil. The evil of child marriage is at least as extensive in the villages as in the cities. It is pre-eminently women's work. Men have no doubt to do their share. But when a man turns into a beast, he is not likely to listen to reason. It is the mothers who have to be educated to understand their privilege and duty of refusal. Who can teach them this but women ? I venture to suggest, therefore, that the All India Women's Conference, to be true to its name, has to descend to the villages. The bulletins are valuable. They only reach a few of the English-knowing city-dwellers. What is needed is personal touch with the village women. Even when, if ever, it is established, the task will not be easy. But some day or other the beginning has to be made in that direction before any result can be hoped for. Will the A. I. W. C. make common cause with the A. I. V. I. A ? No village worker, no matter how able he or she is, need expect to approach the villagers purely for the sake of social reform. They will have to touch all spheres of village life. Village work, I must repeat, means real education, not in the three R's but in opening the minds of the villagers to the needs of true life befitting thinking beings which humans are supposed to be.

Harijan, 16-11-1935

17

A YOUNG MAN'S DILEMMA

A Patidar young man writes :

"My parents want me to be married this very year, and insist on my obeying their wishes in this respect. . . . In my community no one can secure a bride without conforming to the condition of *sata*, i. e. without offering a girl of one's family in exchange. Child marriage is the rule. In my case too girls of nine or ten years of age only are available, and that too on the condition that we conform to the condition of *sata*. My father says that even this may not be possible afterwards, if we miss the opportunity this year. If I say 'no', my mother weeps and creates no end of trouble in the family. I am a Patidar young man of 22 years of age. My parents will not hear of my marrying a widow or outside my caste. What am I to do in the circumstances ?"

I know many a young man who is in the same dilemma as this Patidar youth. According to our *shastras*, a boy of 16 years and over should be regarded by his parents as a friend whom they should take in their confidence and not as a child whom they can coerce. But some parents in our country seem to think that even their grown-up children are bound to follow every wish of theirs — especially when it relates to such things as marriage — as if they could have no will of their own in the matter. And if this is the attitude with regard to the sons, the plight of the daughters may well be imagined. It seems to me that in all such contingencies it is not only the right but the religious duty of young men and young girls not to be afraid of the parents' wrath. It has been my experience that when a grown-up boy or girl takes up a just and right position and adheres to it with absolute firmness there is the least amount of difficulty created by the parents. When once they realize that the resolution of their children is absolutely unalterable, they get reconciled to it. For behind the parents' insistence there is always the ultimate hope that it would bring their children to their view-point. But when this hope

is destroyed, further insistence becomes meaningless and is therefore given up. My advice to the young man in question, therefore, is to refuse to be party to the double sin of marrying a child girl and of conforming to the evil practice of *sata*. He must not mind how much domestic trouble he has to face as a result of his refusal. He should consider it a virtue to marry outside his sub-caste or to marry a widow, subject to the necessary limitations.

Young India, *11-4-1929*

18

A STUDENT'S DIFFICULTY

A student asks :

> " What should a matriculate or an undergraduate, who is unfortunately father of two or three children, do in order to procure a living wage, and what should he do when he is forced to marry against his will and before even the age of twentyfive ? "

The simplest answer that occurs to me is that a student who does not know how to support his wife and children or who marries against his will has studied to no purpose. But that is past history for him. The perplexed student deserves a helpful answer. He does not say what is his requirement. If he does not pitch it high because he is a matriculate and will put himself on a level with the ordinary labourer, he should have no difficulty in earning a livelihood. His intelligence should help his hands and feet and enable him to do better than the labourer who has had no opportunity of developing his intelligence. This is not to say that a labourer who has never learnt English is devoid of intelligence. Unfortunately labour has never been helped to develop the mind and those who pass through schools do have their minds opened even though under a handicap not to be found in any other part of the world. Even this mental equipment is counterbalanced by false notions of dignity inculcated during school and college days.

And so students think that they can earn their living only at the desk. The inquirer has, therefore, to realize the dignity of labour and seek the maintenance of himself and his family in that field.

And there is no reason why his wife should not add to the family income by utilizing her spare hours. Similarly, if the children are at all able to do any work, they too should be inspanned for productive work. The utterly false idea that intelligence can be developed only through book-reading should give place to the truth that the quickest development of the mind can be achieved by artisan's work being learnt in a scientific manner. True development of the mind commences immediately the apprentice is taught at every step why a particular manipulation of the hand or a tool is required. The problem of the unemployment of students can be solved without difficulty, if they will rank themselves among the common labourers.

As for marriage against one's will, all I can say is that students should develop sufficient strength of purpose to resist any marriage that is sought to be forced on them. Students should learn the art of standing alone and resisting in every legitimate manner any attempt to force them to do anything against their will, much more so to marry against their will.

Harijan, 9-1-1937

FOR STUDENTS

"With reference to your note entitled 'A Student's Difficulty appearing in the *Harijan* dated January 9th last, I submit the following in all humility for your kind consideration.

"I feel you have not done justice to the student in question. The problem defies easy solution. Your reply to his question is vague and general. You ask students to shake off false notions of dignity and rank themselves among the common labourers. All this general talk does not carry one far and is certainly not worthy of a supremely practical man like you.

"Please consider the problem at greater length and offer a detailed, practical and comprehensive solution with special reference to the following case.

"I am a student of M. A. (Ancient Indian History) in the university of Lucknow. I am about 21 years of age. I have a love for learning and want to do as much of it as possible in my lifetime. I am also inspired by your ideology of life. In about a month's time when the final M. A. Examinations come off I will have done with my education and will have to enter life as they say.

"Besides a wife, I have 4 brothers (all younger, one of them married), 2 sisters (both below twelve years of age) and my parents to support. There is no capital to fall back upon. The landed property is very small.

"What should I do for the education of the sisters and brothers? Then the sisters will have to be married sooner rather than later. Above all, where are the food and clothing to come from?

"I am not a lover of the so-called standard of living. I want just a healthy condition of life, besides provision for emergencies, for myself and for those who depend on me. It is more or less only a question of two healthy meals and tidy clothes.

"I want to lead an economically honest life. I don't want to earn a living by usury or by selling flesh. I have an ambition for patriotic service also. I am willing to fulfil your conditions laid down in the note referred to above to the best of my ability.

But I do not know what to do! Where and how to begin? My education has been ruinously academic, and theoretical. I sometimes think of spinning, your pet panacea, but then I do not know how to learn it and what to do with the spun yarn, etc.

Yes, under the circumstances in which I am placed will you suggest my adopting contraceptive methods? I may assure you I believe in self-control and *brahmacharya*. But then it will be some time before I become a *brahmachari*. I am afraid, unless I adopt artificial contraceptive methods during the period before the desired consummation of full self-control, I may get children and invite economic ruination thereby. And, moreover, I feel that just now it is not quite proper in the interests of the normally healthy emotional life of my wife to impose on her a life of rigorous self-control. After all, sex has its place in the lives of normal men and women. I am not an exception to it, much less my wife who has not the equipment to read and understand your great writings on *brahmacharya* or dangers of indulgence, etc.

I regret the letter has been a little too lengthy. But then I wanted to avoid brevity at the cost of clarity.

You are at liberty to make what use you like of this letter."

Though this letter was received about the end of February last, I am able to deal with it only now. It raises issues of great importance, each demanding large enough space for two columns of the *Harijan*. But I must be brief.

The very difficulties the student raises, though serious in their setting, are of his own making. The very mention of them must show the falsity of his position and of the educational system in our country. It turns education into a purely commercial product to be converted into money. For me education has a much nobler purpose. Let the student count himself as one among the millions, and he will discover that millions of young men and women of his age cannot fulfil the conditions which he will have his degree to do. Why should he make himself responsible for the maintenance of all the relatives he mentions? Why should the grown-up ones, if of sound body, not labour for

their maintenance? It is wrong to have many drones to one busy bee — though a male.

The remedy lies in his unlearning many things. He must revise his ideas of education. His sisters ought not to repeat the expensive education that he had. They can develop their intelligence through learning some handicraft in a scientific manner. The moment they do so, they have development of the mind side by side with that of the body. And if they will learn to regard themselves as servants of humanity rather than its exploiters, they will have development of the heart, i. e. the soul, as well. And they will become equal earners of bread with their brother.

I might as well discuss here his sisters' marriage to which reference has been made in the letter. I do not know what is meant by marriage taking place 'sooner rather than later'. In no case need it take place before they are 20 years old. It is no use thinking so many years in advance. And if he will revise the whole scheme of life, he will have the sisters to choose their partners, and the ceremony need never cost more than five rupees each, if that. I have been present at several such ceremonies. And the husbands or their elders have been graduates in fair circumstances.

It is pathetic to find the student so helpless as not to know how and where to have spinning lessons. Let him make a diligent search in Lucknow, and he will find that there are young men enough to teach him. But he need not confine himself to spinning though it too is fast becoming a full-time occupation able to give a village-minded man or woman his or her livelihood. I hope I have said here sufficient to enable him to dot the i's and cross the t's.

And now for contraceptives. Even here, the difficulty is imaginary. He is wrong in underrating his wife's intelligence. I have no doubt whatsoever that, if she is the ordinary type of womanhood, she will readily respond to his self-restraint. Let him be true to himself and ask himself whether he has enough of it himself. All the evidence in my possession goes to show that it is man who lacks the power of self-restraint more than woman. But there is no need for belittling his own inability to exercise restraint.

MADURA DT.

He must manfully face the prospect of a large family and discover the best means of supporting them. He must know that, against the millions who are strangers to the use of contraceptives, there are possibly a few thousand who use them. The millions are in no dread of having to breed their children though the latter may not all be wanted. I suggest that it is cowardly to refuse to face the consequences of one's acts. Persons who use contraceptives will never learn the virtue of self-restraint. They will not need it. Self-indulgence with contraceptives may prevent the coming of children, but will sap the vitality of both men and women — perhaps more of men than of women. It is unmanly to refuse battle with the devil. Let my correspondent resolve upon self-restraint as the only sure and honourable method of avoiding unwanted children. What though he and his fail in the effort a hundred times? Joy is in the battle. The result comes by the grace of God.

Harijan, 17–4–1937

20

A YOUNG MAN'S DILEMMA

Q. I am a young man of 22 years. Is it legitimate for me to refuse to oblige my father in the matter of marriage, if I do not wish to marry?

A. According to the *shastras* and also reason, children when they reach the age of discretion, which the former prescribe as 16, become their parents' friends, i. e. are free from parental dictation. They are still bound to consult them and defer to their wishes wherever they can. You are full-grown, and in a matter so vital as marriage you should respectfully refuse to marry, if the match is not to your liking or for any other valid reason.

Harijan, 9–3–1940

IS IT MARRIAGE ?

I give the following from a letter received by me while I was hardly able to attend to any correspondence, that is during the first days of my recent illness. I have omitted the names of parties though the correspondent gives every detail.

> "During this marriage season there has been a heart-breaking marriage ceremony at Sadashivgad, Karwar. The bride is about 12 years and comes from a very poor family from Goa. The bridegroom is 60 years old. His first wife died about three years ago, leaving two children behind her out of eight or nine. The bridegroom is the founder of an English school. Last year he tried to secure a bride of tender age, but owing to the agitation in his community the transaction was abandoned. This year he succeeded by offering rupees two hundred to the parents of the bride. What is to be done in the matter ? Men like—, who are social reformers of the place, do not raise their little finger against this inhuman act."

There seems to me to be no reason to doubt the accuracy of the statement made in the letter from which I have given the foregoing condensation. I wish it were possible to say that this is only a rare instance. Instances of this character occur often enough to call for a drastic remedy. One remedy is undoubtedly to publish every such case and expose it and create a healthy strong public opinion against repetition of such crimes against womanhood. But local agitation, whenever such immoral alliances are impending, is no doubt the most effective. According to this correspondent, the first attempt on the part of this old progenitor of eight children was frustrated because of timely agitation. I wonder why such an agitation did not take place in the present instance. Surely many people in the locality must have known about the attempt to secure possession of a girl of tender age for the old widower. I wonder why agitation was not set on foot immediately to

save the girl from a life of torture and misery. But in my opinion, if local public opinion can be mobilized, it is not too late even now to help the girl wife. I gather from the correspondent's letter that the widower seems to have been a kind of a philanthropist at one time. May he not be persuaded to put the girl away from him at the Seva Sadan or some such institution for education, and then, when she is of full age, be given the choice either of living with him or regarding the marriage bond as a nullity? But whether in the present moribund condition of society such a step is possible or not, there is no reason why young men of undoubted character should not form themselves into bands of mercy pledged by all just and legitimate means to prevent child marriages and to promote wherever possible remarriage of child widows. The two things appear to me to go hand in hand. These bands of mercy, to be able to do effective work, must localize their activity. They will find that in the course of a few years they would become an irresistible force. The majority of our towns have after all a very small population each, and it is not impossible to know when immoral bargains such as the correspondent has drawn attention to are contemplated or to know the child widows of their respective towns. There is no doubt, however, that a great deal of tact and exemplary self-restraint will have to be exercised by these bands of mercy. The slightest impatience or violence on their part will cause revulsion against them and frustrate the very object they have in view.

Young India, 1-9-1927

A DOUBLE SIN

A correspondent, who sends his name for my information but adopts the pseudonym of 'A Bachelor', writes, with reference to my article *Is It Marriage?* published some time ago, a long letter which I abridge as follows:

"I have read with interest the article in your paper of the 1st inst. under the heading *Is It Marriage?* Though the names of the parties are omitted, it is an open secret to the Gaud Sarasvat Brahmins from Karwar. As a member of the community in which the marriage in question took place I wish to place before the public and the Gaud Sarasvat Brahmins throughout India in particular the following few lines for their careful consideration.

"It is no doubt a disgrace for a man to buy a girl. But there is another custom among us which is equally bad, for a father among us is obliged to buy a husband for his daughter and the amount received by the husband is called dowry. It is not settled to suit the purse of the parents of girls, but it would be according to the hereditary income of the would-be husband, or it sometimes depends upon the education he has received. The more a man is educated, the higher the degrees he has received, the more is the worth in the matrimonial market.

"A few months back the marriage took place in Bombay of a well-educated gentleman who is a high Government official, and it is said that a dowry of nearly Rs. 20,000 was presented to him. It is really a pity that the people who receive higher education are going lower and lower by resorting to the very practices they are expected to put down."

I have before me another letter on the subject from a member of the same community. It appears that those who wish to buy wives go to Goa in search, for it is there that poor Sarasvat Brahmins are to be found who are not

ashamed to enrich themselves by selling their daughters to persons old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers. Thus the community commits a double sin. An educated young man is open to the highest bidder for his hand, and needy parents are open to negotiate the sale of their daughters, hardly out of their teens, to the oldest men (sometimes educated) who are prepared to pay the highest price. The only consolation that Sarasvat community may derive, if it wishes to, and if it would postpone a dealing with the reform under some excuse or other, is that there are other castes too that are not free from the same evil. The difference, if any, would be that of degree. But if the Sarasvat community would lead the reform, it will disdain to seek the doubtful refuge of the *tu quoque* and will, now that the evil bas been exposed, set about ridding itself of the double sin.

Young India, 6-10-1927

23

THE RUNNING SORE

A Maheshvari young man from Sholapur, referring to the question of marriages of child girls with old men, writes:

"Domestic life in our Maheshvari community has really fallen upon evil times. Hundreds of decrepit old men in our community every year secure child girls by a lavish expenditure of money to satisfy their lust. As a result our community is fast becoming a sink of depravity and corruption. Child marriages and ill-matched unions have become the order of the day. It is vain to expect such a community, in which domestic life has fallen into such corruption and decay, to produce sons worthy of the country. Unless something is done in time, its future is dark indeed.

"An agitation to cope with this evil has been set on foot by about a dozen young men of this place who have formed themselves into a society for the prevention of child marriages and ill-matched unions. We propose to offer *satyagraha* on the

occasion of every ceremony in connection with such undesirable marriages, and feel sure that such action will not fail to prove effective. You know the various rites and ceremonies in connection with Maheshvari marriages. Will you please advise as to the best way peaceful *satyagraha* can be offered in this behalf ?

" What, in your opinion, should be considered to be the proper age limit for the bride and the bridegroom respectively for marriage ? And in what circumstances would you recommend the offering of *satyagraha* for the prevention of unequal marriges ?

" Only the other day two old men of fiftyfive and sixty years of age respectively married girls of twelve years of age. Several other equally shocking marriages are going shortly to take place in this very village. We have already started an agitation by distributing printed leaflets to prevent these marriages from taking place. But we feel that what is needed is strong direct action, not merely empty propaganda. Would you kindly let us have your opinion on all these points ?"

There is no doubt that *satyagraha* is the right thing in such cases. But how to offer it is another question. I have more than once dilated, in my writings, on the limits of *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* presupposes self-discipline, self-control, self-purification, and a recognized social status in the person offering it. A *satyagrahi* must never forget the distinction between evil and the evil-doer. He must not harbour ill-will or bitterness against the latter. He may not even employ needlessly offensive language against the evil person, however unrelieved his evil might be. For it should be an article of faith with every *satyagrahi* that there is none so fallen in this world but can be converted by love. A *satyagrahi* will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, *himsa* by *ahimsa*. There is no other way of purging the world of evil. Therefore a person who claims to be a *satyagrahi* always tries, by close and prayerful self-introspection and self-analysis, to find out whether he is himself completely free from the taint of anger, ill-will and such other human infirmities, whether he is not himself capable of those very evils against which he is out to lead a crusade. In self-purification

and penance lies half the victory of a *satyagrahi*. A *satyagrahi* has faith that the silent and undemonstrative action of truth and love produces far more permanent and abiding results than speeches or such other showy performances.

But although *satyagraha* can operate silently, it requires a certain amount of action on the part of a *satyagrahi*. A *satyagrahi*, for instance, must first mobilize public opinion against the evil which he is out to eradicate, by means of a wide and intensive agitation. When public opinion is sufficiently roused against a social abuse, even the tallest will not dare to practise or openly to lend support to it. An awakened and intelligent public opinion is the most potent weapon of a *satyagrahi*. When a person supports a social evil in total disregard of a unanimous public opinion, it indicates a clear justification for his social ostracism. But the object of social ostracism should never be to do injury to the person against whom it is directed. Social ostracism means complete non-cooperation on the part of society with the offending individual, nothing more, nothing less, the idea being that a person who deliberately sets himself to flout society has no right to be served by society. For all practical purposes this should be enough. Of course, special action may be indicated in special cases, and the practice may have to be varied to suit the peculiar features of each individual case.

But what about the sensual old man who even in his decrepitude cannot help his sensuality ? Sensuality is blind; it cannot discriminate, it seeks satisfaction anyhow and at any cost. How should society deal with such a man ? The reply is, by refusing to provide him with hapless victims. The rule about not giving in marriage any girl below twenty and against her will should be rigorously enforced. The question as to what the old man should do, if no girl should be willing to marry him of her own accord, naturally arises. Society has no answer to such a question; it is not bound to furnish any. It is concerned only with saving hapless girls from falling victims to blind lust. It is no part of its duty to provide means for the satisfaction of

the latter. In practice, however, it will be seen that when purity pervades the social atmosphere it will serve largely to quell the lust of the lustful.

Young India, 8-8-1929

24

A SHAME UPON YOUNG MEN

A correspondent sends me a newspaper cutting showing that recently in Hyderabad, Sindh, the demand for bride-grooms has been increasing at an alarming rate, an employee of the Imperial Telegraph Engineering service having exacted Rs. 20,000 as cash dowry during betrothal, and promises of heavy payments on the wedding day and on special occasions thereafter. 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. Good as the work of these bodies is at times in helping public movements, it should be remembered that the youth of the country have their reward in the public appreciation they get. Such work, if it is not backed by internal reform, is likely to demoralize the youth by creating in them a sense of unwarranted self-satisfaction. 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

25

MARRIAGE BY PURCHASE

Some months ago *The Statesman* opened its columns to a discussion of the dowry system prevalent among many castes almost all over India, and dealt with it editorially. I used to write on the cruel custom often enough in the columns of the *Young India.* The cuttings from *The Statesman* revives the cruel memories of what I used to know then. My remarks were aimed at *deti leti* as the custom is known in Sindh. Enough educated Sindhis were found who exacted large sums of money from parents who were anxious to see their daughters well married. *The Statesman* has carried on a crusade against the custom in general. There is no doubt that the custom is heartless. But so far as I am aware it does not touch the millions. The custom is confined to the middle class who are but a drop in the ocean of Indian humanity. Whenever we talk of evil customs, we usually think of the middle class. The millions living in the villages have their customs and woes of which we have as yet but little knowledge.

This, however, does not mean that one may ignore the dowry evil because it is confined to a comparatively small number of the people of this country. The system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by 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. Then the age for marrying has also to be raised and the girls have to dare to remain spinsters, if need be, i. e. if they do not get a suitable match. All this means education of a character that will revolutionize the mentality of the youth of the nation. Unfortunately the system of education has no connection with our surroundings which, therefore, remain practically untouched by the education received by a microscopic

minority of the boys and girls of the nation. Whilst, therefore, whatever can be done to abate the evil must be done, it is clear to me that this evil and many others which can be named can only be tackled, if there is education which responds to the rapidly changing conditions of the country. How is it that so many boys and girls who have even passed through colleges are found unable or unwilling to resist the manifestly evil custom which affects their future so intimately as marriage does? Why should educated girls be found to commit suicide because they are not suited? Of what value is their education, if it does not enable them to dare to defy a custom which is wholly indefensible and repugnant to one's moral sense? The answer is clear. There is something radically wrong in the system of education that fails to arm girls and boys to fight against social or other evils. That education alone is of value which draws out the faculties of a student so as to enable him or her to solve correctly the problems of life in every department.

Harijan, 23-5-1936

26

AVOIDABLE MISERY

From a correspondent's long letter of wail I take the following:

"I am a schoolmaster (aged 67) with lifelong service (46 years) in the educational line, born of a poor but highly respectable Kayastha family in Bengal which knew better days but is now reduced to poverty. I am blessed (?)* with 7 daughters and 2 sons: the eldest son aged 20 died in October last leaving behind him his miserable and helpless parents to mourn his loss! He was a promising youth — the only hope of my life. Of my 7 daughters 5 have already been given in marriage. My sixth and seventh daughters (aged 18 and 16) are yet unmarried. My younger son is a minor aged 11 years. My pay is Rs. 60. It hardly allows me to make the two ends meet. I have no savings. I have less than nothing, being in debt.

*The interrogation is by the correspondent.

The match of my sixth daughter has been settled. The cost of the marriage will be not less than Rs. 900 in ornaments and dowry (Rs. 300). I have a life policy in the Sun Life Assurance of Canada for Rs. 2,000. The policy was issued in 1914. The company has agreed to give me a loan of Rs. 400 only. It is only half the amount required. I am absolutely helpless in respect of the other half. Could you not help this poor father with the other half ?"

This letter is one out of many such. The majority of letters are written in Hindustani. But we know that English education has made things no better for parents of daughters. In some cases they have become worse in that the market price of possible young men who would suit an English educated daughter of an English educated father suffers an appreciable increase.

In a case like the Bengali father's the best help that can be rendered is not a loan or a gift of the required sum, but it should consist in persuading and strengthening the parent to refuse to purchase a match for his daughter but choose or let the daughter choose one who would marry her for love, not for money. This means a voluntary extension of the field of choice. There must be a breach in the double wall of caste and province. If India is one and indivisible, surely there should be no artificial divisions creating innumerable little groups which would neither interdine nor inter-marry. 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. And after all what hardships can the school-master suffer, if he and his daughters refuse to treat marriage as a marketable transaction instead of a status or a sacrament which it undoubtedly is ? I would, therefore, advise my correspondent courageously to give up the idea of borrowing or begging, and to save the four hundred rupees he can get on his life policy by choosing in consultation with his daughter a suitable husband, no matter to what caste or province he belongs.

Harijan, 25-7-1936

WHAT A GIRL NEEDS

A fair correspondent writes :

"Your article *Avoidable Misery* seems to me to be incomplete. Why should parents insist on marrying their daughters and for that reason undergo nameless difficulties ? If parents were to educate their daughters as they educate their sons, so as to enable them to earn an independent living, they won't have to worry themselves over the selection of husbands for their daughters. My own experience is that when girls have had the opportunity of developing their minds fairly and are able to support themselves in a dignified manner, they have no difficulty, when they are desirous of marrying, in being suitably matched. I must not be understood to be advocating what is called higher education for our girls. I know it is not possible for thousands of girls. What I plead for is a training of girls in useful knowledge and some calling that would make them fully confident about their ability to face the world and not feel dependent upon parents or their future husbands. Indeed, I know some girls who, having been deserted by their husbands, are today living a dignified life with their husbands, because during the period of their desertion they had the good fortune to become self-dependent and to receive a general training. I wish you could emphasize this aspect of the question in considering the difficulties of parents having on their hands daughters of marriageable age ! !"

I heartily endorse the sentiments expressed by my correspondent. Only I had to deal with the case of a parent who had made himself miserable not because he had an incompetent daughter but because he and perhaps even his daughter wanted to restrict themselves, in the choice of a husband, to their own little caste. The 'accomplishment' of the girl was itself a hindrance in this case. If the girl was illiterate, she could have accommodated herself to any young man. But being an accomplished girl, naturally she would need an equally 'accomplished' husband. It is our misfortune that the sordidness of exacting a price for marrying a girl is not regarded as a decided disqualification. An

altogether artificial value is put upon English collegiate education. It covers a multitude of sins. If the definition of 'accomplishment' was more sensible than it has become among the classes whose educated young men exact a price for accepting marriage proposals on behalf of girls, the difficulty of selecting suitable matches for girls would be much lessened, if not entirely removed. Whilst therefore, I commend the proposal of my fair correspondent to the attention of parents, I must insist on the necessity of breaking down the highly injurious caste barriers. Breaking down the barriers will widen the range of choice and thus in a great measure prevent exactions.

Harijan, 5-9-1936

28

SIMPLIFYING MARRIAGE

A correspondent sends me an account of a marriage ceremony performed in Karachi. At the time of the marriage of a girl 16 years old, the daughter of a monied man, Sheth Lalchand, the father is reported to have curtailed the expenditure to a minimum and given the marriage ceremonial a religious and dignified form. The report before me shows that the whole ceremony did not take more than two hours, whereas generally it involves a wasteful expenditure spread over many days. The religious ceremony was performed by a learned *brahman* who explained to the bride and the bridegroom the meaning of what they were called upon to recite. I congratulate Sheth Lalchand and his wife who actively supported her husband upon initiating this belated reform, and hope that it will be copied largely by other monied men. Khadi lovers will be glad to know that Sheth Lalchand and his wife are thorough believers in khadi, and that both the bride and the bridegroom were clothed in khadi and are themselves convinced khadi wearers. This marriage ceremony calls to my mind the scene I witnessed at the Agra student's meeting. They confirmed the information

that was given to me by a friend, that in the United Provinces young men studying in the colleges and schools were themselves eager to be married early, and expected their parents to go in for a lavish expenditure involving costly gifts, and equally costly and sometimes even more costly entertainments. My informant told me that even highly educated parents were not free from the pride of possession, and that so far as expenses went they beat the comparatively uneducated wealthy merchants. To all such the recent example of Sheth Lalchand and the less recent example of Sheth Jamnalal Bajaj should serve as a stimulus in cutting down expenditure. But more than the parents it is the duty of young men firmly to resist premature marriage, more especially marriage during student life, and at all cost to resist all expenditure. Indeed not more than Rs. 10 should be required for the performance of the religious ceremonial, and nothing beyond the ceremonial should be considered a necessary part of marriage rites. In this age of democracy, when the distinction between the rich and the poor, the high and the low is sought to be abolished, it is for the rich to lead the poor to a contented life by exercising self-restraint in all their enjoyments and indulgences, and let them remember the verse in the Bhagavadgita, "Whatever leaders of society do, the others will follow". The truth of this statement we see daily verified in our experience, and nowhere more vividly than in marriage ceremonies and rites in connection with the dead. Thousands of poor people deprive themselves of necessaries of life, for this purpose and burden themselves with debts carrying ruinous rates of interest. This waste of national resources can be easily stopped, if the educated youths of the country, especially sons of rich parents, will resolutely set their faces against every form of wasteful expenditure on their account.

Young India, 26-9-1929

STUDENTS' SHAME

There is a most pathetic letter from a college girl in the Punjab lying on my file for nearly two months. Want of time was but an excuse for shirking the answer to the girl's question. Somehow or other I was avoiding the task, though I knew the answer. Meanwhile I received another letter from a sister of great experience, and I felt that I could no longer evade the duty of dealing with the college girl's very real difficulty. Her letter is written in chaste Hindustani. I must try to do as much justice as I can to the letter, which gives me a perfect picture of her deep feeling. Here is my rendering of a portion of the letter:

"To girls and grown-up women there come times, in spite of their wish to the contrary, when they have to venture out alone, whether they are going from one place to another in the same city, or from one town to another. And when they are thus found alone, evil-minded people pester them. They use improper or even indecent language whilst they are passing by. And if fear does not check them, they do not hesitate to take further liberty. I should like to know what part non-violence can play on such occasions. The use of violence is of course there. If the girl or the woman has sufficient courage, she will use what resources she has and teach the miscreants a lesson. They can at least kick up a row that would draw the attention of the people around resulting in the miscreants being horsewhipped. But I know that the result of such treatment would be merely to postpone the agony, not a permanent cure. Where you know the people who misbehave, I feel sure that they will listen to reason, to the gesture of love and humility. But what about a fellow cycling by, using foul language on seeing a girl or a woman unaccompnied by a male companion? You have no opportunity of reasoning with him. There is no likelihood of your meeting him again. You may

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> "To girls and grown-up women there come times, in spite of their wish to the contrary, when they have to venture out alone, whether they are going from one place to another in the same city, or from one town to another. And when they are thus found alone, evil-minded people pester them. They use improper or even indecent language whilst they are passing by. And if fear does not check them, they do not hesitate to take further liberty. I should like to know what part non-violence can play on such occasions. The use of violence is of course there. If the girl or the woman has sufficient courage, she will use what resources she has and teach the miscreants a lesson. They can at least kick up a row that would draw the attention of the people around resulting in the miscreants being horsewhipped. But I know that the result of such treatment would be merely to postpone the agony, not a permanent cure. Where you know the people who misbehave, I feel sure that they will listen to reason, to the gesture of love and humility. But what about a fellow cycling by, using foul language on seeing a girl or a woman unaccompnied by a male companion? You have no opportunity of reasoning with him. There is no likelihood of your meeting him again. You may

not even recognize him. You do not know his address. What is a poor girl or a woman to do in such cases ? By way of example I want to give you my own experience of last night (26th October). I was going with a girl companion of mine on a very special errand at about 7-30 p. m. It was impossible to secure a male companion at the time and the errand could not be put off. On the way a Sikh young man passed by on his cycle and continued to murmur something till we were within hearing distance. We knew that it was aimed at us. We felt hurt and uneasy. There was no crowd on the road. Before we had gone a few paces the cyclist returned. We recognized him at once whilst he was still at a respectful distance. He wheeled towards us, heaven knows whether he had intended to get down or merely pass by us. We felt that we were in danger. We had no faith in our physical prowess. I myself am weaker than the average girl. But in my hands I had a big book. Somehow or other courage came to me all of a sudden. I hurled the heavy book at the cycle and roared out, ' Dare you repeat your pranks ? ' He could with difficulty keep his balance, put on speed, and fled from us. Now, if I had not flung the book at his cycle, he might have harassed us by his filthy language to the end of our journey. This was an ordinary, perhaps insignificant, occurrence; but I wish you could come to Lahore and listen to the difficulties of us unfortunate girls. You would surely discover a proper solution. First of all, tell me how, in the circumstances mentioned above, can girls apply the principle of *ahimsa* and save themselves. Secondly, what is the remedy for curing youth of the abominable habit of insulting womenfolk ? You would not suggest that we should wait and suffer till a new generation, taught from childhood to be polite to their womenfolk, comes into being. The Government is either unwilling or unable to deal with this social evil. The big leaders have no time for such questions. Some, when they hear of a girl bravely castigating ill-behaved youth, say, ' Well done. That is the

way all girls should behave.' Sometimes a leader is found eloquently lecturing against such misbehaviour of the students. But no one applies himself continuously to the solution of this serious problem. You will be painfully surprised to know that during *Diwali* and such other holidays newspapers come out with notices warning women from venturing outdoors even to see the illuminations. This one fact should enable you to know to what straits we are reduced in this part of the world! Neither the writers nor the readers of such warnings have any sense of shame that they should have to be issued."

Another Panjabi girl, to whom I gave the letter to read, supports the narrative from her own experiences of her college days, and tells me that what my correspondent has related is the common experience of most of the girls.

The other letter from an experienced woman relates the experiences of her girl friends in Lucknow. They are molested in cinema theatres by boys sitting in the rows behind them using all kinds of language which I can only call indecent. They are stated to resort even to practical jokes, which have been described by my correspondent but which I must not reproduce here.

If the immediate personal relief was all that was needed no doubt the remedy that the girl who describes herself to be physically weak adopted, i. e., of flinging her book at the cyclist, was quite correct. It is an age-long remedy. And I have said in these columns that when a person wants to become violent, physical weakness does not come in the way of its effective use, even against a physically powerful opponent. And we know that in the present age there have been invented so many methods of using physical force that even a little girl with sufficient intelligence can deal death and destruction. The fashion nowadays is growing of training girls to defend themselves in situations such as the one described by my correspondent. But she is wise enough to know that, even though she was able to make effective use for the moment of the book she had in her hand as a weapon of defence, it was no remedy for the

growing evil. In the cases of rude remarks, there need be no perturbation but there should be no indifference. All such cases should be published in the papers. Names of the offenders should be published when they are traced. There should be no false modesty about exposing the evil. There is nothing like public opinion for castigating public misconduct. There is no doubt that, as the correspondent says, there is great public apathy about such matters. But it is not the public alone that are to blame. They must have before them examples of rudeness. Even as stealing cannot be dealt with unless cases of thieving are published and followed up, so also is it impossible to deal with cases of rude behaviour if they are suppressed. Crime and vice generally require darkness for prowling. They disappear when light plays upon them.

But I have a fear that the modern girl loves to be Juliet to half a dozen Romeos. She loves adventure. My correspondent seems to represent the unusual type. 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. I have often remarked in these columns that definite rules govern the development of the non-violent spirit in us. It is a strenuous effort. It marks a revolution in the way of thinking and living. If my correspondent and the girls of her way of thinking will revolutionize their life in the prescribed manner, they will soon find that young men, who at all come in contact with them, will learn to respect them and to put on their best behaviour in their presence. But if perchance they find, as they may, that their very chastity is in danger of being violated, they must develop courage enough to die rather than yield to the brute in man. It has been suggested that a girl who is gagged or bound so as to make her powerless even for struggling cannot die as easily as I seem to think. I venture to assert that a girl who has the will to resist can burst all the bonds that may have been used to render her powerless. The resolute will gives her the strength to die.

But this heroism is possible only for those who have trained themselves for it. Those who have not the living faith in non-violence will learn the art of ordinary self-defence and protect themselves from indecent behaviour of unchivalrous youth.

The great question, however, is why should young men be devoid of elementary good manners so as to make decent girls be in perpetual fear of molestation from them? I should be sorry to discover that the majority of young men have lost all sense of chivalry. But they should, as a class, be jealous of their reputation and deal with every case of impropriety occurring among their mates. They must learn to hold the honour of every woman as dear as that of their own sisters and mothers. All the education they receive will be in vain, if they do not learn good manners.

And is it not as much the concern of professors and schoolmasters to ensure gentlemanliness among their pupils as to prepare them for the subjects prescribed for the classroom?

Sevagram, 26-12-38
Harijan, *31-12*-1938

30

THE MODERN GIRL

I have received a letter written on behalf of eleven girls whose names and addresses have been sent to me. I give it below with changes that make it more readable without in any way altering the meaning:

> "Your comments on the letter of a lady student captioned *Students' Shame* published in the *Harijan* of the 31st December, 1938 deserve special attention. The modern girl, it seems, has provoked you to the extent that you have disposed of her finally as one playing Juliet to half a dozen Romeos. This remark which betrays your idea about women in general is not very inspiring.
>
> "In these days when women are coming out of closed doors to help men and take an equal share of the

burden of life, it is indeed strange that they are still blamed even when they are maltreated by men. It cannot be denied that instances can be cited where the fault is equally divided. There may be a few girls playing Juliets to half a dozen Romeos. But such cases presuppose the existence of half a dozen Romeos, moving about the streets in quest of a Juliet. And it cannot or should never be taken that modern girls are categorically all Juliets or modern youths all Romeos. You yourself have come in contact with quite a number of modern girls and may have been struck by their resolution, sacrifice and other sterling womanly virtues.

"As for forming public opinion against such misdemeanours as pointed out by your correspondent, it is not for girls to do it, not so much out of false shame as from its ineffectiveness.

"But a statement like this from one revered all over the world seems to hold a brief once more for that worn out and unbecoming saying 'woman is the gate of hell.'

"From the foregoing remarks, however, please do not conclude that modern girls have no respect for you. They hold you in as much respect as every young man does. To be hated or pitied is what they resent much. They are ready to mend their ways, if they are really guilty. Their guilt, if any, must be conclusively proved before they are anathematized. In this respect they would neither desire to take shelter under the covering of 'ladies, please', nor would they silently stand and allow the judge to condemn them in his own way. Truth must be faced; the modern girl, or 'Juliet' as you have called her, has courage enough to face it."

My correspondents do not perhaps know that I began service of India's women in South Africa more than forty years ago when perhaps none of them was born. I hold myself to be incapable of writing anything derogatory to womanhood. My regard for the fair sex is too great to permit me to think ill of them. She is, what she has been

described to be in English, the better half of mankind. And my article was written to expose students' shame, not to advertise the frailties of girls. But in giving the diagnosis of the disease, I was bound, if I was to prescribe the right remedy, to mention all the factors which induced the disease.

The modern girl has a special meaning. Therefore, there was no question of my restricting the scope of my remark to some. But all the girls who receive English education are not modern girls. I know many who are not at all touched by the 'modern girl' spirit. But there are some who have become modern girls. My remark was meant to warn India's girl students against copying the modern girl and complicating a problem that has become a serious menace. For, at the time I received the letter referred to, I received also a letter from an Andhra girl student bitterly complaining of the behaviour of Andhra students, which from the description given is worse than what was described by the Lahore girl. This daughter of Andhra tells me, the simple dress of her girl friends gives them no protection, but they lack the courage to expose the barbarism of the boys who are a disgrace to the institution they belong to. I commend this complaint to the authorities of the Andhra University.

The eleven girls I invite to initiate a crusade against the rude behaviour of students. God helps only those who help themselves. The girls must learn the art of protecting themselves against the ruffianly behaviour of man.

Bardoli, 30-1-'39
Harijan, 4-2-1939

31

A MORAL DILEMMA

A friend writes :

" About two and a half years ago this city was convulsed by a social tragedy. A Vaishya gentleman had a sixteen year old daughter. She had a maternal uncle aged twentyone years studying in a college in the same city. The two fell secretly in love with each other. The girl is said to have become pregnant. When the true state of affairs at last became known, the lovers committed suicide by taking poison. The girl died immediately, but the boy died a couple of days afterwards in the hospital. The incident raised a storm of controversy and set all tongues wagging, so much so that it became difficult for the bereaved parents of the hapless girl to dwell in the city. In the course of time the storm blew over. But the memory of the event still lingers in the people's minds and is raked up every now and then whenever a similar topic arises. At the time when the storm was at its height and nobody had a kind word to say about the deceased unfortunate lovers, I shocked everybody by expressing my opinion that under the aforementioned circumstances the young lovers ought to have been allowed to have their way. But mine remained a voice in the wilderness. What is your opinion in the matter ? "

I have deliberately kept back the name of the correspondent and the place at the request of the writer as he did not want old sores to be reopened by a revival of an old controversy. All the same I feel that a public discussion of this delicate topic is necessary. In my opinion such marriages as the interdicted in a particular society cannot be recognized all at once or at the will of an individual. Nor has society or relatives of parties concerned any right to impose their will upon, and forcibly curtail the liberty of action of, the young people who may want to contract such marriages. In the instance cited by the correspondent

both the parties had fully attained maturity. They could well think for themselves. No one had a right forcibly to prevent them from marrying each other if they wanted to. Society could at the most refuse to recognize the marriage, but it was the height of tyranny to drive them to suicide.

Marriage taboos are not universal and are largely based on social usage. The usage varies from province to province and as between different divisions. This does not mean that the youth may ride roughshod over all established social customs and inhibitions. Before they decide to do so, they must convert public opinion to their side. In the meantime, the individuals concerned ought patiently to bide their time, or if they cannot do that, calmly and quietly face the consequences of social ostracism.

At the same time it is equally the duty of society not to take up a heartless, step-motherly attitude towards those who might disregard or break the established conventions. In the instance described by my correspondent the guilt of driving the young couple to suicide certainly rests on the shoulders of society, if the version that is before me is correct.

Harijan, 19-5-1937

THE MARRIAGE IDEAL

A friend writes :

"In the current issue of the *Harijansevak* in your article entitled *A Moral Dilemma* you have observed: 'Many marriage taboos appear to have grown out of social customs. They are nowhere seen to rest on any vital, moral or religious principle.' My own instinct, based upon my experience, tells me that probably these taboos were promulgated out of eugenic considerations. It is a well-known principle of the science of eugenics that the issue resulting from the crossing of exogamous elements is eugenically fitter than the product of endogamous unions. That is the reason why in Hinduism *sagotra* (सगोत्र) and *sapinda* (सपिण्ड) marriages are interdicted. On the other hand, if we admit social custom with all its kaleidoscopic variety and change to be the sole reason for these taboos, we are left with no strong reason why marriages between paternal uncle and niece, or for the matter of that between brother and sister, should absolutely be tabooed. If, as you say, the begetting of progeny be the only legitimate object of marriage, then the choice of partners would become purely a question of eugenic harmony. Are all other considerations to be ruled out of court as relatively unimportant ? If not, what should be their order of precedence ? I would set it down as follows:

(1) Mutual attraction or love;

(2) Eugenic fitness;

(3) Approval and consent of the respective families concerned; and consideration for the interest of the social order to which one belongs;

(4) Spiritual development.

"What do *you* say to it ?

"The Hindu *shastras* have emphatically set down procreation as the sole end of marriage, as the ancient benediction that is pronounced upon the prospective

housewife by her elders at the time of marriage, viz., 'May you be blessed with eight children,' shows. This bears out your contention that cohabitation in marriage should only be for the purpose of begetting offspring, never for sensual gratification. But, then, would you expect a married couple to be satisfied with only one offspring irrespective of whether it is male or female? Besides the longing to perpetuate one's line which you have very properly recognized, there also has existed amongst us a strong feeling that this can be properly done only through a male issue. And the birth of a girl, therefore, is less welcome than that of a boy. In view of this very wide-spread craving for a male issue, don't you think that your ideal of having only one offspring should be modified so as to include the begetting of a male issue in addition to the possible female ones?

"I entirely agree with you that a married person who confines the sex act strictly to the purpose of procreation should be regarded as a *brahmachari*. I also hold with you that in the case of a married couple who have practised the rule of purity and self-control before and after marriage a single act of union must lead to conception. In support of your first point there is in our *shastras* the celebrated story of Vishwamitra and Arundhati, the wife of Vasishtha who in spite of her one hundred sons was greeted by Vishwamitra as a perfect *brahmacharini*, whose command even the elements were bound to obey because her connubial relations with her husband were purely directed to the attainment and discharge of the function of motherhood. But I doubt whether even the Hindu *shastras* would support your ideal of having only one offspring irrespective of whether it is male or female. It seems to me, therefore, that, if you liberalize your ideal of married life so as to include the begetting of one male offspring in addition to the possible female ones, it would go a long way towards satisfying many married couples. Otherwise, I am afraid, most people would find it to be

harder to limit sexual relationship to the procreation of the first child and then irrespective of its sex practise complete abstention for the rest of life than never to marry at all. I am being slowly forced to the view that sexuality is man's primitive nature, and self-control is a cultivated virtue representing a step in his upward evolution towards religion and spirituality which is the natural law of his development. That is why self-control has been held in such high regard. I honour the person who lives up to the ideal of regarding sexual union only as a means for procreation. I also agree that coming together under any other circumstance would be sensual indulgence. But I am not prepared to condemn it as a heinous sin or to regard a husband and wife who cannot help their nature as fallen creatures to be treated with cheap pity or high-brow contempt."

I do not know what the scientific basis for the various taboos in resepct of marriage relationships is. But it seems to me clear that a social custom or usage that helps the practice of virtue and self-control should have the sanctity of a moral law. If it is eugenic considerations that are at the root of interdiction of marriages between brother and sister, then they ought to apply equally to cousin-marriages. A safe rule of conduct, therefore, would be as a rule to respect such taboos where they exist in a particular society. I accept generally the conditions for an ideal marriage enumerated by my correspondent. But I would change their order of importance and put 'love' last in the list. By giving it the first place, the other conditions are liable to be overshadowed by it altogether and rendered more or less nugatory. Therefore, 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 forth 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 conditions 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.

Hindu *shastras* certainly show a marked bias in favour of the male offspring. But this originated at a time when physical warfare was the order of the day and adequate man-power was the *sine qua non* of success in the struggle for existence. The number of sons that a man had was, therefore, then looked upon as a mark of virility and strength, and to facilitate the begetting of numerous offspring even polygamy was sanctioned and encouraged. But if we regard marriage as a sacrament, there is room in it only for one offspring, and that is why in our *shastras* the first offspring is described as धर्मेज i. e., 'duty-born', all subsequent issues being referred to as कामज i. e., 'lust-born'. I make no distinction between son and daughter. Such distinction is in my opinion invidious and wrong. The birth of a son or a daughter should be welcome alike.

The story of Vishwamitra and Vasishtha is good as an illustration of the principle that the sexual act performed solely for the purpose of begetting offsping is not inconsistent with the highest ideal of *brahmacharya*. But the whole of that story need not be taken literally. 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 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 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

ON THE THRESHOLD OF MARRIED LIFE

[The Gandhi Seva Sangh itself is an ethical body — a body of public workers who approach the problems of work in a predominantly religious spirit, and their discussions are always full of self-introspection. It was in the fitness of things that Gandhiji decided to perform the marriage ceremonies of his grand-daughter and my sister and the thread ceremonies of my brother and son under the auspices of the Sangh. Nothing could contribute better to the understanding, on the part of the young parties concerned, of the seriousness of the life on which they were about to embark — above all to a conviction that the ceremonies were no festivities but solemn consecration ceremonies. All outward show and ceremony was eschewed, no invitations to friends or relations were issued, and the parties came in the conviction that they would prize much more the blessings of a body of serious-minded, self-sacrificing, public workers than the blessings of relations and friends which they should get as a matter of course. The ceremonies were performed by two Shastris, Shastri Rambhatji of Belgaum and Shastri Laxman Joshi of the famous Prajna Pathshala at Wai, who offered their services without the thought of a reward. They knew the meaning of every part of the ceremonies, and Shri Laxman Shastri translated every *mantra* in very lucid Hindi and insisted on the parties understanding every word that they repeated.

Contrary to his wont, Gandhiji did not address his remarks to the married couples in the presence of the audience, but privately. But they will interest all married couples and I summarize them here as best I can. — M. D.]

"You must know that I do not believe in ceremonies except to the extent that they awaken in us a sense of duty. I have had that attitude of mind ever since I began to think for myself. The *mantras* you have repeated and the vows you have taken were all in Sanskrit but they were all translated for you. We had the Sanskrit text because I know that the Sanskrit word has a power under the influence of which one would love to come.

"One of the wishes expressed by the husband during the ceremony is that the bride may be the mother of a good and healthy son, The wish did not shock me. It does not mean that procreation is obligatory, but it means that if progeny is wanted, marriage performed in a strictly religious spirit is essential. He who does not want a child need not marry at all. Marriage for the satisfaction of sexual appetite is no marriage. It is *vyabhichara*—concupiscence. Today's ceremony, therefore, means that the sexual act is permitted only when there is a clear desire by both for a child. The whole conception is sacred. The act has, therefore, to be performed prayerfully. It is not preceded by the usual courtship designed to provide sexual excitement and pleasure. Such union may only be once in a lifetime, if no other child is desired. Those who are not morally and physically healthy have no business to unite, and if they do, it is *vyabhichara*—concupiscence. You must unlearn the lesson, if you have learnt it before, that marriage is for the satisfaction of animal appetite. It is a superstition. The whole ceremony is performed in the presence of the sacred fire. Let the fire make ashes of all the lust in you.

"I would also ask you to disabuse yourselves of another superstition which is rampant nowadays. It is being said that restraint and abstinence are wrong and free satisfaction of the sexual appetite and free love is the most natural thing. There was never a more ruinous superstition. You may be incapable of attaining the ideal, your flesh may be weak, but do not therefore lower the ideal, do not make irreligion your religion. In your weak moments remember what I am telling you. The remembrance of this solemn occasion may well steady and restrain you. The very purpose of marriage is restraint and sublimation of the sexual passion. If there is any other purpose, marriage is no consecration, but marriage for other purposes besides having progeny.

"You are being united in marriage as friends and equals. If the husband is called *swamin*, the wife is *swamini* —each master of the other, each helpmate of the other, each co-operating with the other in the performance of life's tasks and duties. To you boys I would say that if you are

gifted with better intellects and richer emotions, infect the girls with them. Be their true teachers and guides, help them and guide them, but never hinder them or misguide them. Let there be complete harmony of thought and word and deed between you, may you have no secrets from each other, may you be one in soul.

"Don't be hypocrites, don't break your health in the vain effort of performing what may be impossible for you. Restraint never ruins one's health. What ruins one's health is not restraint but outward suppression. A really self-restrained person grows every day from strength to strength and from peace to more peace. The very first step in self-restraint is the restraint of thoughts. Understand your limitations and do only as much as you can. I have placed the ideal before you — the right angle. Try as best you can to attain the right angle. But if you fail, there is no cause for grief or shame. I have simply explained to you that marriage is a consecration, a new birth, even as the sacred thread ceremony is a consecration and a new birth. Let not what I have told you alarm you or weaken you. Always aim at complete harmony of thought and word and deed. Always aim at purifying your thoughts and everything will be well. There is nothing more potent than thought. Deed follows word and word follows thought. The world is the result of a mighty thought, and where the thought is mighty and pure the result is always mighty and pure. I want you to go hence armed with the armour of a noble ideal, and I assure you no temptation can harm you, no impurity can touch you.

"Remember the various ceremonies that have been explained to you. Look at the simple-looking ceremony of *madhuparka*. The whole world is full of *madhu* — sweet nectar or honey — if only you will partake of it after the rest of the world has taken its share of it. It means enjoyment by means of renunciation."

"But if there is no desire for progeny, should there be no marriage?" asked one of the bridegrooms.

"Certainly not. I do not believe in Platonic marriages. In certain rare cases men are known to have married

women to protect the latter and not for any physical union at all. But those cases are very rare indeed. You must read all that I have written on a pure married life. What I read in the *Mahabharata* is daily growing upon me. Vyasa is described therein as having performed *niyoga*. He is not described as beautiful, but he was the reverse of it. His form is represented as terrible, he made no amorous gestures, but he smeared his whole body with *ghee* before he performed the union. He performed the act not for lust but for procreation. The desire for a child is perfectly natural, and once the desire is satisfied there should be no union.

"Manu has described the first child as *dharmaja* — born out of a sense of duty, and children born after the first as *kamaja* — carnally born. That gives in a nutshell the law of sexual relations. And what is God but the Law? And to obey God is to perform the Law. Remember that you were thrice asked to repeat: 'I will not transgress the Law in any repects.' Even if we had a handful of men and women prepared to abide by the Law, we should have a race of men and women stalwart and true.

"Remember that I really came to enjoy my married life after I ceased to look at Ba sexually. I took the vow of abstinence when I was in the prime of youth and health, when I was young enough to enjoy married life in the accepted sense of the term. I saw in a flash that I was born, as we all are, for a sacred mission. I did not know this when I was married. But on coming to my senses I felt that I must see that the marriage subserved the mission for which I was born. Then indeed did I realize true *dharma*. True happiness came into our lives only after the vow was taken. Ba, though she looks frail, has a fine constitution and toils from morning until night. She would never have done so, had she continued to be the object of my lust.

"And yet I woke up late in the sense that I had lived the married life for some years. You are lucky enough to be aroused in good time. Circumstances, when I was married, were as unpropitious as they could be. For you

they are as propitious as they could be. There was one thing, though, that I possessed and that carried me through. It was the armour of truth. That protected me and saved me. Truth has been the very foundation of my life. *Brahmacharya* and *ahimsa* were born later out of truth. Whatever, therefore, you do, be true to yourselves and to the world. Hide not your thoughts. If it is shameful to reveal them, it is more shameful to think them."

Harijan. 14-4-1946

34

HUSBAND AND WIFE

Q. In Hindusim, devotion of wife to her husband and her complete merger in him is the highest aim, never mind whether the husband is a fiend or an embodiment of love. If this be the correct conduct for a wife, may she, in the teeth of opposition by her husband, undertake national service ? Or must she only go as far as the husband will permit her to go ?

A. 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.

Q. If a husband is say, a meat-eater and the wife considers meat-eating an evil, may she follow her own bent? May she even try by all loving ways to wean her husband from meat-eating or the like? Or is she bound to cook meat for her husband or, worse still, is she bound to eat it, if the husband requires her? If you say that the wife may take her own course, how can a joint household be run when the one compels and the other rebels?

A. This question is partly answered in the answer to the first. A wife is not bound to be an accomplice in her husband's crimes. And when she holds anything to be wrong, she must dare to do the right. But seeing that the wife's function is to manage the household and thus to cook, as the husband's is to earn for the family, she is bound to cook meat for the family, if both have been meat-eaters before. If, on the other hand, in a vegetarian family the husband becomes a meat-eater and seeks to compel the wife to cook for him, the wife is in no way bound to cook what offends her sense of right. The peace of a household is a most desirable thing. But it cannot be an end in itself. For me the married state is as much a state of discipline as any other. Life is a 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 had 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

they are as propitious as they could be. There was one thing, though, that I possessed and that carried me through. It was the armour of truth. That protected me and saved me. Truth has been the very foundation of my life. *Brahmacharya* and *ahimsa* were born later out of truth. Whatever, therefore, you do, be true to yourselves and to the world. Hide not your thoughts. If it is shameful to reveal them, it is more shameful to think them."

Harijan. 14-4-1946

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HUSBAND AND WIFE

Q. In Hindusim, devotion of wife to her husband and her complete merger in him is the highest aim, never mind whether the husband is a fiend or an embodiment of love. If this be the correct conduct for a wife, may she, in the teeth of opposition by her husband, undertake national service ? Or must she only go as far as the husband will permit her to go ?

A. 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.

Q. If a husband is say, a meat-eater and the wife considers meat-eating an evil, may she follow her own bent? May she even try by all loving ways to wean her husband from meat-eating or the like? Or is she bound to cook meat for her husband or, worse still, is she bound to eat it, if the husband requires her? If you say that the wife may take her own course, how can a joint household be run when the one compels and the other rebels?

A. This question is partly answered in the answer to the first. A wife is not bound to be an accomplice in her husband's crimes. And when she holds anything to be wrong, she must dare to do the right. But seeing that the wife's function is to manage the household and thus to cook, as the husband's is to earn for the family, she is bound to cook meat for the family, if both have been meat-eaters before. If, on the other hand, in a vegetarian family the husband becomes a meat-eater and seeks to compel the wife to cook for him, the wife is in no way bound to cook what offends her sense of right. The peace of a household is a most desirable thing. But it cannot be an end in itself. For me the married state is as much a state of discipline as any other. Life is a 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 had 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 HINDU WIFE

The following is a summary of a long letter from a brother describing the miseries of his married sister :

" Some time ago my sister was married to a man whose character was hidden from us. This man has been discovered to be a rake, and no amount of dissipation and debauchery can satiate him. He has no sense of honour. My unfortunate sister found soon after her marriage that her ' lord ' was sinking down more and more deeply day by day. She remonstrated. The man could not brook this, and in order to ' teach her a lesson ' indulged in his excesses in front of her. He would also whip her, make her stand, starve her, etc. She was tied to a post to compel her to witness his debaucheries. My sister is heart-broken. Her lamentations make us feel wretched. We are helpless. What would you advise her and us to do ? This is one of the most shameful aspects of Hinduism, where woman is left entirely at the mercy of man and has no rights and privileges. If a man chooses to be cruel and heartless, there is no remedy left to the unfortunate woman. The man may go on making random alliances, and not a little finger can be raised against him; but a woman once married is at the utter mercy of her lord. Thousands of such women are groaning and weeping. As long as Hinduism is not purged of these and such like evils, can there be any hope of progress ? "

The writer is an educated man. His is a much more graphic description than the summary is of his sister's distress. The correspondent has sent me his full name and address. His condemnation of Hinduism, though pardonable under intense irritation is based on a hysterical generalization from an isolated instance. For, millions of Hindu wives live in perfect peace and are queens in their own homes. They exercise an authority over their husbands which any woman would envy. It is an authority which love gives. The case

of cruelty brought to light by the correspondent is an illustration not of the evil in Hinduism, but of the evil in human nature which has been known to express itself under all climes and among people professing different faiths of the world. 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. It is, therefore, in the interest of reform for reformers to avoid hysterics and exaggerations.

Nevertheless the occurrence to which this article draws attention is not an altogether uncommon occurrence in Hindu society. 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, therefore, 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. In the case in point the remedy is incredibly simple. Instead of the brother and other relatives feeling helpless and weeping with the distressed girl, they should clothe her with protection, educate her to believe that it is no part of her duty to placate a sinful husband or to seek his company. It is quite evident that the husband himself does not care for the wife. She 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 the husband's reform more difficult if not impossible, which after all should be the aim of society, more so of every wife. In the present instance the girl's parents are well able to support her, but where it is not possible, the

number of institutions that would give shelter to such ill-treated women is growing in the country. There still remains the question of the satisfaction of the sexual appetite on the part of young women thus leaving the inhospitable roofs of their husbands or being actually desetred by them when the relief given by divorce is unobtainable. But this is really not a serious grievance in point of numbers, for in a society in which custom has discountenanced divorce for ages, a woman whose marriage proves unhappy does nor want to be remarried. When public opinion in any social group requires that particular form of relief, I have no doubt that it will be forthcoming. So far as I understand the correspondent's' letter, the grievance is not that the wife cannot satisfy her sexual appetite. The grievance is the gross and defiant immorality on the part of the husband. For this, as I have said, the remedy lies in a revision of the mental attitude. The feeling of helplessness is imaginary as most of our ills are. A fresh outlook, a little original thinking is enough to dispel the grief brought about by defective imagination. Nor should friends and relatives in such cases be satisfied with the mere negative result of isolating the victim from the zone of tyranny. She should be induced to qualify herself for public service. This kind of training would be more than enough compensation for the doubtful privilege of a husband's bed.

Young India, 3-10-1929

THE TRAGEDY OF A YOUNG COUPLE

A young man writes:

"I am fifteen years of age. My wife is seventeen. I am in a great fix. I was opposed to this ill-assorted union all along, but my father and my uncle instead of paying heed to my protest only flew into a temper and began to scold me and call me names, and the father of the girl just for personal satisfaction of securing a rich alliance married his child to me although I was at that time of a tender age and younger than she. How stupid! And why could not my father leave me alone instead of forcing an incompatible match upon me and landing me into a pit? Could I have understood at that time the implications of the thing, I would never have suffered myself to be married. But that is now all over and done. What would you now advise me to do?"

The correspondent has given his name and address in full but wants the reply to be given to him through the *Navajivan* as he is afraid that my letter may not be permitted to reach him. This is a deplorable state of things. My advice to this young man is that, if he has the courage, he should repudiate the marriage. For neither he nor the girl in question could possibly have had any idea of the vows that were administered to them at the *saptapadi* ceremony when they were married. Since their marriage they have never lived together. It is up to the young man, therefore, to take his courage in both hands and brave the prospect of being driven out of his home as a result of his repudiation of the so-called marriage. And I would beseech the respective parents of the couple, if my words can reach them, to have pity on their innocent children and not to force a cruel tragedy upon them. A boy of fifteen is just a stripling. He should be going to school or attending a workshop, not be saddled with the duties of a householder. I hope the parents of the couple in question will wake up to a sense of their duty. If they do not, it will be the clear duty of the boy and the girl respectfully to disregard parental authority and follow the light of reason and conscience.

Young India, 3-1-1929

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DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES

I

Q. I am a young man of 23 years. For the last two years I have been using pure *khadi* only. For the last 28 days I have been spinning regularly in my leisure time. But my wife refuses to wear *khadi*. She says it is too coarse. Should I compel her to use *khadi*? I may also mention that I find our temperaments are incompatible.

A. This is the common lot of life in India. I have often said that the husband, being the stronger and more educated party, has to act as tutor to his wife and put up with her defects, if any. In your case you have to bear the incompatibility and conquer your wife by love, never by compulsion. It follows that you cannot compel your wife to use *khadi*. But you should trust your love and example to make her do the right thing. Remember your wife is not your property any more than you are hers. She is your better half. Treat her as such. You will not regret the experiment.

II

Q. I am married. My wife is a good woman. We have children. We have lived together in peace hitherto. Unfortunately she came across someone whom she has adopted as her *guru*. She has received the *gurumantra* from her, and her life has become a close book for me. This has given rise to coolness between us. I do not know what I should do. Rama, as portrayed by Tulsidasa, is my ideal hero. Should I not do what Rama did, and cut off all connection with my wife?

A. Tulsidasa has taught us that we may not indiscriminately imitate the great. What they may do with impunity we may not. Think of Rama's love for Sita. Tulsidasa tells us that before the appearance of the golden deer the real Sita, at the behest of Rama, disappeared in the clouds and the mere shadow remained. This fact was a close secret even from Lakshmana. The poet further tells us that Rama

had a purpose which was divine. It was with this shadow of Sita that Rama dealt after the appearance of the golden deer on the scene. Even so Sita never resented any single act of Rama. All such data would be lacking in any mundane case, as they are lacking in yours. Therefore, my advice to you would be to bear with your wife and not interfere with her so long as you have no cause of complaint against her conduct. If you adopted someone as your *guru* and had your *gurumantra*, and if you did not impart the secret to your wife, I am sure, you would not relish her resenting your refusal to disclose the secret. I admit that between husband and wife there should be no secrets from one another. I have a very high opinion of the marriage tie. I hold that husband and wife merge in each other. They are one in two or two in one. But these things cannot be regulated mechanically. All things considered, therefore, since you are a liberal-minded husband, you should have no difficulty in respecting your wife's reluctance to share the secret with you.

Harijan, 9-3-1940

III

Q. You have rightly said that no one who has not renounced untouchability in every shape and form can take part in *satyagraha*. Supposing a Congressman's wife does not share his conviction in this regard and won't let him bring Harijans into his house, what should he do — coerce his wife into conformity with his views, renounce her, or renounce the *satyagraha* struggle?

A. No occasion for coercing your wife. You should let her go her way, and you should go yours. This would mean her having a separate kitchen for herself and, if she likes, also a separate room. Thus there is no question of renouncing the struggle.

Harijan, 13-4-1940

AN UNNATURAL FATHER

A young man has sent me a letter which can be given here only in substance. It is as under:

> "I am a married man. I had gone out to a foreign country. I had a friend whom both I and my parents implicitey trusted. During my absence he seduced my wife who has now conceived of him. My father now insists that the girl should resort to abortion; otherwise,he says, the family would be disgraced. To me it seems that it would be wrong to do so. The poor woman is consumed with remorse. She cares neither to eat nor drink, but is always weeping. Will you kindly tell me as to what my duty is in the case?"

I have published this letter with great hesitation. As everybody knows such cases are by no means infrequent in society. A restrained public discussion of the question, therefore, does not seem to me to be out of place.

It seems to me clear as daylight that abortion would be a crime. Countless husbands are guilty of the same lapse as this poor woman, but nobody ever questions them. Society not only excuses them but does not even censure them. Then, again, the woman cannot conceal her shame while man can successfully hide his sin.

The woman in question deserves to be pitied. It would be the sacred duty of the husband to bring up the baby with all the love and tenderness that he is capable of and to refuse to yield to the counsels of his father. Whether he should continue to live with his wife is a ticklish question. Circumstances may warrant separation from her. In that case he would be bound to provide for her maintenance and education and to help her to live a pure life. Nor should I see anything wrong in his accepting her repentance if it is sincere and genuine. Nay, further, I can imagine a situation when it would be the sacred duty of the husband to take back an erring wife who has completely expiated for and redeemed her error.

Young India, 3-1-1929

INVIDIOUS AND UNFAIR

A correspondent writes:

"There are at present in Cutch in our midst several otherwise respectable gentlemen, upright, munificent, deeply religious and high-minded but, without any scruple about remarrying merely for the sake of begetting a male offspring. I would entreat you to express your opinion as to whether you approve of this practice among the Hindus of deploring the birth of a daughter. Do you, too, hold with the orthodox that one cannot go to heaven without a son?

"A man noted for his charities has three wives. But he has no male offspring. He has now married for the fourth time. A few mouths ago he performed a *yajna* when five hundred Brahmins were fed daily. Over a lakh of rupees were spent over this ceremony. I can multiply such instances."

Unfortunately this hankering for a male offspring is almost universally prevalent in Hindu society. It is not necessary to trace its origin. It is enough that in the present age of sex equality this sort of invidious discrimination against the female sex is an anachronism. I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over that of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live, and are equally necessary to keep the world going. But such age-old and deep-rooted practices cannot be eradicated all of a sudden. They can be dealt with only by an awakening of the social conscience, and a proper recognition of the true status and dignity of woman. Today both husband and wife are found to be equally agreeable to the former remarrying when they cannot beget a male offspring. Reformers like my correspondent have to cultivate patience and not be angry over such unfortunate occurrences or lose hearts. They have to have faith in the cause and work away in the hope that society will one day realize the evil of making unmeaning and invidious distinction between male and female offspring.

Harijan, 18-5-1938

REMNANT OF BARBARISM

We know by painful experience of what is daily happening in India that there are husbands enough who regard their wives as their property like their cattle or household furniture, and therefore think they have the right to beat them as they would their cattle. But I was unprepared for a judicial endorsement of the brutal habit till a friend put into my hands a newspaper cutting reporting a decision of the Sessions Judge of Madura recognizing the legal right of a husband of beating his wife. Fortunately an English judge, on going through the calendar, detected this extraordinary judgment of the Madura Sessions Judge, and issued notice to the accused husband to show cause. In due course the case was heard by Justices Pandurang Row and K. S. Menon whose judgment I make no apology for quoting below:

> "The accused was acquitted on the first charge of causing hurt to his wife by the Sessions Judge, and the local Government did not file an appeal against the acquittal. The only reference that has to be made to this charge is necessitated by the learned Sessions Judge's insistence in more than one place of what he calls the right of the husband to beat the wife for impudence or impertinence. The learned Sessions Judge was so much obsessed with the right of the husband to beat his wife that he went to the length of criticizing the police for having included the charge of causing hurt to the wife in the charge sheet and even the Sub-Magistrate for including it in the charges sent by him for trial in the Sessions Court.
>
> "It is perhaps enough to say that, though the learned Judge may be entitled to have his own views on the subject in a private capacity, yet he was not justified is laying down the law in this manner from his seat on the Bench declaring that the husband has the right of punishing his wife by beating her for impudence

or impertinence. No such right is recognized by the Indian Penal Code, and wife-beating is not one of the exceptions in the chapter of 'General Exceptions'.

"One can easily imagine the serious consequences of such a declaration being made from the Bench by a Sessions Judge unless the declaration is declared to be wrong and unfounded by this Court. That is the reason why we thought it necessary to state in unmistakable terms that the learned Sessions Judge's declaration of the rights of husbands in this regard has no foundation so that no one may rely upon that in future as any justification or excuse for beating wives."

It has to be confessed with shame that even educated husbands are not free from the belief in the right of husbands to treat their wives as chattels and beat them whenever they feel the impulse to do so. Would that this judgment would show them that such treatment of wives is a remnant of barbarism.

Harijan, 3-10-1936

41

WOMEN AND ORNAMENTS

[Address delivered before a small gathering of Singhalese ladies at Colombo.]

When Mahendra came to Ceylon the children of the motherland were not starving either materially or spiritually, our star was in the ascendent, and you partook of the glory. The children are starving today, and it is on their behalf that I have come with the begging bowl, and if you do not disown kinship with them but take some pride in it, then you must give me not only your money but your jewellery as sisters in so many other places have done. My hungry eyes rest upon the ornaments of sisters, whenever I see them heavily bedecked. There is an ulterior motive too in asking for ornaments, viz. to wean the ladies from the craze for ornaments and jewellery. And if I may take the liberty that

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I do with other sisters, may I ask you what it is that makes woman deck herself more than man? I am told by feminine friends that she does so for pleasing man. Well, I tell you, if you want to play yout part in the world's affairs, you must refuse to deck yourselves for pleasing man. 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. I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart. I could not steal into my wife's heart until I decided to treat her differently than I used to do and so I restored to her all her rights by dispossessing myself of all my so-called rights as her husband. And you see her today as simple as myself. You find no necklaces, no fineries on her. I want you to be like that. Refuse to be the slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slaves of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, don't go in for scents and lavender waters. If you want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man but humanity. It is your birthright. Man is born of woman, he is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver your message again.

Do you know the hideous condition of your sisters on the plantations? Treat them as your sisters, go amongst them, and serve them with your better knowledge of sanitation and your talents. Let your honour lie in their service. And is there not service nearer home? There are men who are rascals, drunken people who are a menace to society. Wean them from their rascality by going amongst them as fearlessly as some of those Salvation Army girls who go into the dens of thieves and gamblers and drunkards, fall on their necks and at their feet, and bring them round. That service will deck you more than the fineries that you are wearing. I will then be a trustee for the money that you will save, and will distribute it amongst the poor. I pray that the rambling message that I have given you may find a lodgment in your hearts.

Young India, 8-12-1927

WOMEN AND JEWELS

A lady doctor in Tamil Nad sends a letter accompanying her gift referred to in it. As the letter, in my opinion, enhances the value of the gift and is likely to serve as an example to others, I compress its contents as follows, omitting the names of the donor, the Raja and the place:

"Just a few lines to tell you that I sent you yesterday a parcel of a diamond ring and a pair of earrings which were given to me about 12 years ago in remembrance of service in the palace.....when the heir was born to the Raja. It grieved me much when I came to know that the Raja did not have even the courage to invite you to his place when you passed by, and I was told that it was due to fear of the Government. You can imagine my feeling when after your visit I looked at these jewels which before used to travel with me. Now when I looked at them bitterness rose in my breast, and then it turned into deep sympathy for the starving millions about whom you spoke when you were here. I said to myself, 'Are not these jewels made out of the people's money? And what claim have I to keep them as my own?' I then made up my mind to send them on to you. You could use them for *khadi* service and so help some of the starving millions. I feel sure that it is a better use to make of them than that they should remain in a corner of my box. A friend has valued them at Rs. 500. They are, therefore, insured for that amount. I only hope that some generous person will give you more than the actual price, knowing the circumstances in which these things are being sent to you. You may make what use you like of this letter."

It is remarkable how we imagine fears even when there is no cause. There are many Rajas who have openly and willingly supported *khadi* and therethrough the cause of the poor from whom, after all, as my correspondent correctly puts it, they derive their riches. It is true that *khadi* has

a political significance; but we have not yet come to the stage when support of *khadi* can be safely declared by the Government to be criminal. Every philanthropic movement can be turned to political use, but it would be a sad day when on that account it is boycotted even as to its philanthropic aspect. But it is only fair to state that the Raja, to whom reference has been made by the lady doctor, is not the only one who is afraid of supporting *khadi* or showing ordinary courtesy to a public servant like me. It is well, however that the Raja's boycott of me has stimulated the gift. But I would like all the sisters who may chance to see this note to realize that it is not necessary to be able to emulate the fair donor to have occasions like the one that set her athinking about her duty to the starving millions. Surely it is easy enough to realize that so long as there are millons of men and women in the country starving for want of food because of want of work, the sisters have no warrant for possessing costly jewels for adorning their bodies or often for the mere satisfaction of possessing them. As I have remarked before now in these pages, if only the rich ladies of India will discard their superfluities and be satisfied with such decoration as *khadi* can give them, it is possible to finance the whole of the *khadi* movement, not to take into consideration the tremendous moral effect that such a step on the part of the rich daughters of India will produce upon the nation and particularly the starving masses.

Young India, 5-4-1928

WOMEN AND JEWELLERY

I have seen a paragraph in a newspaper adversely criticizing my appeal to the women for the gifts of jewellery, and my auctioning things received as donations. Indeed, I would like thousands of sisters who attend my meetings to give me most, if not all, of the jewellery they wear. 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

TEAR DOWN THE PURDAH

Whenever I have gone to Bengal, Bihar or the United Provinces, I have observed the purdah system more strictly followed than in the other provinces But when I addressed a meeting at Darbhanga late at night and amid calm surroundings free from noise and bustle and unmanageable crowds, I found in front of me men, but behind me and behind the screen were women of whose presence I knew nothing till my attention was drawn to it. The function was in connection with the laying of the foundation stone of an orphanage, but I was called upon to address the ladies behind the purdah. The sight of the screen behind which my audience, whose numbers I did not know, was seated made me sad. It pained and humiliated me deeply. I thought of the wrong being done by man to the women of India by clinging to a barbarous custom which, whatever use it might have had when it was first introduced, had now become totally useless and was doing incalculable harm to the country. All the education that we have been receiving for the past 100 years seems to have produced but little impression upon us, for I note that the purdah is being retained even in educated households not because the educated men believe in it themselves but because they will not manfully resist the brutal custom and sweep it away at a stroke. I have the privilege of addressing hundreds of meetings of women attended by thousands. The din and the noise created at these meetings make it impossible to speak with any effect to the women who attend them. Nothing better is to be expected so long as they are caged and confined in their houses and little courtyards. When, therefore, they find themselves congregated in a big room and are expected all of a sudden to listen to someone, they do not know what to do with themselves or with the speaker. And when silence is restored it becomes difficult to interest them in many everyday topics, for they know nothing of them, having been never

allowed to breathe the fresh air of freedom. I know that this is a somewhat exaggerated picture. I am quite aware of the very high culture of these thousands of sisters whom I get the privilege of addressing. I know that they are capable of rising to the same height that men are capable of, and I know too that they do have occasions to go out. But this is not to be put down to the credit of the educated classes. The question is, why have they not gone further? Why do not our women enjoy the same freedom that men do? Why should they not be able to walk out and have fresh air?

Chastity is not a hothouse growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. It must be as defiant as Sita's. It must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men. Men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk even as the latter are compelled to trust them. Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed. Rama would be nowhere without Sita free and independent even as he was himself. But for robust independence Draupadi is perhaps a better example. Sita was gentleness incarnate. She was a delicate flower. Draupadi was a giant oak. She bent mighty Bhima himself to her imperious will. Bhima was terrible to everyone, but he was a lamb before Draupadi. She stood in no need of protection from any one of the Pandavas. By seeking today to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India we are interfering with the growth of free and independent-spirited men. What we are doing to our women and what we are doing to the 'untouchables' recoils upon our heads with a force thousand times multiplied. It partly accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us then tear down the purdah with one mighty effort.

Young India, 3-2-1927

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THE PURDAH

I am of opinion that the purdah in India is a recent institution and was adopted during the period of Hindu decline. In the age when proud Draupadi and spotless Sita lived, there could be no purdah. Gargi could not have held her discourses from behind the purdah. Nor is the purdah universal in India. It is unknown in the Deccan, Gujarat and the Punjab. It is unknown among the peasantry, and one does not hear of any untoward consequences of the comparative freedom which women in these provinces and among the peasantry enjoy. Nor will it be just to say that the women or men in the other parts of the world are less moral because of the absence of the purdah system. The correspondent seeks to defend everything that is ancient. Whilst I hold that the ancients gave us a moral code which is not to be surpassed, I am unable to subscribe to the doctrine of their infallibility in every detail. And who shall say what is really ancient? Are all the hundred and eight Upanishads of equal sanctity? It seems to me that we must test on the anvil of reason everything that is capable of being tested by it, and reject that which does not satisfy it even though it may appear in an ancient garb.

Young India, 24-3-1927

THE DOOM OF THE PURDAH

A reasoned appeal, signed by many most influential people of Bihar and almost an equal number of ladies of that province, advising the total abolition of the purdah, has been just issued in Bihar. The fact that over fifty ladies have signed the appeal shows that if the work is carried on with vigour, the purdah will be a thing of the past in Bihar. It is worthy of note that the ladies who have signed the appeal are not of the anglicized type but orthodox Hindus. It definitely states:

"We want that the women of our province should be as free to move about and take their legitimate part in the life of the community in all particulars as their sisters in Karnatak, Maharashtra and Madras, and in an essentially Indian way, avoiding all attempts at Europeanization, for while we hold that a change from enforced seclusion to a complete anglicization would be like dropping from the frying pan into the fire, we feel that the purdah must go, if we want our women to develop along Indian ideals. If we want them to add grace and beauty to our social life and raise its moral tone, if we want them to be excellent managers at home, helpful companions of their husbands and useful members of the community, then the purdah, as it now exists, must go. In fact no serious step for their welfare can be taken unless the veil is torn down, and it is our conviction that, if once the energy of half of our population that has been imprisoned artificially is released, it will create a force which, if properly guided, will be of immeasurable good to our province."

I know the evil effects of the purdah in Bihar. The movement has been started none too soon.

The movement has a curious origin. Babu Ramanandan Mishra, a *khadi* worker, was desirous of rescuing his wife from the oppression of the purdah. As his people would not let the girl come to the Ashram, he took two girls from the Ashram to be companions to his wife. One of them, Radhabehn, Maganlal Gandhi's daughter, was to be the tutor. She was accompanied by the late Dalbahadur Giri's daughter Durgadevi. The parents of the girl wife

resented the attempt of the Ashram girls to wean young Mrs. Mishra from the purdah. The girls braved all difficulties. Meanwhile Maganlal Gandhi went to see his daughter and steel her against all odds and persist in her efforts. He took ill in the village where Radhabehn was doing her work, and died at Patna. The Bihar friends, therefore, made it a point of honour to wage war against the purdah. Radhabehn brought her charge to the Ashram. Her coming to the Ashram created additional stir, and obliged the husband, who was already prepared for it, to throw himself in the struggle with greater zeal. Thus the movement, having a personal touch, promises to be carried on with energy. At its head is that seasoned soldier of Bihar, the hero of many battles, Babu Brijkishore Prasad. I do not remember his having headed a movement that has been allowed to die.

The appeal fixes the 8th of July next as the date on which to inaugurate an intensive campaign against the system which puts a cruel ban on social service by one half of Bihar humanity and which denies it freedom in many cases and even the use of light and fresh air. The sooner it is recognized that many of our social evils impede our march towards Swaraj, the greater will be our progress towards our cherished goal. To postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj is not to know the meaning of Swaraj. Surely we must be incapable of defending ourselves or healthily competing with the other nations, if we allow the better half of ourselves to become paralysed.

I therefore congratulate the Bihar leaders on their having earnestly taken up the struggle against the purdah. The success of such a reform especially, as of all reform generally, depends upon the purity of the workers. A great deal will rest with the ladies who have signed the appeal. If, notwithstanding their having given up the purdah, they retain the original modesty of India's womanhood and show courage and determination in the face of heavy odds, they will find success quickly awaiting their effort. The campaign against the purdah, if properly handled, means mass education of the right type for both men and women of Bihar.

Young India, 28-6-1928

PURDAH IN BIHAR

The organized demonstration against the purdah that was held in many important centres in Bihar on the 8th instant was, a Bihari friend's letter tells me, successful beyond the expectations of the organizers. *The Searchlight* report of the Patna meeting opens thus:

> " A unique spectacle was witnessed at the mixed meeting of ladies and gentlemen of the 8th July held at Patna in the Radhika Sinha Institute on Sunday last. In spite of heavy rains that fortunately stopped just at the time of the meeting, the gathering was unexpectedly large. In fact half of the spacious hall of the Radhika Sinha Institute was crowded with ladies, three-fourths of whom were such as had been observing purdah a day before, nay, an hour before."

The following is the translation of the resolution adopted at the meeting:

> " We, the men and women of Patna assembled, hereby declare that we have today abolished the pernicious practice of the purdah, which has done and is doing incalculable harm to the country, and particularly to women, and we appeal to the other women of the province, who are still wavering, to banish this system as early as they can and thereby advance their education and health."

A provisional committee was formed at the meeting to carry on an intensive propaganda against the purdah and for the spread of women's education in the province of Bihar. A third resolution advised the formation of Mahila Samitis in every town and every village of the province. And a fourth resolution was passed to the effect that Mahila Ashrams should be started at different places where ladies might stay for certain periods and receive a training so as so become 'good wives', 'worthy mothers', and 'useful servants' of the country. Over 5,000 rupees were promised on the spot for the purpose, and I see many ladies among the donors, giving anything between Rs. 25 and 250. The paper publishes reports of similar meetings in several places

in Bihar. If the campaign is well organized, and continued with zeal, the purdah should become a thing of the past. It should be noted that this is no anglicizing movement. It is an indigenous conservative effort made by leaders who are conservative by nature and are yet alive to all the evils that have crept into Hindu society. Babu Brijkishore Prasad and Babu Rajendra Prasad who from far-off London is keenly watching and supporting the movement are no Westernized specimens of Indian humanity. They are orthodox Hindus, lovers of Indian culture and tradition. They are no blind imitators of the West, and yet do not hesitate to assimilate whatever is good in it. There need therefore be no fear entertained by the timid and the halting ones that the movement is likely to be in any shape or form disruptive of all that is most precious in Indian culture and especially in feminine grace and modesty so peculiar to India's womanhood.

Young India, 26-7-1928

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ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE OF WOMEN

Q. Some people oppose a modification of laws relating to the right of a married woman to own property on the ground that economic independence of woman would lead to the spread of immorality among women and disruption of domestic life. What is your attitude on the question?

A. I would answer the question by a counter question: Has not independence of man and his holding property led to the spread of immorality among men? If you answer 'yes' then let it be so also with women. And when women have rights of ownership and the rest like men, it will be found that the enjoyment of such rights is not responsible for their vices or their virtues. Morality which depends upon the helplessness of a man or woman has not much to recommend it. Morality is rooted in the purity of our hearts.

Harijan, 8-6-1940

A SISTER'S QUESTION

Q. "How is one to protect the honour of women?"

A. "I am afraid you do not read the *Harijan* regularly. I discussed this question years ago, and have discussed it often since. The question may be discussed under two heads: (1) how is a woman to protect her own honour?; and (2) how are her male relatives to protect it?

"As regards the first question, where there is a non-violent atmosphere, where there is the constant teaching of *ahimsa*, woman will not regard herself as dependent, weak or helpless. She is not really helpless when she is really pure. Her purity makes her conscious of her strength. 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.

"The second question is easily answered. The brother or father or friend will stand between his protege and her assailant. He will then either dissuade the assailant from his wicked purpose or allow himself to be killed by him in preventing him. In so laying down his life he will not only have done his duty, but given a new accession of strength to his protege who will now know how to protect her honour."

"But," said one of the sisters from Poona, "there lies the rub. How is a woman to lay down her life? Is it possible for her to do so?"

"Oh!" said Gandhiji, "any day more possible for her than for man. I know that women are capable of throwing

away their lives for a much lesser purpose. Only a few days ago a young girl of twenty burnt herself to death as she felt she was being persecuted for refusing to go in for ordinary studies. And she perished with such cool courage and determination. She ignited her sari with an ordinary oil-light and did not so much as raise a cry, so that the people in the neighbouring room were unaware of the happening until all was over. I do not give these details to commend her example, but to show how easily woman can throw away her life. I at any rate am incapable of this courage. But I agree that it is not the external light but the inner light that is needed."

The same sister wondered how one was to avoid anger and violence altogether in dealing with children. "You know our old adage," said Gandhiji laughing heartily, "play with him till he is five, hammer him for ten years, treat him as your friend when he is sixteen." "But," he added, "don't you worry. If you have to be angry with your child on occasions, I shall call that anger non-violent anger. I am speaking of wise mothers, not the ignorant ones who do not deserve to be mothers."

M. D.

Harijan, 1-9-1940

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THE WIDOW'S WAIL

Remarriage of widows is necessary to a certain extent. The reform can be brought about only when our youths have purified themselves. Are they pure ? Do they profit by their education ? Or why blame their education ? From childhood up a slave mentality is sedulously cultivated in us. And if we cannot think freely, how can we act freely ? We are alike slaves of the caste, of a foreign education, and of an alien Government. Every one of the facilities provided us has become our fetters. There are so many educated youths amongst us. How few of them have thought of the lot of the widows in their own homes ! How few have resisted the temptation of lucre ! How few regard them as their own sisters and mothers and protect

their honour ! How few have had the courage of their convictions and defied their castes to do their worst ! Whom is the poor widow to approach ? What comfort can I bring her ? How few of them are readers of the *Navajivan* ! How few even of those who read it can act up to their convictions ! And yet I have occasionally devoted the columns of the *Navajivan* to the widow's wail, and hope to do more as opportunity offers itself. In the meantime I would appeal to everyone who has a child widow under his care to consider it his duty to marry her.

Young India, 4-2-1926

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ENFORCED WIDOWHOOD

Sir Ganga Ram has published a valuable table giving the number of widows throughout India with subsidiary tables for each province. The tables should be in the hands of every reformer.

Not many will agree with Sir Ganga Ram about the order in which, according to him, reform should proceed. He gives the order thus :

1st, Social Reformation
2nd, Economic Reformation
3rd, Swaraj or political emancipation.

Not so thought Sir Ganga Ram's predecessors, every whit as keen social reformers as himself. Ranade, Gokhale and Chandavarkar considered Swaraj to be as important as social reform. Lokamanya Tilak felt no less for social reform. But he and his predecessors recognized and realized the necessity of all branches of reform proceeding side by side. Indeed, Lokamanya and Gokhale considered political reform to be of greater urgency than the others. They held that our political serfdom incapacitated us for any other work.

The fact is that political emancipation means the rise of mass consciousness. It cannot come without affecting all the branches of national activity. Every reform means an awakening. Once truly awakened the nation *will*

not be satisfied with reform only in one department of life. All movements must therefore proceed, everyone proceeding simultaneously.

But one need not quarrel with Sir Ganga Ram about his arrangement of the order of the needed reform. One cannot but acknowledge his zeal for social reform even though one may not agree with his political or economic panaceas. The figures he has given us are truly appalling. "Who will not weep," he asks, "over the figures which show the misery caused by child marriages and enforced widowhood?" Here are the figures of Hindu widows according to the Census of 1921:

Widows of ages up to	5—	11,892
,, from 5 to	10—	85,037
,, from 10 to	15—	232,147
		329,076

The figures are also given for the two previous censuses. The total of 1921 is a trifle higher than for the two decades. The widows of the other classes are also given. They only demonstrate still further the enormity of the wrong done to the Hindu girl widows. We cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl widow? We would resort to force in religion. But in the name of religion we force widowhood upon our three lacs of girl widows who could not understand the import of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily paying dearly. If our conscience was truly awakened, there would be no marriage before 15, let alone widowhood, and we would declare that these three lacs of girls were never religiously married There is no warrant in any *shastra* for such widowhood. 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.

And does not this Hindu widowhood stink in one's nostrils when one thinks of old and diseased men over 50 taking or rather purchasing girl wives, sometimes one on the top of another? So long as we have thousands of widows in our midst, we are sitting on a mine which may explode at any moment. If we would be pure, if we would save Hinduism, we must rid ourselves of this poison of enforced widowhood. The reform must be begun by those who have girl widows in their charge taking courage in both their hands and seeing that they are duly and well married—not remarried. They were never really married.

Young India, 5-8-1926

52

SUPPRESSED HUMANITY

The untouchable is not the only portion of suppressed humanity. The young widow in Hindu society is no less so. A correspondent from Bengal writes:

> "There is no restriction among Muslims about widow remarriage, but there is provision for a man to marry up to four wives, and as a matter of fact many Muslims have more than one wife. So none of the Muslim male population remains unmarried. Is it not, therefore, true that where there is no restriction against widow remarriage the number of females is much in excess of males? In other words, is it not true that, in the communities in which widow remarriage is allowed, polygamy should also be allowed?
>
> "If widow remarriage is made common among Hindus, will not young widows induce young men to marry them and make it difficult, rather impossible, to find out bridegrooms for unmarried girls?
>
> "Will not unmarried girls then commit all the sins which are committed or are presumed to be committed by widows, if there be no provision to keep more than one wife by a Hindu?
>
> "I refrain from reminding you of the love (*prem*), the saintly *grihastha* life, the *Pativrata Dharma* and such other things which should be taken into consideration in recommending widow remarriage."

In his zeal to prevent widows from remarrying, the correspondent has ignored many things. Musalmans have indeed the right to take more than one wife, but the vast majority of them have only one wife. The correspondent does not seem to know that unfortunately there is no prohibition against polygamy in Hinduism. Hindus in highest circles have been known to marry more than one wife. Many Princes marry an unlimited number. The correspondent further forgets the fact that it is only among the so-called higher classes that widow remarriage is prohibited. Among the vast majority belonging to the fourth division widows freely remarry, but no untoward consequences have taken place. Though free to take more wives than one, they are as a rule satisfied with one companion at a time.

The suggestion that young widows will take up all young men and leave none for unmarried girls betrays a woeful want of sense of proportion. The excessive anxiety for the chastity of young girls betrays an unhealthy mind. The limited number of widows remarrying can never leave a large number of young girls unmarried. And in any event, if ever such a problem arose, it would be found to be due to the early marriages that take place today. The remedy in anticipation is to prevent early marriages.

Of the love, the sanctity of *grihastha* life, etc., where there is a widow of tender age, the less said the better.

But the correspondent has missed the whole of my point. I have never advocated widow remarriage on a wholesale scale. The statistics collected by Sir Ganga Ram and summarized in these pages deal with widows up to 15 years only. These poor, wretched beings know nothing of *pativrata dharma*. They are strangers to love. The truer statement would be to say that these girls were never married at all. 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. It is a crime against God and man to call the union of the children a married state and then to decree widowhood for a girl whose so-called husband is dead.

I do believe that a real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity. Ramabai Ranade was such a gift. But the existence of girl widows is a blot upon Hinduism for which the existence of a Ramabai is no atonement.

Young India, 19-8-1926

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WIDOW REMARRIAGE

A correspondent pertinently asks whether Sir Ganga Ram's statistics regarding Hindu widows refer to all Hindu widows or only to those whom custom prohibits from marrying. On referring the inquiry to Sir Ganga Ram, I learn that his "statistics are not confined to classes in which widow remarriage is prohibited, they contained Hindu widows of all classes." Sir Ganga Ram adds: "Moreover it was no good to give figures of such classes only. We all know that Musalmans and Christians can remarry, yet there are widows amongst them who will remarry sooner or later. It is the *ban* on Hindu widows which I wish to remove. I don't want to force every widow to remarry."

This is no doubt good. But the ban in Hinduism is confined only to the classes which come within the prohibited zone. Outside the zone Hindu widows marry almost as freely as Musalman and Christian widows, though to be fair to the latter it must be mentioned that all Musalman and Christian widows do not remarry "sooner or later". There are many who do not from choice. There is no doubt, however, that a tendency exists even outside the prohibited zone to slavishly copy the so-called higher classes and to keep young widows unmarried. But so long as we have not fuller statistics it is not possible accurately to gauge the magnitude of the evil wrought by the custom of prohibiting widows from remarrying. It is to be hoped that Sir Ganga Ram's and other associations that have specialized in this matter will collect and publish the required statistics. It should be possible to know the number

of Hindu widows, say under twenty years, among the prohibited classes.

Let not my correspondent, whose question was prompted probably by a desire to justify the ban, and those who think with him, disregard the evil of young widows being prohibited from marrying. If there be even one child widow, the wrong demands redress.

Young India, 2-9-1926

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WIDOWS

What I have pleaded for is that parents who commit the sin of 'marrying' their daughters of tender age should expiate for the sin by remarrying these daughters, should they become widowed while they are yet in their teens. If the girls become widowed at a ripe age, it is their concern whether they would remarry or remain widowed. If I were called upon to state what the rule should be, I should say the same rule should apply to women as to men. If a fifty year old widower may remarry with impunity, it should be open to the widow of that age to do likewise. That, in my opinion, both will be sinning by remarriage is quite another matter. I should any day subscribe to a reform in the Hindu Law making sinful the remarriage of a widow or a widower who voluntarily married after maturity.

Young India, 14-10-1926

WIDOWS AND WIDOWERS

A correspondent writes:

"I have carefully read the correspondence, *A Catechism* and your replies published in the *Young India* dated 14th October last. While answering the first question you say: 'I should any day subscribe to a reform in the Hindu Law making sinful the remarriage of a widow or a widower who voluntarily married after maturity.'

"In my opinion a reform of this kind in the Hindu Law will be disastrous and to a large extent affect the moral standard of the society as a whole. For instance, if a man or a woman married after maturity unfortunately happens to lose either his wife or her husband after some days of married life, do you mean to say that the man or the woman should not be allowed to remarry, even though a great desire of enjoying married life is left unfulfilled, for the only reason that the man or the woman concerned married after maturity? If a reform of this kind is made in the Hindu Law, I am afraid, the man or the woman will find out some immoral way of gratifying his or her unsatisfied desire and there will be a wholesale moral corruption in the society. I therefore think that this question should entirely be left to the discretion of the man or the woman concerned."

My reply to the catechist was a challenge to man who is the law-giver. He will not allow his liberty to be restricted. My reply, therefore, is an attempt to show that what is considered desirable for man should be equally so for woman, and that therefore, a widow should have the same discretion as a widower about remarriage. Moreover, the Hindu Law is not inelastic like the laws made under the British constitution. It will be noticed that I have deliberately used the word 'sinful' instead of criminal. A crime carries with it punishment imposed by a man-worked State. A sin is punishable only by God or one's conscience. And I do think that, if Hindu society rises to the level I have aimed at in my answer, it will be a great gain for it and humanity.

Young India, 18-11-1926

PROSTITUTION OF IDEALS

I extract the following from a letter on the remarriage of child widows:

> "In your reply to B. Agra, in the *Young India* of September 23, you say that child widows should be remarried by their parents. How can this be done by those parents who perform *kanyadana*, i. e. who give their daughter in marriage according to shastric injunction? Surely it is impossible for parents, who have most solemnly and by religious rites renounced all claims on their daughter in favour of their son-in-law, to give her in marriage after his death to another person. She may of her own accord remarry if she will, but since she was given by her parents as a gift or donation (*dana*) to her husband, no one in the world after the death of her husband has any right to give her in marriage. And for the same reason she herself does not possess any right to remarry. She would, therefore, be faithless and a traitress to her dead husband, if she remarried without his express consent given at the time of his death. From a logical point of view it is thus impossible for a widow — be she child, young or old — who was married according to the *kanyadana* system which is prevalent amongst most Sanatanists, to remarry unless her husband had given her permission to do so. A true Sanatanist husband cannot, however, brook the idea of giving such permission. He will rather fain agree to his wife's becoming *sati*, if she can, or at any rate will like her to spend the rest of her life in devotion to his memory or, which is the same thing, in devotion to God. In this he will solely be actuated by the desire or sense of duty to help the preservation of the high ideals of Hindu marriage and widowhood, which are complementary to and not independent of each other."

I regard this kind of argument as prostitution of a high ideal. No doubt the correspondent means well, but his over-anxiety about purity of women makes him lose sight of elementary justice. What is *kanyadana* in the case of little

children? Has a father any rights of property over his children? He is their protector, not owner. And he forfeits the privilege of protection when he abuses it by seeking to barter away the liberty of his ward. Again, how can a donation be made to a child who is incapable of receiving a gift? There is no gift where the capacity to receive is lacking. Surely *kanyadana* is a mystic, religious rite with a spiritual significance. To use such terms in their literal sense is an abuse of language and religion. One may as well take literally the mystic language of the *Puranas* and believe in the earth being a flat dish sustained on the hood of a thousand-headed snake and Divinity lying in soft ease on an ocean of milk for His bed.

The least that a parent, who has so abused his trust as to give in marriage an infant to an old man in his dotage or to a boy hardly out of his teens, can do, is to purge himself of his sin by remarrying the daughter when she becomes widowed. As I have said in a previous note, such marriages should be declared null and void from the beginning.

Young India, 11-11-1926

WIDOW REMARRIAGE

[From a speech delivered at Mysore on 30-7-1927]

I have met hundreds of girls, but I have during my wanderings scarcely seen two or three who being above the age of 13 said that they were unmarried. It is no religion to have as one's wife a girl who is fit only to sit in one's lap, but it is the height of irreligion. I look to every youth in India to resolve not to marry a girl under 16. The widow has a sacred place in Hinduism, but the ancient Hindu widow was never in the wretched condition in which we find the Hindu widow of today. I cannot conceive of a girl of 15 becoming a widow. I do not regard a girl married who is given away in marriage by her parents without her consent and for pecuniary or some other advantage. If any such girl is widowed, I think, it is the duty of her parents to marry her again. So far as other widows are concerned, if they think that they cannot lead a life of pure widowhood, they have as much right to remarry as have widowers in the same predicament. Let your society make these three questions its own, and try its utmost to solve them.

Young India, 18-8-1927

STUDENT'S DUTY

[From a speech delivered at Pachaiappa's College, Madras]

You have mentioned there child marriage and child widows. A learned Tamilian has written to me to address the students on child widows. He has said that the hardships of child widows in this presidency are far greater than those of child widows in other parts of India. I have not been able to test the truth of this statement. You should know that better than I do. But what I would like you, young men around me, to do is that you should have a touch of chivalry about you. If you have that, I have a great suggestion to offer. I hope the majority of you are unmarried, and a fair number of you are also *brahmacharis*. I have to say, a 'fair number' because I know students; a student who casts his lustful eyes upon his sister is not a *brahmachari*. I want you to make this sacred resolve that you are not going to marry a girl who is not a widow, that you will seek out a widow girl, and that, if you cannot get a widow girl, you are not going to marry at all. Make that determination, announce it to the world, announce it to your parents if you have them or to your sisters. I call them widow girls by way of correction because I believe that a child ten or fifteen years old who was no consenting party to the so-called marriage, who having married, having never lived with the so-called husband, is suddenly declared to be a widow, is not a widow. It is an abuse of the term, abuse of language, and a sacrilege. The word 'widow' in Hinduism has a sacred odour about it. I am a worshipper of a true widow like the late Mrs. Ramabai Ranade who knew what it was to be a widow. But a child, nine years old, knows nothing of what a husband should be. If it is not true that there are such child widows in the presidency, then my case falls to the ground. But if there are such child widows, it becomes your sacred duty to make the determination to marry a girl widow, if you want to rid ourselves of this curse. I am superstitious enough to

'AN INDIGNANT PROTEST'

The head master of a Bengali school writes :

"Your advice and utterances to students at Madras, asking them to marry widowed girls only, have horrified us, and I send forth my humble but indignant protest.

This kind of advice will tend to destroy the tendency of the widows to observe lifelong *brahmacharya* which has given Indian womanhood the greatest or rather the higest place in the world, and destroy their chances of attaining salvation through *brahmacharya* in a single birth, throwing them on the filthy path of worldly happiness. Thus this kind of keen sympathy for widows will do a great disservice to them and an injustice to the maidens whose marriage problem has become at present one of complexity and difficulty. Your theory of marriage will overturn the Hindu theory of transmigration, rebirth and even *mukti*, and will bring down Hindu society on the same level with other societies, which we do not like. Our society has been demoralized no doubt, but we must have our eyes open to Hindu ideals and try to go up as far as we can and not be influenced, by the examples of other societies and ideals. Examples of Ahalyabai, Rani Bhavani, Behula, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti will guide the Hindu society, and we must direct it according to their ideals. I beg most humbly, therefore, that you will refrain from giving your opinions on these knotty questions and allow society to do what it thinks best."

This indignant protest leaves me unconverted and unrepentant. My advice will not wean from her purpose a a single widow who has a will of her own and who knows *brahmacharya* and is bent upon observing it. But if the advice is followed, it will certainly bring great relief to those girls of tender age who knew not the meaning of marriage when they were put through the ceremony. The use of the term 'widow' in their connection is a violent abuse of a name with sacred associations. It is precisely for the very object that my correspondent has in view that I

advise the youth of the country to marry either these so-called widows or not at all. The sacredness of the institution can be preserved only when it is purged of the curse of child widowhood.

The statement that the widows attain *moksha* if they observe *brahmacharya* has no foundation whatsoever in experience. More things are necessary than mere *brahmacharya* for the attainment of the final bliss. And *brahmacharya* that is superimposed carries no merit with it, and often gives rise to secret vice that saps the morals of the society in which that vice exists. Let the correspondent know that I am writing from personal observation.

I should be glad indeed, if my advice results in elementary justice being done to the maiden widows, and if for that reason the other maidens instead of being prematurely sold to man's lust are given an opportunity of waiting for maturity in age and wisdom.

I have no theory of marriage that is inconsistent with a belief in transmigration, rebirth or *mukti*. The reader should know that millions of Hindus whom we arrogantly describe as belonging to the lower order have no ban on widow remarriage. And I do not see how, if remarriage of old widowers does not interfere with that belief, real marriage of girls wrongly described as widows can interfere with that grand belief. I may mention for the edification of the correspondent that transmigration and rebirth are not mere theories with me but facts as patent as the daily rise of the sun. *Mukti* is a fact, to realize which I am striving with all my might. And it is the contemplation of *mukti* which has given me a vivid consciousness of the wrong that is being done to these maiden widows. Let us not in our emasculation mention in the same breath these modern injured maiden widows and the immortal names of Sita and others referred to by the correspondent.

Lastly, whilst there is, and very properly, glorification of real widowhood in Hinduism, there is, so far as I am aware, no warrant for the belief that in the Vedic times there was any absolute ban upon remarriage of widows.

But my crusade is not against real widowhood. It is against its atrocious caricature. The better way is not to regard as widows at all the girls I have in view and whom every Hindu who has a spark of chivalry in him is bound to relieve from their intolerable yoke. I therefore humbly but emphatically repeat the advice to every young Hindu to refuse to marry any but these maidens miscalled widows.

Young India, 6-10-1927

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LOOSE THINKING

A correspondent writes:

"In the course of an article you have said at one place: 'Where marriage is a sacrament, the union is not the union of bodies but the union of souls indissoluble even by the death of either party. Where there is a true union of souls, the remarriage of a widow or widower is unthinkable, improper and wrong.'

"At another place in the course of the same article you say: 'I consider remarriage of virgin widows not only desirable but the bounden duty of all parents who happen to have such widowed daughters.'

"How do you reconcile the two views?"

I find no difficulty in reconciling the two views. In the giving away of a little girl by ignorant or heartless parents without considering the welfare of the child and without her knowledge and consent there is no marriage at all. Certainly it is not a sacrament, and therefore remarriage of such a girl becomes a duty. As a matter of fact the word 'remarriage' is a misnomer in such cases. The virgin was never married at all in the true sense, and therefore on the death of her supposed husband it would be the most natural thing, it would be a duty, for the parents to seek for her a suitable companion in life.

Young India, 26-9-1929

HELPLESS WIDOWS

A bereaved friend sends a pathetic letter describing the plight of a 17 years old girl who has lost in Quetta her husband, two months old child, father-in-law and her husband's younger brother, that is to say everybody in her father-in-law's house. My correspondent adds that she escaped unhurt and returned with only her clothes on. She is his uncle's daughter, and he does not know how to console her or what to do with her. She herself is not undamaged. Her leg has been injured, though fortunately the bone remains intact. The correspondent concludes by saying:

> "I have left her with her mother in Lahore. I gently mentioned to her and other relatives whether the girl might not be remarried. Some listened to me sympathetically, and some resented the proposal. I have no doubt that many a girl must have suffered the same fate as this cousin of mine. Will you say a word of encouragement to these unfortunate widows?"

I do not know what my pen or voice can do in matters in which age-long prejudices are concerned. I have repeatedly said that every widow has as much right to remarry as every widower. Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon in Hinduism; enforced widowhood is a curse. And I very much feel that many young widows, if they were absolutely free, not so much from the fear of physical restraint as from the opprobrium of Hindu public opinion, would remarry without the slightest hesitation. All the young widows, therefore, who are in the unfortunate position of this bereaved sister from Quetta should have every inducement given to them to remarry, and should be sure that no blame would be attached to them if they chose to remarry, and every effort should be made to select for them suitable matches. This is not work that can be done by any institution. This work has got to be done by individual reformers whose relatives have become widows, and they have to carry on a vigorous, dignified and restrained propaganda

A TWENTIETH CENTURY SATI (?)

[A lady correspondent from Ghatkopar having invited Gandhiji to express his opinion on an alleged case of *sati* that was recently reported in a Bombay Gujarati paper, Gandhiji wrote an artical on the subject in Gujarati, of which, the following is an English rendering.]

I hope that the incident as reported in the press is not true, and that the lady in question died through illness or through accident, not by suicide. A *sati* has been described by our ancients, and the description holds good today, as one who, ever fixed in her love and devotion to her husband signalizes herself by her selfless service during her husband's lifetime as well as after, and remains absolutely chaste in thought, word and deed. Self-immolation on the death of the husband is a sign not of enlightenment but of gross ignorance as to the nature of the soul. The soul is immortal, unchangeable and immanent. It does not perish with the physical body, but journeys on from one mortal frame to another till it completely emancipates itself from earthly bondage. The truth of it has been attested to by the experience of countless sages and seers, and can be realized by anyone who may wish to even today. How can suicide be then justified in the light of these facts?

Again, true marriage means not merely the union of the bodies. It connotes the union of the souls too. If marriage meant no more than a physical relationship, the bereaved wife should be satisfied with a portrait or a waxen image of her husband. But self-destruction is worse than futile. It cannot help to restore the dead to life; on the contrary it only takes away one more from the world of the living.

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 the divine or universal love. That is why immortal Mira sang:

"God alone is my husband — none else."

It follows from this that a *sati* would regard marriage not as a means of satisfying the animal appetite but as a means of realizing the ideal of selfless and self-effacing service by completely merging her individuality in her husband's. She would prove her *satihood* not by mounting the funeral pyre at her husband's death, but she would prove it with every breath that she breathes from the moment that she plighted her troth to him at the *saptapadi* ceremony by her renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country. She would shun creature comforts and delights of the senses. She would refuse to be enslaved by the narrow domestic cares and interests of the family, but would utilize every opportunity to add to her stock of knowledge and increase her capacity for service by more and more cultivating renunciation and self-discipline, and by completely identifying herself with her husband learn to identify herself with the whole world.

Such a *sati* would refuse to give way to wild grief at the death of her husband, but would ever strive to make her husband's ideals and virtues live again in her actions and thereby win for him the crown of immortality. Knowing that the soul of him whom she married is not dead but still lives, she will never think of remarrying.

The reader will here be perhaps tempted to ask, "The *sati* that you have pictured is a being untouched by passion or animal appetite. She can have no desire for offspring. Why should she marry at all?" The reply is that in our present-day Hindu society marriage, in a vast majority of cases, is not a matter of choice. Again, there are some who believe that in our ramshackle age marriage is necessary as a shield to virtue and as an aid to self-restraint. And as a matter of fact I personally know several instances of persons, who, though at the time of the marriage were not free from animal passion, later on became imbued with the ideal of absolute chastity and found in their married life a powerful means for realizing their ideal. I have cited these instances to show that the ideal of *sati* that I have depicted is not merely a counsel of perfection that has no

place outside the world of theory but something that has to be lived up to and realized in this very matter-of-fact world of ours.

But I readily concede that the average wife who strives to attain the ideal of *sati* will be a mother too. She must, therefore, add to her various other qualities mentioned above a knowledge of rearing and bringing up children so that they might live to be true servants of their country.

All that I have said about the wife applies equally to the husband. If the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. You cannot have one set of weights and measures for the one and a different one for the other. Yet we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. It may, therefore, be taken for granted that the practice of the widow immolating herself on the death of her husband had its origin in superstitious ignorance and the blind egotism of man. Even if it could be proved that at one time the practice had a meaning, it can only be regarded as barbarous in the present age. 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.

I therefore regard the alleged self-immolation of this sister as vain. It certainly cannot be set up as an example to be copied. Don't I appreciate at least her courage to die, I may perhaps be asked. My reply is 'no' in all conscience. Have we not seen even evil-doers display this sort of courage? Yet no one has ever thought of complimenting them on it. Why should I take upon me the sin of even unconsciously leading astray some ignorant sister by my injudicious praise of suicide? *Satihood* is the acme of purity. This purity cannot be attained or realized by dying. It can be attained only through constant striving, constant immolation of the spirit from day to day.

Young India, 21-5-1931

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IN ANDHRADESH

I

I must however, descend from the soul-stirring to the soul-killing discoveries. At Cocanada, just after the great public meeting, on my return to the bungalow at about 9 p. m., I had a visit from some women and girls. The light was very dim as I entered. There was something uncanny about their movements and their looks. Somehow or other the usual greeting, "Do you spin? What will you give me for the Tilak Swaraj Fund?" would not come to my lips. On the contrary I asked my host who the ladies were. He did not know. He inquired and after some hesitation the answer came, "We are dancing girls." I felt like sinking into the bowels of the earth. My host soothed me by saying that there was a ceremony attached to the commencement of life. It made matters worse for me. It gave the damnable thing an air of respectability. I cross-examined. They said in the politest tones they had come to have *darshan*. "Will they take up some other occupation?" "Yes, if it gives us our livelihood." I had not the heart to close with them there and then. I felt ashamed of my sex. I spoke straight the next morning at Rajahmundry, the next halting place. It was the one most painful experience in Andhra. I suppose the sin is common enough in one shape or another in the rest of India. All I can say is that, if we will have Swaraj through self-purification, 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 brutes.

Young India, 13-4-1921

II

I had my full say at Rajahmundry on an important matter, and I hope that some Telugu friend will reproduce that speech, translate it, and spread it broadcast among hundreds of our countrymen. It was at about ten o'clock last night in Cocanada that dancing girls paid me a visit. When I understood the full significance of what they were, I felt like sinking in the earth below. I ask you to blot that sin out of us. It is not right that for our lust a single sister should have to live a life of shame and humiliation. In this movement of purification we are in duty bound to regard these girls as our sisters and daughters. Let us, who feel the pricks of violence that this insolent Government inflicts on us, not commit worse violence by ruining the life of a single girl in India. I ask you, brothers and sisters, to send me an assurance, as early as possible, that there is not a single dancing girl in this part of the land. I charge these sisters who are sitting behind me to go about from place to place, find out every dancing girl, and shame the men into shunning the wrong they are doing.

Young India, 11-5-1921

POSITION OF WOMEN

Shrimati Saraladevi of Cuttack writes:

> "Don't you admit that the treatment of women is as bad a disease as untouchability itself? The attitude of the young 'nationalists' I have come in contact with is beastly in ninety cases out of a hundred. How many of the non-cooperators in India do not regard women as objects of enjoyment? Is that essential condition of success — self-purification — possible without a change of attitude towards women?"

I am unable to subscribe that the treatment of women is 'a disease as bad as untouchability'. Shrimati Saraladevi has grossly exaggerated the evil. Nor can the charge levelled against the non-cooperators, of mere gratification of lust, be sustained. A cause can only lose by exaggeration. At the same time I have no difficulty about subscribing to the proposition that in order to fit ourselves for true Swaraj men must cultivate much greater respect than they have for woman and her purity. Mr. Andrews has struck a much truer note than this lady when he tells us in burning language that we dare not gloat over the shame of our fallen sisters. That any non-cooperator could have been found willing to relate with gusto that there were some of these erring sisters who reserved themselves for non-cooperators is a degrading thought. There can be no distinction between cooperators and non-cooperators in this matter of vital importance for our moral well-being. All of us men must hang our heads in shame, so long as there is a single woman whom we dedicate to our lust. I will far rather see the race of man extinct than that we should become less than beasts by making the noblest of God's creation the object of our lust. But this is not a problem merely for India, it is a world problem. And if I preach against the modern artificial life of sensual enjoyment and ask men and women to go back to the simple life epitomized in the *charkha*, I do so because I know that without an intelligent return to

simplicity there is no escape from our descent to a state lower than brutality. I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women. I detest child marriages. I shudder to see a child widow, and shiver with rage when a husband just widowed contracts with brutal indifference another marriage. I deplore the criminal indifference of parents who keep their daughters utterly ignorant and illiterate and bring them up only for the purpose of marrying them off to some young men of means. Notwithstanding all this grief and rage, I realize the difficulty of the problem Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation.

To illustrate what I mean, let me relate the enchanting description a valued Mussalman friend gave me of a talk he had with a noted feminist in London. He was attending a meeting of feminists. A lady friend was surprised to find a Mussalman at such a meeting! She inquired how he found himself there. The friend said he had two major and two minor reasons for so doing. His father died when he was an infant, He owed all he was in life to his mother. Then he was married to a woman who was a real partner in life. And he had no sons but four daughters, all minors, in whom as a father he was deeply interested. Was it any wonder that he was a feminist? He went on, Mussalmans were accused of indifference to women. There never was a grosser libel uttered. The law of Islam gave equal rights to women. He thought that man for his lust had degraded women. Instead of adorning the soul within her, he had set about adorning her body, and he had succeeded so well in his design that woman today did not know that she had begun to hug her bodily adornment which was almost a sign of her slavery. He added with his voice almost choked: if it was not so, how could it be that the fallen sisters delighted most in the embellishment of the body? Had we (men) not crushed the very soul out of them? No, he said, regaining self-possession, he wanted not only the mechanical freedom for women, he wanted also to break down the shackles that bound her of her own will. And

so he had intended to bring up his daughters to an independent calling.

I need not pursue the ennobling conversation any further. I want my fair correspondent to ponder over the central idea of the Mussalman friend's discourse and tackle the problem. 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

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PLAGUE-SPOTS OF LUCKNOW

An English friend writes to me at Lucknow:

> "I am just writing to ask you to write a word before you go to someone in authority among your supporters here in regard to the brothels in Lucknow. I was talking to the military police this morning in Aminabad, and it seems that there are some fifty of these places in that locality frequented by soldiers (some of whom have been courtmartialled as it is out of bounds), Europeans and Anglo-Indians. He did not say anything about Indians, but I heard the other day that they also go to these women. A word from you as to this debasing of manhood and lack of self-control would do more than anything else to counteract this evil. I will pledge myself to do all I can to help in the matter."

I wish I could share the English friend's belief that my word has the power he attributes to it. As I write this paragraph, the picture of the dear sisters who visited me at Cocanada after nightfall haunts me. They were dearer to me after I learnt of their shame. It was only by suggestion they could tell me what their life was. As the spokeswoman spoke to me, she had shame and sorrow written in her eyes. I could not bring myself to hold them guilty. I

devoted my speech after this meeting to the necessity of personal purity. My heart, therefore, goes out to the fallen sisters of Lucknow. They are driven to a life of shame. I am satisfied that they do not go to it from choice. And the beast in man has made the detestable crime a lucrative profession. Lucknow is noted for its love of ease. But Lucknow is also the seat of a Mussalman divine. It has its full share of all that is noble in Islam. For the Hindus Lucknow is the capital of the province where spotless Sita and Rama roamed and reigned. It recalls the best days of Hindu purity, nobility, bravery and steadfastness to truth. Non-cooperation is self-purification, and I urge all the non-cooperators and others to deal with this moral plague of Lucknow. I hope no custodian of Lucknow's good name will remind me that Lucknow is no worse than the other cities in India. Lucknow has come in by chance as an illustration. We are responsible throughout India for the purity and safety of our womanhood. Why should not Lucknow lead?

Young India, 18-8-1921

OUR FALLEN SISTERS

The first occasion I had of meeting those women who earn their livelihood out of their shame was at Coconada in the Andhra Province. There it was a few moment's interview with only half a dozen of them. The second occasion was at Barisal. Over one hundred of them met by appointment. They had sent a letter in advance, asking for an interview and telling me that they had become members of the Congress and subscribed to the Tilak Swaraj Fund, but could not understand my advice not to seek office in the various Congress Committees. They wound up by saying that they wished to seek my advice as to their future welfare. The gentleman who handed me the letter did so with great hesitation, not knowing whether I would be offended or pleased with the receipt of the letter. I put him at ease by assuring him that it was my duty to serve these sisters, if I could in any way.

For me the two hours I passed with these sisters is a treasured memory. They told me that they were over 350 in the midst of a population of about 20,000 men, women and children. They represent the shame of the men of Barisal, and the sooner Barisal gets rid of it the better for its great name. And what is true of Barisal is true, I fear, of every city. I mention Barisal, therefore, as an illustration. The credit of having thought of serving these sisters belongs to some young men of Barisal. Let me hope that Barisal will soon be able to claim the credit, too, of having eradicated the evil.

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. A woman's intuition has often proved truer than man's arrogant assumption of superior knowledge. There is method in putting Sita before Rama,

and Radha before Krishna. Let us not delude ourselves into the belief that this gambling in vice has a place in our evolution because it is rampant and in some cases even State-regulated in civilized Europe. Let us not also perpetuate the vice on the strength of Indian precedents. We should cease to grow the moment we cease to discriminate between virtue and vice and slavishly copy the past which we do not fully know. We are proud heirs to all that was noblest and best in the by-gone age. We must not dishonour our heritage by multiplying past errors. In a self-respecting India is not every woman's virtue as much every man's concern as his own sister's? Swaraj means ability to regard every inhabitant of India as our own brother or sister.

And so, as a man I hung my head in shame before these hundred sisters. Some were elderly, most were between twenty and thirty, and two or three were girls below twelve. Between them all, they told me, they had six girls and four boys, the eldest of whom was married to one of their own class. The girls were to be brought up to the same life as themselves, unless something else was possible. That these women should have considered their lot to be beyond repair was like a stab in the living flesh. And yet they were intelligent and modest. Their talk was dignified, their answers were clean and straight. And for the moment their determination was as firm as that of any *satyagrahi*. Eleven of them promised to give up their present life and take to spinning and weaving from the following day, if they received a helping hand. The others said they would take time to think, for they did not wish to deceive me.

Here is work for the citizens of Barisal. Here is work for all true servants of India, men as well as women. If there are 350 unhappy sisters in a population of 20,000, there may be 5,250,000 in all India. But I flatter myself with the belief that four-fifths of the population of India, which live in the villages and are purely agricultural, are not touched by the vice. The lowest figure for all India would, therefore, be 1,050,000 women living on the sale of their own honour. Before these unfortunate sisters can be weaned from their

degradation, two conditions have to be fulfilled. We men must learn to control our passions, and these women should be found a calling that would enable them to earn an honourable living. The movement of non-cooperation is nothing, if it does not purify us and restrain our evil passions. And there is no occupation but spinning and weaving which all can take up without overcrowding. These sisters, the vast majority of them, need not think of marriage. They agreed that they could not. They must, therefore. become the true *sannyasinis* of India. Having no cares of life but of service, they can spin and weave to their hearts' content. One million fifty thousand women deligently weaving every day for eight hours means that number of rupees per day for an impoverished India. These sisters told me they earned as much as two rupees per day. But then they admitted that they had many things needed to pander to man's lust, which they could discard when they took to spinning and weaving, reverting to a natural life. By the time I had finished with my interviewers they knew, without my telling them, why they could not be office-bearers in Congress Committees if they did not give up their sinfulness. None could officiate at the alter of Swaraj who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart.

Young India, 15-9-1921

FALLEN SISTERS SPINNING

At Noakhali I was told that two fallen sisters were not only spinning but that they were entirely supporting themselves by spinning. These were not young girls but women over forty who could no longer sell their shame but who would, but for spinning, have lived on begging. They were, therefore, strictly speaking, weaned from begging and not from their original trade. It is, however, a great thing for Noakhali to come in touch with these sisters and interest itself in their welfare. I was also told that some of them, though they had not given up their calling, had taken to spinning. I do not know whether it could be considered a gain for such sisters to spin if they would not give up their calling. It may well be used to cover their shame. At the same time there is no doubt that spinning could not be recommended to them as a means of livelihood. They are used to earning so much as one to two rupees per day, if not even more. They must have either weaving or even embroidery or other fancy work which would bring them a fair remuneration. It is, too, not a question that man can tackle. It must be reserved for the fair sex to rise to the occasion. Not until a woman of exceptional purity and strength of character rises and devotes herself to the task of redeeming this portion of fallen humanity will the problem of prostitution be tackled. No doubt man can do much among men who degrade themselves by enticing young women to sell themselves for their lust. 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 a 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

FALLEN SISTERS

At Madaripur the reception committee had arranged a spinning demonstration by the fallen sisters. I felt pleased at the sight, but I drew the attention of the organizers to the dangers attendant upon handling the question, But at Barisal where the movement for their reclamation first took definite shape, instead of its having taken a healthy course, the appearance of it was decidedly ugly. These unfortunate sisters have been organized there. A misleading name has been given to the organization. Its 'present aims and objects' are stated as follows:

"1. To help the poor and nurse the sick brothers and sisters.

"2. (a) To spread education amongst themselves;

(b) To promote spinning, weaving, tailoring, needle-work and other handicrafts, by establishing a *Nari Silpashram;*

(c) To give higher musical training;

"3. To join with all other institutions which have *satyagraha* and non-violence as their creed."

To say the least, this is putting the cart before the horse. These sisters are advised to do humanitarian work before reforming themselves. The idea of giving higher musical training will be accounted as extremely funny, if it was not tragic in its consequence. For let it be understood that these women do know how to dance and sing. And they may join all organizations which have *satyagraha* and non-violence as their creed all the time they are, by their trade, doing violence to truth and non-violence!

The document before me says further that they have been enrolled as Congress members and have also been allowed to 'do other national work befitting their humble position'. They have been even elected as delegates. I have seen what I regard as an obscene manifesto written in their name.

FALLEN SISTERS SPINNING

At Noakhali I was told that two fallen sisters were not only spinning but that they were entirely supporting themselves by spinning. These were not young girls but women over forty who could no longer sell their shame but who would, but for spinning, have lived on begging. They were, therefore, strictly speaking, weaned from begging and not from their original trade. It is, however, a great thing for Noakhali to come in touch with these sisters and interest itself in their welfare. I was also told that some of them, though they had not given up their calling, had taken to spinning. I do not know whether it could be considered a gain for such sisters to spin if they would not give up their calling. It may well be used to cover their shame. At the same time there is no doubt that spinning could not be recommended to them as a means of livelihood. They are used to earning so much as one to two rupees per day, if not even more. They must have either weaving or even embroidery or other fancy work which would bring them a fair remuneration. It is, too, not a question that man can tackle. It must be reserved for the fair sex to rise to the occasion. Not until a woman of exceptional purity and strength of character rises and devotes herself to the task of redeeming this portion of fallen humanity will the problem of prostitution be tackled. No doubt man can do much among men who degrade themselves by enticing young women to sell themselves for their lust. 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 a 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

FALLEN SISTERS

At Madaripur the reception committee had arranged a spinning demonstration by the fallen sisters. I felt pleased at the sight, but I drew the attention of the organizers to the dangers attendant upon handling the question, But at Barisal where the movement for their reclamation first took definite shape, instead of its having taken a healthy course, the appearance of it was decidedly ugly. These unfortunate sisters have been organized there. A misleading name has been given to the organization. Its 'present aims and objects' are stated as follows:

"1. To help the poor and nurse the sick brothers and sisters.

"2. (a) To spread education amongst themselves;

(b) To promote spinning, weaving, tailoring, needle-work and other handicrafts, by establishing a *Nari Silpashram;*

(c) To give higher musical training;

"3. To join with all other institutions which have *satyagraha* and non-violence as their creed."

To say the least, this is putting the cart before the horse. These sisters are advised to do humanitarian work before reforming themselves. The idea of giving higher musical training will be accounted as extremely funny, if it was not tragic in its consequence. For let it be understood that these women do know how to dance and sing. And they may join all organizations which have *satyagraha* and non-violence as their creed all the time they are, by their trade, doing violence to truth and non-violence!

The document before me says further that they have been enrolled as Congress members and have also been allowed to 'do other national work befitting their humble position'. They have been even elected as delegates. I have seen what I regard as an obscene manifesto written in their name.

Whatever be the motives, I cannot but regard the whole of this development as disgraceful. I appreciate spinning, but it must not be used as a passport to vice. I like everybody to subscribe to *satyagraha*, but I would prevent by all the power at my command an unrepentant professional murderer from signing the creed. My whole heart is with these sisters. But I am unable to identify myself with the methods adopted at Barisal. These sisters have acquired a status which for the sake of the moral well-being of society they must not have. We will not incorporate an association of known thieves for the purpose for which these women have formed their association. There is less warrant for this association, for these are more dangerous than thieves. The latter steal material possessions, the former steal virtue. Whilst man is primarily responsible for the existence of these unfortunate members of society, it must not be forgotten that they have acquired tremendously dangerous powers for mischief. I was told in Barisal that the corporate activity of these women had made them unhealthily forward, and that they were already producing a corrupt influence upon the Barisal youths. I wish that the association could be disbanded. I am firmly of opinion that, so long as they continue the life of shame, it is wrong to accept donations or services from them or to elect them as delegates or to encourage them to become members of the Congress. There is no legal bar against their entry into the Congress, but I had hoped that public opinion would keep them off the Congress and that they themselves would have the modesty to refrain from seeking Congress membership.

I wish that my words could reach them. I would urge to withdraw their names from the Congress, forget that they had an association, but quickly and resolutely give up their immoral trade. Then, and not till then, they may take up spinning as a discipline, and weaving or any other remunerative and clean occupation for a living.

Young India, 25-6-1925

PAINFULLY ILLUMINATING

"As you are now making a tour over many of the towns and rural areas of Bengal, I avail myself of the opportunity to draw your kind notice to a very dark side of the Bengal social life with the fervant hope that a word of advice and an appeal from you will have a great salutary effect. I have not the slightest desire to cast aspersions on any particular community, caste or sect. My only intention is to draw your kind attention to the actual state of things now prevalent in Bengal.

"I believe your attention has been certainly drawn to the amazing number of abduction cases now happening every day in Bengal. These moral eruptions are an unmistakable indication that there is something wrong in the inner working of our social life.

"Prevalence of prostitution and corruption in some of the Bengal districts is simply amazing. In most of the districts of Western Bengal and in many of the jute areas of Northern and Eastern Bengal brothels are considered to be a necessary part of even a village bazar. One can easily guess the condition that obtains in big marts or as they are called 'bundars'. During the busy season most of the important jute markets have their prostitute quarters augmented by floating brothels! Numerous prostitutes infest these places and ply on their infernal trade in boats which remain moored alongside the market. In many parts of Western Bengal almost all fairs are infested with these unhappy women. They erect temporary sheds on the *Mela* grounds and cater for the people who visit the *Mela*. In some of the districts quite a number of prostitutes are found settled round a zamindar's house or his *kutchery*. For they are generally patronized by the zamindar and his officers. Districts of Mymensingh, Pubna and Rajshahi are particularly notorious in this respect. As is naturally to be expected cases of abduction and molestation of women occur in the largest number in these districts. Bengal has nearly 4 lacs

of Vaishnava or *Bairagi* population (exact number male 174,497, female 203,610). Most of these people live by begging and singing. In short, the Bengali people spend more than 3 crores of rupees a year for the maintenance of these parasites. What is most unfortunate is that this Vaishnava community is regarded as a waste paper basket of Hindu society. A majority of the abduction cases are in connection with Vaishnava women. Under the garb of religion these unfortunate people lead a most sordid and corrupt life. I only ask you to make confidential enquiries about my statement and find for yourself how far it is correct. Introduction of the *charkha* coupled with stoppage of indiscriminate charity would save these 4 lacs of people and turn them into a valuable asset.

"Conditions prevailing in and around Calcutta are as bad as can be imagined. The crushing poverty of many of the western Bengal districts, Midnapur, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, etc., induces hundreds of women to forsake their village homes and flock to Calcutta and its suburbs. Here they lead a dubious life by working as maid servants *(jhee)*, betel leaf sellers *(panwali)*, etc. A very low standard of morality amongst the masses is another cause of wide-spread prevalence of venereal diseases and leprosy in these districts. Of 15,451 lepers of Bengal 7,240 (nearly half) hail from Burdwan division alone ! (Bengal Census report 1921, part II, page 162.) Again these are the most decaying districts of Bengal and have suffered the greatest reduction in population. Strangely enough, drinking is more wide-spread in these districts than anywhere else in Bengal.

"The theatres of Calcutta are chiefly run by fallen women. These are resorted to by large numbers of students and even by noted public men. Important public meetings are held in these theatre halls. Lengthy appreciations of actresses and dancing girls find a place in the columns of our daily papers (unfortunately some of the most influential nationalist papers). Besides, there are Bengali illustrated magazines specially devoted to the subject of drama and dancing, etc. Outturn of debasing literature in the Bengali language is perhaps greater now than it was ten years ago.

"All these things make one's heart sink within him and cannot but overpower him with a feeling of despair.

"Sir, as the matter stands I cannot but in all humility ask for a public expression of your opinion on the following points :

"1. Whether a Congress member or volunteer or anyone aspiring to be a nationalist worker should visit theatres run by women or cinema houses where pictures rousing carnal desires are exposed in all seducing forms ?

"2. Whether any public meeting be held in any of these theatre houses ?

"3. Whether any Indian nationalist paper should publish advertisements of opera and dancing houses run by women or appreciation of actresses etc., as well as advertisements of wines and intoxicants ?

"4. Should not all students and Congress workers strictly abstain from smoking and drinking ? I am reliably informed by the traders themselves that Rs. 50,000 worth of cigarettes and *bidis* are sold every month in the town of Chittagong (population of the town 36,030 and of the district 1,611,422)!!

"5. Should not all municipalities and local boards try their utmost to suppress drinking and brothels and should not these bodies exert their utmost to maintain a propaganda to eradicate these social evils ?"

This letter was handed to me at Chittagong and has been in my jacket awaiting attention at the first opportunity. The reader is aware how the attempt to wean the fallen sisters from their error has apparently resulted in giving a passport to vice. Prostitution, I knew, was a tremendous and a growing evil. 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. But I was unprepared for the terrible state the correspondent declares to exist. I fear that he has not exaggerated the evil. For, during my tour, I have had corroboration from various sources. 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. London is seething with the vice. Paris is notorious for its vice which has almost become a fashion. If law would have prevented it, these highly organized nations would have cured their capitals of the vice. No amount of writing on the part of reformers like myself can deal with the evil in any appreciable form. The political domination of England is bad enough. The cultural is infinitely worse. For whilst we resent and therefore endeavour to resist the political domination, we hug the cultural, not realizing in our infatuation that when the cultural domination is complete the political will defy resistance. Let me not be misunderstood. I do not wish to imply that before the British rule prostitution was unknown in India. But I do say that it was not so rampant as now. It was confined to the few upper ten. Now it is fast undoing the youth of the middle classes. My hope lies in the youth of the country. Such of them as are prey to the vice are not vicious by nature. They are helplessly and thoughtlessly drawn to it. They must realize the harm that it has done them and society. They must understand too that nothing but a rigorously disciplined life will save them and the country from utter ruin. Above all, unless they visualize God and seek His aid in keeping them from temptation, no amount of dry discipline will do them much good. Truly has the seer said in the Gita that 'Desire persists though man may by fasting keep his body under restraint. Desire goes only when one has seen God face to face'. Seeing God face to face is to feel that He is enthroned in our hearts, even as a child feels a mother's affection without needing any demonstration. Does a child reason out the existence of a mother's love? Can he prove it to others? He triumphantly declares, 'It is'. So must it be with the existence of God. He defies reason. But He is experienced. Let us not reject the experience of Tulsidas, Chaitanya, Ramdas and a host of other spiritual teachers, even as we do not reject that of mundane teachers.

The correspondent has inquired whether Congressmen may do the many things he has enumerated, such as theatre-going, etc. I have already remarked that man cannot be made good by law. If I had the power of persuasion, I would certainly stop women of ill fame from acting as actresses, I would prevent people from drinking and smoking, I would certainly prevent all the degrading advertisements that disfigure even reputable journals and newspapers, and I would most decidedly stop the obscene literature and portraits that soil the pages of some of our magazines. But, alas, I have not the persuasive power I would gladly possess. But to regulate these things by law whether of the State or the Congress would be a remedy probably worse than the disease. What is wanted is an intelligent, sane, healthy and pure public opinion. There is no law against using kitchens as closets or drawing rooms as stables. But public opinion, i. e. public taste, will not tolerate such a combination. The evolution of public opinion is at times a tardy process, but it is the only effective remedy.

Young India, 9-7-1925

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GAMBLING AND VICE

In the provinces where the Congress has a majority, all kinds of hopes have been raised. Some are legitimate and will, no doubt, be fulfilled. Some others cannot be. Thus the people who indulge in gambling, which unfortunately is even on the increase in the Bombay Province, think that gambling will be legalized and surreptitious dens that cover Bombay will be no longer required. I am not quite sure that, even if gambling is legalized on a universal scale, as it is already in a restricted manner, there will be no illegal dens. Thus it has been suggested that the Turf Club, which has the monopoly of gambling on the race course, should be allowed to open an additional entrance to make it easier for poor people to gamble. The bait offered is a larger

revenue. A similar suggestion has been made for the regulation and licensing of brothels. The argument advanced, as in all such cases, is that the vice will continue whether it is legalized or not and, therefore, it is better to legalize it and make it safe for those who visit the brothels. Let me hope that the ministers will not fall into this trap. 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. As for gambling on the race course, it is so far as I am aware, an importation, like many other importations from the West, and if I had my way, would withdraw the protection or the law that gambling on the race course enjoys even to the extent it does. The Congress programme being one of self-purification, as is stated in so many words in the resolution of 1920, the Congress can have nothing to do with income derived from any vice. The ministers will, therefore, use the authority that they have obtained for educating public opinion in the right direction and for stopping gambling in high quarters. It is useless to hope that the unwary public will not copy the bad manners of the so-called high-placed people. I have heard it argued that horse racing is necessary for breeding good horses. There may be truth in this. Is it not possible to have horse racing without gambling, or is gambling also an aid to the breeding of good horses?

Harijan, 4-9-1937

OUR UNFORTUNATE SISTERS

Of all the addresses I received in the South the most touching was one on behalf of the *devadasis* — a euphemism for prostitutes. It was prepared and brought by people who belong to the clan from which these unfortunate sisters are drawn. I understood from the deputation that brought the address that reform from within was going on, but that the rate of progress was still slow. The gentleman who led the deputation told me that the public in general was apathetic to the reform. The first shock I received was at Cocanada. And I did not mince matters when I spoke to the men of that place. The second was at Barisal where I met a large number of these unfortunate sisters. Whether they be known as *devadasis* or by any other name, the problem is the same. It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow, of deep humiliation, that a number of women have to sell their chastity for man's lust. 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. 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. 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

A DOUBLE CRIME

The moral filth made a still deeper wound. It was a tragedy to see the women seated amongst men, their own relatives, both not knowing what to do to get out of a situation that the devil of custom had landed them into. "Not one of us likes it, but how to maintain ourselves?" was the helpless cry of all. "Supposing I took you away, and gave you sufficient food and clothing and education and clean surroundings, would you not leave this life of shame and come with me?" asked Gandhiji. They said, "Yes", but Gandhiji had no illusion about the matter. He referred to it in the speech, and branded the drowsy consciences of the criminals with words of fire:

"As I was talking to them and understanding the hidden meaning of the thing, my whole soul rose in rebellion against the custom of dedicating minor girls for immoral purposes. 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. And I assure you that as I was talking to them I saw that there was no evil in their eyes, and that they were as capable of fine feelings and fine character as any other women. What difference can there be between them and our own blood sisters? And if we do not allow our own sisters to be used for immoral purposes, how dare we allow these to be so used? Let the Hindus who are in any way whatsoever connected with these things purge society of this pest. The majority of them have promised to retrace their steps, if I fulfil the promise I have made to them. But if they cannot, I shall blame not them but the society in which they are passing their lives. It is up to you to extend the hand of fellowship to these sisters, it is up to

you to see that they are reclaimed from their life of shame. I know that when they are again face to face with temptation it will become difficult for them to resist it. But if man will restrain his lust and society stands up against the evil, it will be easily possible to rid society of the evil."*

M. D.

Young India, 22-2-1927

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THE DEVADASI

The indefatigable Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi writes:

"As you have been openly denouncing the *devadasi* system in the Hindu temples, I make bold to appeal to you for help in the great task of getting rid of that evil. In this Presidency I find it an uphill task, as the so-called educated men and even some of the most prominent Congressmen oppose my reform measures and defend that infamous institution.

"My Devadasi Bill, which has now become an Act, deals only with the Inam-holding *devadasis*, but there is a section of that community which practises dedication under the cloak of religion simply to make a living out of prostitution. This is nothing but traffic in children; because children are even bought and adopted (adoption by a *devadasi* is allowed by our Hindu Law), and, at an age when they are innocent and cannot judge or act for themselves, are led into this abominable life, from which they rarely escape. I have had many memorials and petitions from the enlightened section of that community asking me to bring about legislation to punish such wicked people who trade upon the children's souls and bodies.

"The Penal Code Sections 372 and 373 have proved ineffective. Hence I have given notice of another Bill for the success of which I want your blessings. Some may argue that legislation is no good so long as the people do

* From a description of Gandhiji's visit to Mayavaram (Tamil Nad).

not realize the evil in that custom; but my contention is that a good section of our people perceives the injustice. Now I myself feel that I could rescue many of these girls, if I had some legal power to take away children from such criminal parents.

"Among the *devadasi* community itself there is a great awakening, and they have been doing propaganda on a large scale, but I am pained to observe that the high caste people do not help them in that community's efforts to reform themselves. And, further, our laws for the protection of children are almost nil in this Presidency compared with the protection that exists for the children of other countries and even the children of other provinces such as Bombay and Bengal.

"We know that in advanced countries health and moral reform always preceded the formation of public opinion in their favour as they were themselves educative factors. In this Presidency we cannot blame the Government so much as the high caste people who do not sufficiently realize that all children, irrespective of caste or creed, need our care and sympathy, and in this matter of rescuing innocent children from the prospect of a dreadful life they should rise above their communal and caste prejudices."

I heartily endorse the writer's proposal. Indeed I do not think that the proposed legislation will be in advance of public opinion. The whole of the enlightened public opinion that is vocal is against the retention of the system in any shape or form. The opinion of the parties concerned in the immoral traffic cannot count, just as the opinion of keepers of opium dens will not count in favour of their retention, if public opinion is otherwise against them. The *devadasi* system is a blot upon those who countenance it. It would have died long ago but for the supineness of the public. Public conscience in this country some how or other lies dormant. It often feels the awfulness of many a wrong, but is too indifferent or too lazy to move. But if some active spirit like Dr. Reddi moves, that conscience is prepared to lend such support as indifference can summon up. I am, therefore, of opinion that Dr. Reddi's proposal is in no way

premature. Such legislation might well have been brought earlier. In any case I hope that she will receive the hearty support of all lovers of purity in religious and general social life.

Young India, 29-8-1929

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ALMOST LIKE HARIJANS

An Andhra graduate, who has married a *devadasi*, writes :

"I wanted to write to you long ago. But I was awfully shy. Thank God, I am at last confiding my burden to you.

"I come from the *devadasi* community. My life was socially a torture. Mahatmaji, do you think there is any other profession worse than that of the dancing girls in the universe ? Is it not a blot on India that prostitution should personify in a community ?

"Andhradesh, I think, is the heart of this evil. Hindu society here engages dancing girls—especially during marriages and festivals of the Deity—to sing obscene songs accompanied by obscene gestures before the pious deity, and sets a bad example before the newly-wed couple.

"The misery of a whole community consigned to a life of prostitution is great. Young men here are trying their best to root out this evil. But they badly need help and guidance. Won't you kindly take up this matter as equally important and emergent as the Harijan movement ? Please have this affair always in a corner of your heart and give it publicity. You have not only the Congress but the whole public opinion at your back. What the Brothels Bill and the I. P. C. could not do, I am confident a word from your mouth would do.

"I am legally and religiously married to a girl of my own community, and I am a father of two daughters. My wife is as pious in my eyes as any other Hindu wife. Still society looks down upon us. The sins of our ancestors are

wreaking vengeance on us. The stigma of prostitution is attached to us, though both of us are free from the vice.

"Harijans and *devadasis* are the only two communities which are almost in the same degree of depravity. Of course they will have to help themselves to moral elevation. Still a teacher like you would educate them and the society more quickly than they can do it for themselves. These are two sister movements. Please don't forget the sister community in your enthusiasm for the Harijans."

I wish I had the ability he ascribes to me. I am painfully conscious of my limitations. The correspondent is perhaps unaware that when I was editing the *Young India* I used constantly to refer to the *devadasi* institution and prostitution in general. But my effort did not root out the evil. It would only bring relief in individual cases. If I now refer to the question in the pages of the *Harijan*, it is not because I have any hope of faring better than I did during the *Young India* days. I shall be pleased, if this fresh effort brings relief in individual cases.

The correspondent is quite right in likening the *devadasis* to Harijans. Nevertheless he will recognize the difference there is between the two. But it is waste of time to measure the degree of difference in wretchedness. Like untouchability this institution for the perpetuation of vice must go if Hinduism is to be purified. Those who are engaged in the noble task of ridding society of the evil will have to work in a systematic manner and not become dispirited if they do not find their effort crowned with success at once. Let them concentrate on the evil immediately surrounding them. There are two ways of working at the problem. There should be work amongst those who employ *devadasis* for their base end, and the *devadasi* community itself. If the latter will refuse to serve society's vice, the system ends at once. But the process is not quite so simple. Hunger knows no sin. Even Like Drona and Bhishma, *devadasis* point to their bellies in justification of sin. Habit has dulled their sense of sin regarding their calling. Therefore they have to be found an innocent source of livelihood in the place of prostitution. Then there is work in society. Festival and

marriage parties in which *devadasis* are employed have to be sought out and those in charge reasoned with. Reformers may not dictate reform to society. They will have to appeal to its reason and heart. In a way all reform is a kind of education, just as essential as the education which is commonly known as such. Hence it is a science by itself, and yields results only when systematically pursued.

The correspondent, who has dared to marry a *devadasi*, deserves to be congratulated. He should be satisfied with the approbation of his own conscience and live down the prejudice against him and his wife.

Harijan, 14-9-1934

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LEGALIZED PROSTITUTION

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi furnishes one more proof of the very high expectations formed of Congress ministries. People have a right to form such expectations. Even opponents of the Congress have admitted that they are standing the test well. The Congress ministries seem to be vying with one another in adopting ameliorative measures so as to make their administration respond to the real Indian environment. Dr. Muthulakshmi has issued a public appeal to the Madras ministry to pass her Bill which puts a stop to the immoral custom of dedicating *devadasis* to a life of shame. I have not examined the Bill. But the idea behind is so sound that it is a wonder that it has not yet found a place in the statute book of the Southern Province. I wholly agree with Dr. Muthulakshmi that the reform is as urgent as prohibition. She recalls the fact that the present Premier spoke out many years ago in strong terms against the evil practice. I know that he is no less eager now that he has some power to deal with it legally. And I hope with her that before many months have passed the *devadasi* system will cease to have legal sanction.

Harijan, 25-9-1937

HINDU LAW AND MYSORE

Shri Bhashyam Aiyengar of Banglore writes :

"The principles of Hindu Law as at present administered are antiquated and opposed to our sense of equity and justice. I shall give a few instances :

"1. Near and dear relations like the sister's daugher, the daughter-in-law, the brother's widow, and the stepmother are altogether denied the right of inheritance. If a man were to leave a widowed daughter-in-law as his only surviving relation, his properties escheat to the Government, and the poor girl who staked all her life and fortune on the family of her husband gets out into the street.

"2. Even such near relations as are included in the list of heirs do not get a chance because of the priorities of distant agnates. The sister is an heir: but if only the deceased has left a fifth descendant of a great-great-grandfather of his, the latter takes the property and the sister gets nothing. So too the son's daughter, the sister's son, and the brother's daughter.

"3. Women are not allowed to exercise full rights of ownership in properties inherited by or gifted to them. A widow should carefully handle her husband's property, and if only she spends more or incurs a debt on the security of the property, may be for her own livelihood, a distant *dayada* can drag her to the court and coerce her into giving up her rights. Mitakshara, which is the prevailing authority here, clearly and definitely says that all properties which a woman may get in any manner whatsoever are her *stridhana* and she can dispose them of at her will. The Privy Council refused to follow it, stating that Indians always treated women as incapables and the author of Mitakshara is a fire-eater

"4. The deaf and the dumb are excluded from inheritance. In this we are beating the lame man with his own crutches.

"5. The legality of widow remarriage is not recognized in Mysore as it is in British India.

"6. It is doubtful whether post-puberty marriage is legal. The age of consent should be raised to 14 in the case of girls.

"7. Divorce may be provided for, if people agree. We had it in India formerly. We find Parashara mentioning the circumstances under which a wife may marry a second husband during the lifetime of the first.

"8. Intercaste marriages are not allowed under the present law. They must be legalized. It was an institution freely recognized by our ancients. Many of our sages, such as Vasishtha, Vyasa, Narada and Parashara were the offspring of intercaste marriages. If I may marry a Christian wife lawfully, why may not I be permitted to marry a Hindu wife though of another caste?

"9. An orphan is declared ineligible for adoption. If ever a boy be fit for adoption, it is the orphan, and yet we have the prohibition.

"10. Widows are not allowed to adopt unless they have been authorized by the husband or the consent of *sapindas* is taken. Authority should be presumed, and the widow allowed to adopt unless directed by the husband not to do so. This is the law in Bombay.

"There are many more such instances. I have chosen only a few.

"Thinking people feel the oppressiveness and desire reform. The only way of changing the law is by legislation. The legislature is unable to pass any law without consulting public opinion. And public opinion can only be consulted by a committee appointed for the purpose. Hence I moved a resolution in the last budget session of our Assembly asking for the appointment of a committee to go into the question, take evidence, and report thereon, formulating suggestions for legislative action. It was unanimously passed by the House.

"The committee has not yet been appointed, though people all over the State desire it. The fear seems to be that British India not having moved in the matter yet, it may be that any attempt by Mysore might be laughed at. This is absurd as you said. Mysore is peculiarly fitted to

undertake the work, whereas there are real difficulties with British India. Mysore has peculiar advantages which it would be unwise on our part to ignore. We have now a most enlightened ruler and an equally earnest and progressive Dewan. If we cannot effect the desired reforms now, we never can hope to do it.

"Can you not take up this matter in *Young India?*"

The prominence I have given to the foregoing need not imply that I endorse every one of the reforms suggested by the writer. That some of them require immediate attention I have no doubt. Nor have I any doubt that all of them demand serious consideration from those who would rid Hindu society of its anachronisms.

In pre-British days there was no such thing as rigid Hindu Law governing the lives of millions. The body of regulations known as Smritis were indicative, rather than inflexible, codes of conduct. They never had the validity of law such as is known to modern lawyers. The observance of the restraints of the Smritis was enforced more by social than legal sanctions. The Smritis were, as is evident from the self-contradictory verses to be found in them, continually passing, like ourselves, through evolutionary changes, and were adapted to the new discoveries that were being made in social science. Wise kings were free to procure new interpretations to suit new conditions. Hindu religion or Hindu *shastras* never had the changeless and unchanging character that is now being sought to be given to them. No doubt in those days there were kings and their councillors who had the wisdom and authority required to command the respect and allegiance of society. But now the custom has grown up of thinking that Smriti and everything that goes by the name of *shastras* is absolutely unchangeable. The verses which we find to be unworkable or altogether repugnant to our moral sense we conveniently ignore. This very unsatisfactory state of things has to be, some day or other and somehow, changed, if Hindu society is to become a progressive unit in human evolution. The British rulers cannot make these changes because of their different religion and their different ideal. Their ideal is to sustain their

commercial supremacy and to sacrifice every other interest, moral or otherwise, for the attainment of that ideal. Unless, therefore, Hindu public opinion clearly demands it, and it can be made without any injury to their ideal, no drastic change in our custom or so-called laws will be attempted or countenanced by them. And it is difficult to focus Hindu public opinion on identical points in a vast territory like British India covering many schools of thought and law. And such public opinion as there is is naturally and necessarily preoccupied with the struggle for political freedom. A State like Mysore, however, has no such limitations or preoccupations. In my humble opinion it is its duty to anticipate British India in the matter of removing the anachronisms in the Hindu Law and the like. Mysore State is large and important enough to attempt such changes. It has become a progressively constitutional monarchy. It has a Legislative Assembly representative enough to initiate social changes. It seems already to have passed a resolution asking for the appointment of a committee to consider what changes, if any, are necessary in the Hindu Law. And if a strong committee representing orthodox as well as progressive Hindu opinion is appointed, its recommendations must prove useful and pave the way towards making the necessary changes. I do not know the rules of the Mysore Assembly governing the constitution of such committees, but there is little doubt that they are elastic enough to admit of appointing or co-opting members from outside the Mysore State. Anyway Shri Bhashyam Aiyengar has shown that a revision of the Hindu Law is absolutely necessary in several cases. No State is better fitted than Mysore for initiating the belated reform.

Young India, 13-10-1927

TO THE WOMEN OF INDIA

Dear Sisters,

The All India Congress Committee has come to a momentous decision in fixing the 30th September next as the final date for completing the boycott of foreign cloth begun by the sacrificial fire lit on the 31st July in Bombay in memory of Lokamanya Tilak. I was accorded the privilege of setting fire to the huge pile containing costly *saris* and other dresses which you have hitherto considered fine and beautiful. I feel that it was right and wise on the part of the sisters who gave their costly clothing. Its destruction was the most economical use you could have made of it, even as destruction of plague-infected articles is their most economical and best use. It was necessary surgical operation designed to avert more serious complaints in the body politic.

The women of India have during the past twelve months worked wonders on behalf of the motherland. You have silently worked away as angels of mercy. You have parted with your cash and your fine jewellery, You have wandered from house to house to make collections. Some of you have even assisted in picketing. Some of you, who were used to fine dresses of variegated colours and had a number of changes during the day, have now adopted the white and spotless but heavy *khadi sari* reminding one of a woman's innate purity. You have done all this for the sake of India, for the sake of the Khilafat, for the sake of the Punjab. There is no guile about your word or work. Yours is the purest sacrifice untainted by anger or hate. Let me confess to you that your spontaneous and loving response all over India has convinced me that God is with us. No other proof of our struggle being one of self-purification is needed than that lacs of India's women are actively helping it.

Having given much, more is now required of you. Men bore the principal share of the subscriptions to the Tilak Swara Fund. But completion of the Swadeshi programme

is possible only if you give the largest share. Boycott is impossible unless you will surrender the whole of your foreign clothing. So long as the taste persists, so long is complete renunciation impossible. And boycott means complete renunciation. We must be prepared to be satisfied with such cloth as India can produce, even as we are thankfully content with such children as God gives us. I have not known a mother throwing away her baby even though it may appear ugly to an outsider. So should it be with the patriotic women of India about Indian manufactures. And for you only hand-spun and hand-woven can be regarded as Indian manufactures. During the transition stage you can only get coarse *khadi* in abundance. You may add all the art to it that your taste allows or requires. And if you will be satisfied with coarse *khadi* for a few months, India need nor despair of seeing a revival of the fine rich and coloured garments of old which were once the envy and the despair of the world. I assure you that a six months' course of self-denial will show you that what we today regard as artistic is only falsely so, and that true art takes note not merely of form but also of what lies behind. There is an art that kills and an art that gives life. The fine fabric that we have imported from the West or the Far East has literally killed millions of our brothers and sisters, and delivered thousands of our dear sisters to a life of shame. True art must be evidence of happiness, contentment and purity of its authors. And if you will have such art revived in our midst, the use of *khadi* is obligatory on the best of you at the present moment.

And not only is the use of *khadi* necessary for the success of the Swadeshi programme, but it is imperative for every one of you to spin during your leisure hours. I have suggested to boys and men also that they should spin. Thousands of them, I know, are spinning daily. But the main burden of spinning must, as of old, fall on your shoulders. Two hundred years ago the women of India spun not only for home demand but also for foreign lands. They spun not merely coarse counts but the finest that the world has ever spun. No machine has yet reached the fineness of

the yarn spun by our ancestors. If then we are to cope with the demand for *khadi* during the two months and afterwards, you must form spinning clubs, institute spinning competitions, and flood the Indian market with hand-spun yarn. For this purpose some of you have to become experts in spinning, carding, and adjusting the spinning wheels. This means ceaseless toil. You will not look upon spinning as a means of livelihood. For the middle class it should supplement the income of the family, and for very poor women it is undoubtedly a means of livelihood. The spinning wheel should be, as it was, the widow's loving companion. But for you who will read this appeal, it is presented as a duty, as *dharma*. If all the well-to-do women of India were to spin a certain quantity daily, they would make yarn cheap and bring about much more quickly than otherwise the required fineness.

The economic and the moral salvation of India thus rests mainly with you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation. You can bring up the children of India to become simple, god-fearing and brave men and women, or you can coddle them to be weaklings unfit to brave the storms of life and used to foreign fineries which they would find it difficult in after life to discard. The next few weeks will show of what stuff the women of India are made. I have not the shadow of a doubt as to your choice. The destiny of India is far safer in your hands than in the hands of a Government that has so exploited India's resources that she has lost faith in herself. At every one of the women's meetings I have asked for your blessings for the national effort, and I have done so in the belief that you are pure, simple and godly enough to give them with effect. You can ensure the fruitfulness of your blessings by giving up your foreign cloth and during your spare hours ceaselessly spinning for the nation.

I remain,
Your devoted brother,
M. K. GANDHI

Young India, 11-8-1921

79

WOMEN'S PART

I

The women of Calcutta have obstructed the gentlemen of Calcutta by trying to sell *khadi*, and a telegram in the newspapers has announced that they have been consequently arrested. The company includes the devoted partner of the President-Elect, his widowed sister, and his niece. I had hoped that in the initial stages at any rate women would be spared the honour of going to gaol. They were not to become aggressive civil resisters. But the Bengal Government, in their impartial zeal to make no distinction even of sex, have conferred the honour upon three women of Calcutta. I hope that the whole country will welcome this innovation. The women of India should have as much share in winning Swaraj as men. Probably in this peaceful struggle woman can outdistance man by many a mile. We know that she is any day superior to man in her religious devotion. Silent and dignified suffering is the badge of her sex. And now that the Government of Bengal have dragged woman into the line of fire, I hope that the women all over India will take up the challenge and organize themselves. In any case they were bound, when a sufficient number of men had been removed, for the honour of their sex to step into their places. But now let it be side by side with men in sharing the hardships of gaol life. God will protect their honour. When, as if to mock man, her natural protectors became helpless to prevent Draupadi from being denuded of her last piece of cloth, the power of her own virtue preserved her honour. And so will it be to the end of time. Even the weakest physically have been given the ability to protect their own 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.

I would suggest to the women of India quietly but without loss of time to collect names of those who are

ready to enter the line of fire. Let them send their offer to the women of Bengal, and let the latter feel that their sisters elsewhere are ready to follow their noble example. It is likely that there will not be many forthcoming to brave the risks of a gaol life and all it must mean to women. The nation will have no cause to be ashamed, if only a few offer themselves for sacrifice in the first instance.

Men's duty is clear. We must not lose our heads. Excitement will not protect our women or our country. We have asked the Government to spare neither women nor children. It certainly did not in the Punjab during those martial law days. I consider it decidedly more civilized that the officials in Calcutta should under a legal pretence arrest our sisters in Calcutta for what they consider is a crime than that a Bosworth Smith in the Punjab should spit upon, swear at, and otherwise humiliate, the women of Manianwala. But we do offer our women for imprisonment, if they will arrest them in the prosecution of public service. We must not expect the Government to look on with indifference whilst the women are spreading the gospel of Swadeshi and undermining the very basis of its existence—its traffic in foreign cloth and the consequent ability to exploit India's resources. If, therefore, we men allow our sisters to take part in the Swadeshi agitation, we must concede the right of the Government to imprison them equally with men.

Young India, 15-12-1921

II

Woman is sacrifice personified. When she does a thing in the right spirit, she moves mountains. We have misused our women. We have possibly neglected them. But the spinning wheel, thank God, is transforming them. And when all the leaders and others who are in the good books of the Government have been honoured with imprisonment, I have not the faintest doubt that the women of India will finish the work left by men and that they will do it far more gracefully than men.

Young India, 22-12-1921

TO THE WOMEN OF INDIA

The impatience of some sisters to join the good fight is to me a healthy sign. It has led to the discovery that, however attractive the campaign against the salt tax may be, for them to confine themselves to it would be to change a pound for a penny. They will be lost in the crowd, there will be in it no suffering for which they are thirsting.

In this non-violent warfare their contribution should be much greater than men's. 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.

I have nursed this thought now for years. When the women of the Ashram insisted on being taken along with men, something within me told me that they were destined to do greater work in this struggle than merely breaking salt laws.

I feel that I have now found that work. The picketing of liquor shops and foreign cloth shops by men, though it succeeded beyond expectations up to a point for a time in 1921, failed because violence crept in. If a real impression is to be created, picketing must be resumed. If it remains peaceful to the end, it will be the quickest way of educating the people concerned. It must never be a matter of coercion but conversion, moral suasion. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?

Prohibition of intoxicating liquors and drugs and boycott of foreign cloth have ultimately to be by law. But the law will not come till pressure from below is felt in no uncertain manner.

That both are vitally necessary for the nation, nobody will dispute. Drink and drugs sap the moral well-being of those who are given to the habit. Foreign cloth undermines the economic foundations of the nation and throws millions out of employment. The distress in each case is felt in the home, and therefore by the women. Only those women who have drunkards as their husbands know what havoc the drink devil works in homes that once were orderly and peace-giving. Millions of women in our hamlets know what unemployment means. Today the Charkha Sangh covers over one hundred thousand women against less than ten thousand men.

Let the women of India take up these two activities, specialize in them; they would contribute more than men to national freedom. They would have an access of power and self-confidence to which they have hitherto been strangers.

Their appeal to the merchants and buyers of foreign cloth and to the liquor dealers and addicts to the habit cannot but melt their hearts. At any rate the women can never be suspected of doing or intending violence to these four classes. Nor can Government long remain supine to an agitation so peaceful and so resistless.

The charm will lie in the agitation being initiated and controlled exclusively by women. They may take and should get as much assistance as they need from men, but the men should be in strict subordination to them.

In this agitation thousands of women, literate and illiterate, can take part.

Highly educated women have, in this appeal of mine, an opportunity of actively identifying themselves with the masses and helping them both morally and materially.

They will find, when they study the subject of foreign cloth boycott, that it is impossible save through *khadi*. Mill-owners will themselves admit that mills cannot manufacture in the near future enough cloth for Indian requirements. Given a proper atmosphere, *khadi* can be manufactured in our villages, in our countless homes. Let it be the privilege of the women of India to produce this atmosphere by devoting every available minute to the spinning of yarn.

The question of the production of *khadi* is surely a question of spinning enough yarn. During the past ten days of the march, under pressure of circumstances I have discovered the potency of the *takli* which I had not realized before. It is truly a wonder-worker. In mere playfulness my companions have, without interrupting any other activity, spun enough yarn to weave 4 square yards per day of *khadi* of 12 counts. *Khadi* as a war measure is not to be beaten. The moral results of the two reforms are obviously great. The political result will be no less great. Prohibition of intoxicating drinks and drugs means the loss of twentyfive crores of revenue. Boycott of foreign cloth means the saving by India's millions of at least sixty crores. Both these achievements would monetarily be superior to the repeal of the salt tax. It is impossible to evaluate the moral results of the two reforms.

"But there is no excitement and no adventure in the liquor and foreign cloth picketing," some sisters may retort. Well, if they will put their whole heart into this agitation, they will find more than enough excitement and adventure. Before they have done with the agitation they might even find themselves in prison. It is not improbable that they may be insulted and even injured bodily. To suffer such insult and injury would be their pride. Such suffering, if it comes to them, will hasten the end.

If the women of India will listen and respond to my appeal, they must act quickly. If the all-India work cannot be undertaken at once, let those provinces which can organize themselves do so. Their example will be quickly followed by the other provinces.

Young India, 10–4–1930

81

WOMEN IN CONFERENCE

The conference of women on Sunday last at Dandi became a Congress as I had wanted it to be. Thanks to the Government prohibition against the Baroda territory cars plying between Navsari and Dandi, many had walked the full 12 miles to Dandi. The following resolutions were unanimously adopted.

1

This conference of the women of Gujarat assembled at Dandi on 13th April 1930, having heard Gandhiji, resolves that the women assembled will picket liquor and toddy shops of Gujarat, and appeal to the shop-keepers and the shop-goers to desist from plying their trade or drinking intoxicating liquors as the case may be, and will similarly picket foreign cloth shops and appeal to the dealers and the buyers to desist from the practice of dealing in or buying foreign cloth as the case may be.

2

This conference is of opinion that boycott of foreign cloth is possible only through *khadi*, and therefore the women assembled resolve henceforth to use *khadi* only, and will so far as possible spin regularly and will learn all the previous processes and preach the message of *khadi* among their neighbours, teach them the processes up to spinning, and encourage them to spin regularly.

3

This conference hopes that women all over Gujarat and the other provinces will take up the movement initiated at this conference.

I regard this extension of the Swaraj movement as of the highest importance. I need not reiterate the argument already advanced in these pages. Mithubehn has already commenced operations. She is not the woman to let the grass grow under her feet. The idea is for twenty to twentyfive

women to go in one batch, and plant themselves near each liquor shop, and come in personal contact with all visitors to the liquor or toddy shop and wean them from the habit. They will also appeal to the shop-keepers to give up the immoral traffic and earn their livelihood through better means.

Foreign cloth shops are to be treated in the same way as liquor shops as soon as there are enough trained women volunteers. Though the same committee will carry on the two boycotts, it will necessarily have two branches. It will be open to any woman to offer her services for only one branch of work, nor is it necessary that every worker should belong to the Congress. Only this must be clearly understood that the work is part of the Congress programme, and has tremendous political results, if it has also equally great moral and economic consequences.

Those who will belong to the foreign cloth boycott branch should realize that without the constructive work of *khadi* production the mere boycott will be a mischievous activity. Its very success without the production of *khadi* will prove the ruin of the national movement of Independence. For the millions will take it up in simple faith. But they will curse us, if they discover that they have no cloth to wear or that the cloth they can get is too dear for their purse. The formula therefore is : discard foreign cloth, and make your own *khadi* and wear it. Already there is a dearth of *khadi*. Most of the *khadi* workers are in the salt campaign. Therefore the production has suffered a temporary check.

But there need never be any dearth of cloth the moment the country gets disabused of the superstition that it must buy cloth to cover its nakedness. It would be on a par with someone saying that we must starve if we cannot get Manchester or Delhi biscuits. Even as we cook our food and eat, so can we, if we but will it, make our own cloth and wear it. We did it only a hundred years ago, and we can relearn the trick now. All the vital processes are almost too simple to learn. At this supreme crisis, this turning point in the nation's history, we must not hesitate and nurse idleness. I do not need to restate the argument about

our mills. Even if every mill were genuinely Swadeshi and even if all became patriotic, they could not supply all our wants. Whichever way we look at it, whether we like it or not, we cannot escape *khadi*, if we are to achieve independence through non-violent means and if we are to achieve the boycott of foreign cloth on which we began concentration in 1920.

Of men's part in the boycott I have said enough in my speech which I unexpectedly delivered to the men who had come to Dandi. Suffice it here to say that men will damage the movement, if they will meddle with women's picketing wherever it is undertaken by the latter.

Young India, 17–4–1930

82

SPINNING WHEEL AND WOMEN

This production means Rs. 30,000 distributed to 30,000 of the poor women of Bihar. Come with me to the *khadi* centres of Darbhanga, and see the joy and happiness the *charkha* has brought to those Hindu and Mussalman women. If it cannot give work to more, it is not my fault but yours. If you do not care to purchase the products of their hands, the work cannot progress. Every yard of *khaddar* you purchase means a few coppers in the hands of those women. A few coppers and not more. But it means few coppers where none was carried before. I saw the fallen women in Rajahmundry and Barisal. A young girl came and said to me: "Gandhi, what can your *charkha* give us? The men who come to us pay Rs. 5 to 10 for a few minutes." I said to her the *charkha* could not give them that but, if they renounced the life of shame, I could arrange to teach them spinning and weaving and help them to earn a decent living. As I listened to that girl my heart sank within me, and I asked God why I was also not born a woman. But if I was not born a woman, I can become a woman, and it is for the women of India, a large number of whom do not get even an anna per day, that I am going about the country with my spinning wheel and my begging bowl.

Young India, 10–2–1927

A SISTER'S DIFFICULTY

A sister writes:

> "A year ago I heard you speaking on the supreme necessity of every one of us wearing *khadi*, and thereupon decided to adopt it. But we are poor people. My husband says that *khadi* is costly. Belonging as I do to Maharashtra, I wear a *sari* 8 yards long. Now, if I reduce the length of my *sari* to 6 yards, there would be great saving, but the elders will not hear of any such reduction. I reason with them that wearing *khadi* is the more important thing and that the style and length of the *sari* are absolutely immaterial, but in vain. They say that it is my youth that puts all these new-fangled notions into my head. But I expect they will agree to the proposed reduction in length, if you are good enough to write to me, saying that *khadi* ought to be used, even at the cost of the style of clothing."

I have sent the desired reply to the sister. But I take note of her difficulty here, as I know that the same difficulty is encountered by many other sisters as well.

The letter in question bears witness to the strong patriotic feeling of the writer, for there are not many sisters who, like her, are ready to give up old styles or old customs on their own initiative. The number of such sisters and brothers is legion as would gladly have Swaraj, if it could be attained without suffering any discomfort or incurring any expenditure, and in spite of their sticking to old customs regardless of their propriety or the reverse. But Swaraj is not such a cheap commodity. To attain Swaraj implies the cultivation of a spirit of self-sacrifice, including the sacrifice of provincialism.

Provincialism is a bar not only to the realization of national Swaraj but also to the achievement of provincial autonomy. Women, perhaps, are more responsible than men for keeping up this narrow spirit. Variety is worth cherishing up to a certain limit, but if the limit is exceeded, amenities

and customs, masquerading under the name of variety, are subversive of nationalism. The Deccani *sari* is a thing of beauty, but the beauty must be let go, if it can be secured only by sacrificing the nation. We should consider the Cutchi style of short *sari* or the Punjabi *odhani* to be really artistic, if the wearing of *khadi* can be cheapened and facilitated by their means. The Deccani, Gujarati, Cutchi and Bengali styles of wearing *sari* are all of them various national styles, and each of them is as national as the rest. Such being the case, preference should be accorded to that style which requires the smallest amount of cloth, consistently with the demands of decency. Such is the Cutchi style, which takes up only 3 yards of cloth, that is, about half the length of the Gujarati *sari*, not to mention the saving of trouble in having to carry a smaller weight. If the *pachhedo* and the petticoat are of the same colour, one cannot at once make out whether it is only a *pachhedo* or full *sari*. The mutual exchange and imitation of such national styles is eminently desirable.

Well-to-do people might well keep in their wardrobes all possible provincial styles of clothing. It would be very courteous and patriotic on the part of a Gujarati host and hostess to put on the Bengali style of dress when they entertain Bengali guests, and *vice versa*. But such procedure is open only to the patriotic rich. Patriotic people of the middle and poorer classes should take pride in adopting that particular provincial style which cheapens as well as facilitates the wearing of *khadi*. And even there they should fix their eye upon the clothing style as the poorest of the poor.

Swadeshi does not mean drowning oneself in one's own little puddle, but making it a tributary to the ocean, that is, the nation. And it can claim to contribute to the ocean only if it is and keeps itself pure. It is, therefore, clear that only such local or provincial customs should have a nation-wide vogue as are not impure or immoral. And when once this truth is grasped, nationalism is transmuted into the enthusiasm of humanity.

What is true of clothing is equally true of language, food, etc. As we might imitate the dress of other provinces on a suitable occasion, so might we utilize the language and other things. But at present all our energy is wasted in the useless, impossible and fatal attempt to give English the pride of place to the neglect, conscious or unconscious, of our mother-tongue and, all the more so, of the languages of other provinces.

Young India, 2-2-1928

84

NOT MAN'S WORK ?

Thus writes a professor :

"Personally I have full faith in the spinning wheel and *khaddar*. I fully understand that without *khaddar* there can be no common bond between the classes and the masses of India. And without a common bond, without feeling as one, no country can accomplish anything, much less India. Besides, I can very well understand that a success in sufficient production of *khaddar* is bound to result in excluding foreign cloth. The *khaddar* programme must be worked out to a success, if India is to achieve freedom.

"But I am of opinion that you have begun at the wrong end. To ask able-bodied men to sit for spinning like women, is what appears odd in the eyes of most of the people. I quite appreciate the reflection that we, at present, are no better than women. Still the reality is that we, all of us, cannot take up the work which has been associated in our country, for centuries, with women. Again, I would have consented to shake off this acquired notion, could I be persuaded to believe that at least the female population of the country have taken up the cause of spinning, and that it still requires further support from the male population. To ask men to ply the spinning wheel while the female folk strut about in fine foreign *saris* is putting the cart before the horse. Besides, the question of foreign cloth in India is not so much of men's creation as of women's and

therefore, I think, to press the use of the spinning wheel and *khaddar* on men instead of women is to begin the solution at the wrong end.

"In my humble opinion, you should have left men alone, busy with their various sorts of political propaganda and should have taken your message direct to the women of the land. Let your great programme of the *charkha* and *khaddar* be confined to women for the present, and let men fight the battle of freedom with manlier weapons."

The letter was rather long. I have boiled down the argument without changing the language. It is evident the learned professor does not know the condition of the women of India. Or he would have known that ordinarily men do not get the privilege or the opportunity of addressing women. It has been my good fortune, no doubt, to be able to do so to a certain extent. But in spite of all the facilities given to me, I have not been able to reach them to the extent I have reached men. He should also know that the women cannot act without the consent of men. I can quote several instances where men have prevented women from adopting the *charkha* or *khaddar*. Thirdly, women cannot make the inventions and the changes that men can make. Had the movement of spinning been confined only to women, it would have been impossible to make the improvements that the *charkha* has undergone during the past four years or to organize spinning in the manner it has been. Fourthly, it is contrary to experience to say that any vocation is exclusively reserved for one sex only. Cooking is predominantly the occupation of women. But a soldier who cannot cook his own food would be worthless. The whole of the cooking in camps is necessarily and naturally done by men. Moreover, whilst women naturally cook for the household, organized cooking on a large scale is universally done by men throughout the world. Fighting is predominantly men's occupation, but Arab women fought like heroines side by side with their husbands in the early struggles of Islam. The Rani of Jhansi distinguished herself for her bravery as very few men did during the Sepoy Revolt. And today in Europe we find women shining as lawyers, doctors

and administrators. The clerical profession is being almost monopolized by women shorthand writers and typists. Why is spinning not a manly occupation ? Why is anything that will bring about the economic and spiritual uplift of India (and spinning will, according to the professor) not manly enough for men ? Does not the professor know that it was a man who invented the spinning jenny ? Had he not invented it, the history of mankind would have been written differently. Needle-work is essentially women's work. But the master tailors of the world are men. And it was a man who invented the sewing machine. Had Singer despised the needle, he would not have left his legacy to mankind. Had men taken care of spinning side by side with the women of India in days gone by, we would perhaps have never given up spinning as we did under pressure from the East India Company. The politician may devote himself to pure politics as much as he likes, but if we are to clothe ourselves by the joint effort of millions, the politician, the poet, the potentate, the *pandit* and the pauper, male or female, Hindu or Mussalman, Christian, Parsi or Jew, will have religiously to give half an hour to spinning for the sake of the country. Religion of humanity is not the exclusive prerogative of any sex or class. It is the prerogative, nay the duty, of all. The religion of Indian humanity demands half an hour's spinning at least from everyone who calls himself or herself Indian.

Young India, 11-6-1925

SWARAJ THROUGH WOMEN

Now that the Working Committee has accepted spinning as an indispensable condition of civil disobedience, the women of India have a rare opportunity of serving the country. The salt campaign brought out tens of thousands from their seclusion and showed that they could serve the country on equal terms with men. It gave the village woman a dignity which she had never enjoyed before. The restoration of spinning to its central place in India's peaceful campaign for deliverance from the imperial yoke gives her women a special status. In spinning they have a natural advantage over men.

Since the beginning of time there has been a division of labour between men and women. Adam wove and Eve span. The distinction persists to the present day. Men spinners are an exception. In the Punjab when during 1920-21 I asked men to spin, they used to tell me that men considered spinning to be beneath their dignity and that it was solely women's occupation. Men nowadays do not object on the ground of dignity. There are thousands who spin for sacrifice. It was when men took up spinning from a patriotic motive that spinning was reduced to a science and inventions as great as in any other field were made. Nevertheless experience shows that spinning will remain woman's speciality. I believe there is a good reason behind the experience. Spinning is essentially a slow and comparatively silent process. Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and therefore non-violence. Her occupations must therefore be, as they are, more conducive to peace than war. That she is now being dragged down for purposes of violent war is no credit to modern civilization. I have no doubt that violence so ill becomes woman that presently she will rebel against the violation of her fundamental nature. I feel that man too will repent of his folly. Equality of the 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.

But a proof of the different functions of the sexes is unnecessary for my purpose. The fact stands, at any rate in India, that millions of women regard spinning as their natural occupation. The Working Committee's resolution automatically shifts the burden from men to women and gives to them an opportunity of showing their mettle. I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then approach it with much greater confidence than if men predominated. I would dread the latter's violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak.

Sevagram, 27-11-39

Harijan, 2-12-1939

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CURSE OF DRINK

A sister writes :

"On going to the village — I was more than grieved to hear of the havoc drink is working among these people. Some of the women were in tears. What can they do ? There is not a woman who would not like to banish alcohol for all time from our midst. It is the cause of so much domestic misery, poverty, ruined health and physique. As usual, it is the woman who has to bear the burden of this self-indulgence on the part of man. What can I advise the women to do ? It is so hard to face anger, and even cruelty. How I wish the leaders in this province would concentrate on the removal of this evil, rather than expend time, energy and brain on the injustice of the Communal Award. We are so apt to neglect the things that really matter, for such trivialities as would settle themselves, if the moral stature of our people were raised. Can't you write an appeal to the people on the question of drink ? It is sad to see these people literally going to perdition because of this curse."

My appeal to those who drink will be vain. It must be. They never read the *Harijan*. If they do, they do so to scoff. They can have no interest in being informed of the evil of the drink habit. They hug the very evil. But I would like to remind this sister, and through her all the women of India, that at the time of the Dandi March the women of India did listen to my advice, and made the fight against drink and the plying of the wheel their speciality. Let the writer recall the fact that thousands of women fearlessly surrounded drink shops and, often successfully, appealed to the addicts to give up the habit. In the prosecution of their self-imposed mission, they put up with the abuses of the addicts and, sometimes, even assaults by them. Hundreds went to gaol for the crime of picketing drink shops. Their zealous work produced a marvellous effect all over the country. But, unfortunately, with the cessation of civil disobedience, and even before the cessation, the work slackened. Into the reasons for the slackening I need not go. But the work still awaits workers. The women's pledge remains unfulfilled. It was not taken for a definite period only. It could not be fulfilled, until prohibition was proclaimed throughout India. The women's was the nobler part. Theirs was to bring about prohibition by emptying drink shops by an appeal to the best in men. Could they have continued the work, their gentleness, combined with earnestness, would most assuredly have weaned the drunkard from his habit.

But nothing is lost. The women can still organize the campaign. If the wives of those of whom the writer writes are in earnest, they can surely convert their husbands. 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? But who but a woman can effectively awaken the wives to a sense of their power and duty? This is but a part of the women's movement against drink.

There must be enough women, with proper equipment, to study the statistics of drink, the causes that induce the habit, and the remedies against it. They must learn the lesson from the past, and realize that mere appeals to the addicts to give up drink cannot produce lasting effects. The habit has to be regarded as a disease and treated as such. In other words, some women have to become research students and carry on researches in a variety of ways. In every branch of reform, constant study, giving one a mastery over one's subject, is necessary. Ignorance is at the root of failures, partial or complete, of all reform movements whose merits are admitted. For, every project, masquerading under the name of reform, is not necessarily worthy of being so designated.

Harijan, 24-4-1937

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BE SISTERS OF MERCY

Speaking at the Udivil Girls' College in Jaffna on 29-9-1927 Gandhiji said:

It has given me very great pleasure indeed to meet you this morning. I do not at all appreciate the idea of your little gifts, which have come right from the bottom of your hearts, having been merged in the general purse, but I am going to put the best construction possible upon the fact of your purse having been merged in the general purse. You, being more modest than boys, do not want me to know that you had given anything at all, but having met thousands or tens of thousands of girls throughout India, it is difficult for girls nowadays to hide from me any good things that they may do.

Now there are some girls who do not mind even telling me the bad things that they do. Let me hope that, of all these girls before me, there is not one single girl who does a bad thing. Not having the time to cross-examine you, I am not going to weary you with questions, but if there are any girls in our midst who do bad things, I would fain let them know that, if that is the case, their education is useless.

Your parents do not send you to school to become dolls; on the contrary you are expected to become Sisters of Mercy. Do not make the mistake of thinking that only those may be called Sisters of Mercy who wear a particular dress. She becomes a Sister of Mercy immediately she thinks less of herself, and more of those who are poorer and more unfortunate than herself. And you have done the work of Sisters of Mercy in giving your mite to the purse that has been presented to me, because that purse has been presented for those who are unfortunately poorer than yourselves.

To give a little bit of money is easy enough, to do a little thing one's self is more difficult. If you really feel for the people for whom you are giving money, you must go a step further and wear *khadi* that these people manufacture. If, when *khadi* is brought before you, you say: '*Khadi* is a bit coarse, we cannot wear it,' then I know you have not the spirit of self-sacrifice in you.

It is such a very nice thing that here there is no distinction between high class and low class, touchables and untouchables; and if your hearts are also working in that direction, and you do not consider yourselves superior to some other girls, it is a very good thing indeed.

May God bless you!

ADVICE TO GIRL STUDENTS

In his speech at Ramanathan Girls' College in Jaffna on 27-11-1927 Gandhiji said :

It has indeed given me great joy to be able to come here this morning, as if to put a finishing touch to the whole round of visits to different scholastic institutions in Jaffna.

Your promise in your address, that you are going to observe this day as an annual function and devote it to collections for *khadi* work, has touched me to the core. I know that this is no idle promise on your part, but that you are going to fulfil that promise religiously. If the famishing millions, on whose behalf I am touring, could possibly understand this determination on the part of their sisters, I know it would gladden their hearts, but you will be pained to be informed by me that these dumb millions, in whose behalf you have given me this purse — and so many purses have been given in Ceylon — would not even understand such things, if I attempted to tell them. No description that I can give you of their miserable life can possibly give you a proper perspective of what that position means.

This immediately brings me to the question — what are you to do for these and such other people ? It is easy enough to suggest a little more simplicity, a little more hardness in life, but that would be merely playing with the question.

Thoughts and thoughts like these brought me to the spinning wheel. I said to myself, as I say to you now, that, if you could but establish a living link between those famishing millions and yourselves, there is some hope for you, for them and for the world.

Religious instruction you have, and very properly, in this institution. You have got also a beautiful temple. I see from your time-table that you begin the day by offering worship, all of which is good and elevating, but it may easily amount to a beautiful ceremonial and nothing else,

if that worship is not translated day after day into some practical work. So I say, in order to follow out that act of worship, take up the spinning wheel, sit at it for half an hour, and think of these millions that I have described to you and say in the name of God : 'I spin for the sake of them.' If you do it with your heart, with the knowledge that you are the humbler and the richer for that real act of devotion, if you will dress not for show, but for covering your limbs, you will certainly not have any hesitation in wearing *khadi* and establishing that bond between yourselves and the millions.

This is not all that I want to say to the girls of this institution.

If you will be deserving of the care and attention that Sir Ramanathan has bestowed upon you and that is being bestowed on you by Lady Ramanathan and the staff working under her care, you will have to do many more things. I saw in your magazines mention made, with some degree of pardonable pride, of what some of the old school girls had been doing. I saw notices after this style : So and so married so and so — 4 or 5 notices. There is, I know, nothing wrong in a girl who has come of age, about 25 or even 22 years old, getting married. But I miss in these notices a single mention of a girl who had dedicated herself to service only. So I propose to tell you, what I told the girls of H. H. the Maharaja's College for Girls in Bangalore, that we get a poor return for the great efforts that are being made by educationists and by lavish charities, if you all become mere dolls and disappear from life as soon as you are discharged from such institutions.

A vast majority of girls disappear from public life as soon as they are discharged from schools and colleges. You, of this institution, have no such business. You have the example of Miss Emery and the example of others who have been superintending, and who have been, if I am not speaking incorrectly, maidens.

Every girl, every Indian girl, is not born to marry. I can show many girls who are today dedicating themselves to service, instead of serving one man. It is high time

that Hindu girls produce or reproduce an edition, and, if possible, a glorified edition, of Parvati and Sita.

You claim to be Shaivites. You know what Parvati did. She did not spend money for a husband, nor would she allow herself to be bought; and she today adorns the Hindu firmament by being classed with one of the seven *satis*—not because of the degrees in an educational institution that she received, but because of her unheard-of *tapasya* (penance).

Here, I understand, there is the hateful system of dowry, whereby it becomes most difficult for young women to get suitable matches. The grown-up girls — some of you are grown-up — are expected to resist all such temptations. If you will resist these evil customs, some of you will have to begin by remaining maidens either for life or at least for a number of years. Then, when it is time for you to marry, and you feel that you must have a partner in life, you will not be in thirst of one who has money or fame or beauty of person, but you will be in search of one — even as Parvati was — who has got all the matchless qualities which go to make good character. You know how Naradji described Siva to Parvati — a mere pauper smeared with ashes, no handsomeness about him, and a *brahmachari*, and Parvati said: "Yes, he will be my husband." You will not have several editions of Siva, unless some of you will be content to offer *tapasya* not for thousands of years, as Parvati did. We, frail human beings, cannot afford to do it, but you can do so at least during your lifetime.

If you will accept these conditions, you will refuse to disappear into the kingdom of dolls, but will aspire to be *satis* like Parvati, Damayanti, Sita and Savitri. Then, and not till then, in my humble opinion, will you have deserved an institution of this character.

May God fire you with this ambition, and if you are inspired, may He help you to realize this ambition.

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WOMEN AND UNTOUCHABILITY

[The following extracts are taken from Gandhiji's speeches delivered at various women's meetings in the course of his Harijan tour in 1933-34.]

AT BILASPUR

I want you sisters to give as much as you can for the Harijan cause. You have asked me in your address how you can serve the Harijans. I want you, above everything else, to root out untouchability from your hearts and serve the Harijan boys and girls as you would serve your own children. You should love them as your own relatives, your own brothers and sisters, children of the same Mother India. I have worshipped woman as the living embodiment of the spirit of service and sacrifice. Man can never be your equal in the spirit of selfless service with which nature has endowed you. Woman has a compassionate heart which melts at the sight of suffering. If, then, the sufferings of Harijans move you and you give up untouchability and with it the distinctions of high and low, Hinduism will be purified and Hindu society will take a great stride toward spiritual progress. It will ultimately mean the well-being of the whole of India, i. e. of 35 crores of human beings. And the wonderful purificatory process that one-fifth of the human race will undergo cannot but have a healthy reaction on the whole of humanity. This movement is fraught with such far-reaching results. This is a big movement — perhaps the biggest going — of self-purification. I expect you to contribute your full share to it.

AT DELHI

In the eyes of God, who is the creator of all, His creatures are all equal. Had He made any distinction of high and low between man and man, they would have been visible as are the distinctions between, say, an elephant and an ant. But he has endowed all human beings impartially

with the same shape and the same natural wants. If you consider the Harijans untouchables because they perform sanitary service, what mother has not performed such service for her children? It is the height of injustice to consider the Harijans, who are the most useful servants of society, as untouchables and outcastes. I have undertaken this tour to awaken the minds of Hindu sisters to a sense of this sin. It can never be an act of merit to look down upon any human being as inferior to us. We are all worshippers of one God whom we worship under different names. We must, therefore, realize our essential unity and give up untouchability as well as the spirit of superiority and inferiority between human beings.

AT MADRAS

I have come here to ask you to do one thing. Forget altogether that some are high and some are low. Forget altogether that some are touchables and some are untouchables. I know that you all believe in God as I do; and God cannot be so cruel and unjust as to make distinctions of high and low between man and man and woman and woman. This untouchability is the greatest blot on Hinduism, and I have not hesitated to say that, if untouchability lives, Hinduism dies. If one may use man's language about God, God has been very patient with us. But I have no hesitation in saying that even God's patience can be exhausted, and He will no longer be patient towards this atrocity that man has been doing to man in Hindu India.

AT BANGALORE

There is too much of evil in us when we consider some persons as lower than ourselves. If we do not get rid of this evil, it will eat us up. There will not be a single Hindu left even to do penance, and I think we shall well deserve it if such a fate overtakes us. I am going from one end of India to the other just to utter the warning. You will, therefore, do a great act of virtue, if you regard all Harijans as blood brothers and sisters.

[At another meeting which he addressed after seeing some quarters of the Harijans, which presented a sad contrast to what he had seen in Mysore, he said :]

I believe in the maxim that we should treat others as we would wish that they should treat us. Now the holes that I saw this morning, just this very moment, are not fit for human habitation. There is a minimum standard below which we dare not go without offending against humanity. The holes I saw do not satisfy that minimum. I wish that in this place, which is in many respects a beautiful place, this blot may be removed at the first opportunity. I have been told that arrangements have already been made to provide these unfortunate brothers and sisters with better dwellings. But in giving such aid you will agree with me that time is a vital factor. Let it be not said of your arrangements, when they are ready, that they were too late.

PLAIN TALK TO WOMEN

[In his last speech of the Harijan tour, which was made at the women's meeting in Benares, Gandhiji summarized his position on the question of untouchability as follows :]

It is a tragedy that religion for us means today nothing more than restrictions on food and drink, nothing more than adherence to a sense of superiority and inferiority. Let me tell you that there cannot be grosser ignorance than this. Birth and observance of forms cannot determine one's superiority or inferiority. Character is the only determining factor. God did not create men with the badge of superiority or inferiority, and no scripture which labels a human being as inferior or untouchable, because of his or her birth, can command our allegiance. It is a denial of God and of Truth which is God. God who is the embodiment of Truth and Right and Justice, could never have sanctioned a religion or practice which regards a fifth of our vast population as untouchables. I want you, therefore, to rid yourselves of

this monstrous notion. Untouchability attaching to unclean work is there, must be there. It applies to every one of us. But the moment we have washed ourselves clean of dirt or filth, we cease to be untouchables, But no work or conduct can render a man or woman untouchable for all time

Sinners we are all to a greater or less extent, and every one of our spiritual books—the *Gita*, the *Bhagavata*, and the *Tulsi Ramayana* — declares in no uncertain terms that whoever seeks refuge in Him, whoever takes His name, shall be free from sin. That covenant is for all mankind.

There is another simple test that I want you to apply to this question. Every species, human and sub-human, has some distinguishing mark, so that you can tell a man from a beast, or a dog from a cow and so on. Have the so-called untouchables any distinguishing mark declaring them to be untouchables? They are as much human as every one of us, and we do not regard even sub-human beings as bearing the mark of untouchability. Why and whence, then, this monstrous injustice? It is not religion, but the grossest species of irreligion. I want you to cast off that sin, if you still happen to have it in you.

The only way in which you can expiate this sin of centuries is to befriend the Harijans, by going to their quarters, by hugging their children as you do your own, by interesting yourselves in their welfare, by finding out whether they get enough to eat, whether they get pure water to drink, whether they have the fresh light and air that you enjoy as of right. The other way is for each of you to start the spinning sacrifice and to pledge yourselves to wear *khadi*, which supports millions of these submerged human beings. The spinning sacrifice will help you, in some slight measure, to identify yourselves with them, and every yard of *khadi* you wear will mean some coppers going into the pockets of the Harijans and the poor. The last thing is to contribute your mite to the Harijan fund which has no other end but the amelioration of the lot of the Harijans.

Harijan, 31-8-1934

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WOMEN AS THE STRONGER SEX

Q. Is not non-resistance submission to the strong?

A. Passive resistance is regarded as the weapon of the weak, but the resistance for which I had to coin a new name altogether is the weapon of the strongest. I had to coin a new word to signify what I meant. But its matchless beauty lies in the fact that, though it is the weapon of the strongest, it can be wielded by the weak in body, by the aged, and even by the children if they have stout hearts. And since resistance in *satyagraha* is offered through self-suffering, it is a weapon pre-eminently open to women. We found last year that women in India, in many instances, surpassed their brothers in sufferings and the two played a noble part in the campaign. For, the idea of self-suffering became contagious and they embarked upon amazing acts of self-denial. Supposing that the women and the children of Europe became fired with the love of humanity, they would take the men by storm and reduce militarism to nothingness in an incredibly short time. The underlying idea is that women, children and others have the same soul, the same potentiality. The question is one of drawing out the limitless power of truth.

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POSITION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Q. The awakening of civil and political consciousness among Indian women has created a conflict between their traditional domestic duties and their duty towards society. If a woman engages in public work, she may have to neglect her children or her household. How is the dilemma to be solved?

A. 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. In my opinion the slavery of the kitchens is a remnant of barbarism mainly. 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.

Harijan, 8-6-1940

CRIMINAL ASSAULTS

The whole world is on trial today. No one can escape from the war. Whilst the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are products of poets' imagination, their authors were not mere rhymsters. They were seers. What they depicted is happening before our very eyes today. Ravanas are warring with each other. They are showing matchless strength. They throw their deadly weapons from the air. No deed of bravery in the battlefield is beyond their capacity or imagination.

Man would not fight in this manner, certainly not the gods. Only brutes can. Soldiers drunk with the pride of physical strength loot shops and are not even ashamed to take liberties with women. The administration is powerless to prevent such happenings in war time. The army fulfils their primary need, and they wink the eye at their misdeeds. Where a whole nation is militarized the way of military life becomes part and parcel of its civilization. Therefore, a soldier's taking such liberties is not a matter for condemnation. But it would take generations for India to become so. Hence arise questions like the following which a sister sends me:

"(1) If a soldier commits an assault on a woman, can she be said to have lost her virtue?

(2) Is such a woman to be condemned and ostracized by society?

(3) What should women and the public do under such circumstances?

Whilst the woman has in point of fact lost her virtue, the loss cannot in any way render her liable to be condemned or treated as an outcaste. She is entitled to our sympathy for she has been cruelly injured, and we should tend her wounds as we would those of any injured person.

A woman is worthy of condemnation only when she is a willing party to her dishonour. In no case are adultery and criminal assault synonymous terms. If we were to view the matter in this light, we would not hide such instances as has thus far been our wont. Public opinion against such conduct on the part of men towards women would then be created and freely exercised.

If the press carried on a sustained agitation, soldiers, white or brown, would probably cease to behave in this manner. Their officers would be compelled to prevent such misbehaviour.

My advice to women is that they should leave the cities and migrate to the villages where a wide field of service awaits them. There is comparatively little risk of their being assaulted in the villages. They must, however, live simple lives and make themselves one with the poor. If they will display their wealth by dressing in silks and satins and wearing jewellery, they will, in running away from one danger, expose themselves to a double one. Naturally the advice cannot refer to those whom duty compels to live in cities.

The main thing, however, is for women to know how to be fearless. It is my firm conviction that a fearless woman who knows that her purity is her best shield can never be dishonoured. However beastly the man, he will bow in shame before the flame of her dazzling purity. There are examples even in modern times of women who have thus defended themselves. I can, as I write, recall two such instances. I, therefore, recommend women who read this article to try to cultivate this courage. They will become wholly fearless, if they can and cease to tremble as they do today at the mere thought of assaults. It is not, however, necessary for a woman to go through a bitter experience for the sake of passing a test of courage. These experiences mercifully do not come in the way of lakhs or even

thousands. Every soldier is not a beast. It is a minority that loses all sense of decency. Only twenty per cent of snakes are poisonous, and out of these a few only bite. They do not attack unless trodden on. But this knowledge does not help those who are full of fear and tremble at the sight of a snake. Parents and husbands should, therefore, instruct women in the art of becoming fearless. It can best be learnt from a living faith in God. Though He is invisible, He is one's unfailing protector. He who has this faith is the most fearless of all.

But such faith or courage cannot be acquired in a day. Meantime we must try to explore other means. 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 comes 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. In truth we fear death most, and hence we ultimately submit to superior physical force. Some will bend the knee to the invader, some will resort to bribery, some will crawl on their bellies or submit to other forms of humiliation, and some women will even give their bodies rather than die. I have not written this in a carping spirit. I am only illustrating human nature. Whether we crawl on our bellies or whether a woman yields to the lust of man is symbolic of that same love of life which makes us stoop to anything. Therefore, only he who loses his life shall save it: तेन त्यक्तेन भुंजीथा: । Every reader should commit this matchless *shloka* to memory. But mere lip loyalty to it will be of no avail. It must penetrate deep down to the innermost recesses of the heart. To enjoy life one should give up the lure of life. That should be part of our nature.

So much for what a woman should do. But what about the man who is witness to such crimes? The answer is implied in the foregoing. He must not be a passive onlooker. He must protect the woman. He must not run for police

help; he must not rest satisfied by pulling the alarm chain in the train. If he is able to practise non-violence, he will die in doing so and thus save the woman in jeopardy. If he does not believe in non-violence, or cannot practise it, he must try to save her by using all the force he may have. In either way there must be readiness on his part to lay down his life.

If old, decrepit and toothless, as I am, I were to plead non-violence and be a helpless witness of assault on the honour of a sister, my so-called Mahatmaship would be ridiculed, dishonoured and lost. If I or those like me were to intervene and lay down our lives whether violently or non-violently, we would surely save the prey and at any rate we would not remain living witnesses to her dishonour.

So much about the witnesses. But if the courageous spirit pervades the entire atmosphere of our country and it is known that no Indian will stand women being assaulted, I venture to say that no soldier will dare to touch them. That such a spirit does not exist is a matter of shame for us. But it will be something, if persons ready to wipe out this blot are forthcoming.

Those who have influence with the Government will try to get the authorities to take the necessary action. But self-help is the best help. In the present circumstances we may rely only on our own strength and God's help.

On the train to Wardha, 19-2-'42

Harijan, 1-3-1942

WOMEN

Q. While you have advised women in the cities to go into the villages in order to escape from the danger of assaults, do you not think that some of us, at any rate, should be brave enough to face the risk ? After all, women cannot become brave or self-reliant, if they are always to be kept out of harm's way. Will not one death bravely faced help the woman's cause ? There is danger today of our girls being put back into the purdah, as it were, by their parents.

A. Of course those who are wanted in the cities must remain at all cost and face the worst. Nothing should be done in bravado. When they go to the villages there will be no purdah. It will be all work and no freedom from danger anywhere on this God-forsaken little ball which two teams are kicking for all they are worth. The days of the purdah are gone for good.

Sevagram, 2-3-'42

Harijan, 8-3-1942

JAMNALALJI AND WOMEN

[An address at the Mahila Ashram, Wardha]

Members of the Mahila Ashram, in particular, owed a deep debt of gratitude to him. How were they going to repay it ? There must be no idle tears. The best memorial to him was service. The soul does not die. It is the body alone that perishes. But not everyone lives for ever in the hearts of men as Jamnalalji will. The Mahila Ashram students and staff must pull their full weight in making Wardha an ideal town. Clean it, remove illiteracy, spread the gospel of *khadi*, remove untouchability, and serve the women. Then all of you can become members of the Goseva Sangh and help in enlisting members too. The pledge is not a rigid one, and if you love the cow, you will

willingly sign it. Last but not the least there is Urdu. Each one of you should begin to study the Urdu script. Only those who know both Hindi and Urdu will be able in due course to create that beautiful mixture, the Hindustani of my dream, which shall be the national language.

Jamnalalji created the Mahila Mandal in order to create women workers. The least each one of you can do is to imbibe his spirit of service and take it as your armour when you go into the wider sea of life. Most of you will marry. It is the natural thing to do, and I used to chaff Jamnalalji and call him a registrar of marriages because he was always arranging marriages. He was no less anxious than I that many of our girls should elect to remain unmarried for the sake of serving their less fortunate sisters, but such women are rare. In any case I shall expect service from you, and when married you will be two persons and will have to give fourfold. In many ways a married life—if well and truly lived, not for the sake of satisfying carnal desires—is harder than celibacy.

Jamnalalji was a rare man. He was born to serve and serve universally. Nothing that he did was done half-heartedly. His diligence was amazing. He had even begun to tend the cow that gave him milk. Such was his thoroughness. He died in harness as we would have wished. Everyone cannot follow him in everything, but, at any rate, if you really loved and admired one who did so much for you, you should learn one lesson from his life. Work hard and give yourselves utterly to the fulfilment of those high ideals of womanhood which he set before you.

Harijan, 15-3-1942

A sister, who is a good worker and was anxious to remain celibate in order better to serve the country's cause, has recently married having met the mate of her dreams. But she imagines that in doing so she has done wrong and fallen from the high ideal which she had set before herself. I have tried to rid her mind of this delusion. It is no doubt an excellent thing for girls to remain unmarried for the sake of service, but the fact is that only one in a million is able to do so. Marriage is a natural thing in life, and to consider it derogatory in any sense is wholly wrong. When one imagines any act a fall it is difficult, however hard one tries, to raise oneself. The ideal is to look upon marriage as a sacrament and, therefore, to lead a life of self-restraint in the married estate. Marriage in Hinduism is one of the four *Ashramas*. In fact the other three are based on it. But in modern times marriage has unfortunately come to be regarded purely as a physical union. The other three *Ashramas* are all but non-existent.

The duty of the above-mentioned and other sisters who think like her is, therefore, not to look down upon marriage but to give it its due place and make of it the sacrament it is. If they exercise the necessary self-restraint, they will find growing within themselves a greater strength for service. She who wishes to serve will naturally choose a partner in life who is of the same mind, and their joint service will be the country's gain.

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. When the latter

grow up they too will be ready to serve. The truth of the matter is that those who are filled with a living spirit of service will always serve whatever their position in life. They will never adopt a way of life which will interfere with service.

Sevagram, 3-3-'42

Harijan, 22-3-1942

97

INDIRA NEHRU'S ENGAGEMENT

I have received several angry and abusive letters and some professing to reason about Indira's engagement with Firoz Gandhi. Not a single correspondent has anything against Firoz Gandhi as a man. His only crime in their estimation is that he happens to be a Parsi. I have been, and I am still, as strong an opponent of either party changing religion for the sake of marriage. Religion is not a garment to be cast off at will. In the present case there is no question of change of religion. Firoz Gandhi has been for years an inmate of the Nehru family. He nursed Kamala Nehru in her sickness. He was like a son to her. During Indira's illness in Europe he was of great help to her. A natural intimacy grew up between them. The friendship has been perfectly honourable. It has ripened into mutual attraction. But neither party would think of marrying without the consent and blesssing of Jawaharlal Nehru. This was given only after he was satisfied that the attraction had a solid basis. The public know my connection with the Nehrus. I had also talks with both the parties. It would have been cruelty to refuse consent to this engagement. As time advances such unions are bound to multiply with benefit to society. At present we have not even reached the stage of mutual toleration, but as toleration grows into mutual respect for religions, such unions will be welcomed. No religion which is narrow and which cannot satisfy the test of reason will survive the coming reconstruction of society in which the values will have changed and character, not

possession of wealth, title or birth will be the sole test of merit. The Hinduism of my conception is no narrow creed. It is a grand evolutionary process as ancient as time, and embraces the teachings of Zoroaster, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Nanak and other prophets that I could name. It is thus defined:

विद्वद्भिः सेवितः सद्भिर्नित्यमद्वेषरागिभिः ।
हृदयेनाभ्यनुज्ञातो यो धर्मस्तं निबोधत ॥

[Know that to be (true) religion which the wise and the good and those who are ever free from passion and hate follow and which appeals to the heart.]

If it is not that, it will perish. My correspondents will pardon me for not acknowledging their letters. I invite them to shed their wrath and bless the forthcoming marriage. Their letters betray ignorance, intolerance and prejudice—a species of untouchability, dangerous because not easily to be so classified.

Harijan, 8-3-1942

98

ABOUT CHILDREN

Q. I quite agree that as society advances, marriages between the different communities will increase and should be welcomed. You rightly advocate no change of religion for the parties concerned. But what do you advocate for the children? In which religion should they be brought up, the father's or the mother's?

A. Presumption in such marriages is that the parents respect each other's religion. If they are religiously minded, the children will unconsciously imbibe what they think is best for them and choose their own faith without let or hindrance from the parents. If the latter are indifferent, the children will also be probably indifferent and label themselves anyhow. This is what I have observed in such marriages. The difficulty crops up when there is a serious difference arising between the parents as to the upbringing of the children.

Harijan, 29-3-1942

DO NOT SEEK PATRONAGE

Q. We find that the Congress is reluctant to select women representatives on a large scale for elective bodies. It is surely just and necessary that more women are taken into the various bodies. How would you deal with the question?

A. I am not enamoured of equality or any other proportion in such matters. Merit should be the only test. Seeing however that it has been the custom to decry women, the contrary custom should be to prefer women, merit being equal, to men even if the preference should result in men being entirely displaced by women. It would be a dangerous thing to insist on membership on the ground merely of sex. Women, and for that matter any group, should disdain patronage. They should seek justice, never favours. Therefore, the proper thing is for women, as indeed for men, to advance the spread not of English or Western education among them, but such education on general lines through their provincial languages as will fit them for the numerous duties of citizenship. For men to take a lead in this much needed reform will not be a matter of favour but a simple act of belated justice due to women.

Uruli Kanchan, 30-3-'46

From Question Box

Harijan, 7-4-1946

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Uruli Kanchan, 30-3-'46

From Question Box

Harijan, 7-4-1946

WHAT ABOUT WOMEN ?

"I am glad to read your reply to the complaint that enough women have not been put up for elections or selected for official posts. You reply that merit should be the only criterion in the choice of candidates. Your dictum is perfectly correct and every thinking man and woman will agree with it. There is a saying that "neither age nor sex but merit alone should be the object of adoration." The reality, however, is far from the truth. You are not unaware that the maxim is everywhere observed in the breach. Neither in the ministries and legislatures, nor in local bodies is merit given first consideration in the matter of selection of candidates. Considerations of caste, community and province come into the picture and are the determining factors. The argument proffered in favour of such action is that none of these interests can be ignored. If the argument holds, what about the interests of women ? In view of the maxim, does not the basis of selection need clarification ?"

The above is from the letter of an esteemed sister. The sister's argument boils down to this, that where everything is on a wrong basis another wrong will not matter. But if we go on thus, the evil will grow and we shall be hopelessly caught in a vicious circle. My appeal to women, therefore, is that they should intelligently become the personification of renunciation and thereby not only adorn but also raise the status of their sex and the nation.

So long as considerations of caste and community continue to weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be advised to remain aloof and thereby build up their prestige. The question is as to how best this can be done. 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 man 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. So much for women.

As to men, they should consider it their duty to come out of the impure atmosphere wherever it exists. They will not be guided by considerations of caste and community if these are banished from their own minds. The best and easiest way to achieve this is for both men and women to stoop to conquer by becoming Harijans and that too of the last class, i. e. *bhangis* or *mehtars*.

Where capable women have been left out men should make amends. It is their duty to give such encouragement to women as will enable them to outshine men. If both parties act as suggested, the atmosphere will soon become pure. Whether men do so or not, women's duty is, to my mind, clear.

New Delhi, 12-4-'46

Harijan, *21-4-1946*

101

ENFORCED MARRIAGE

Q. A sister writes :

" What is an unwilling girl to do when her parents insist either upon her marriage or leaving the parental home ? Where is she to go, if she has not been educated enough to earn her own living ? Whose protection is she to seek ? "

A. The question makes sad reading. It is wholly wrong of parents to force marriage on their daughters. It is also wrong to keep their daughters unfit for earning their living. No parent has a right to turn a daughter out on to the streets for refusal to marry. Let us hope that such cruel specimens are rare. To the girl concerned, my advice would be not to look on any labour with her hands, down to scavenging, as beneath her dignity. Women may not look for protection to men. They must rely on their own strength and purity of character and on God as did Draupadi of old.

New Delhi, 6-9-'46

Harijan 15-9-1946

102

WOMEN'S ORDEAL

" It is not death that matters but how you meet death," he remarked on another occasion. To die at the hands of one's brother is a privilege, provided you die bravely. But what about women who were being abducted and forcibly converted ? That no one could be ' converted ' forcibly was here beside the point. " And why should Indian women feel so helpless ? Is bravery the monopoly of men only ? Women of course do not generally carry swords though the Rani of Jhansi did and outdid all her contemporaries in the valour of the sword. Still all cannot become Ranis of Jhansi. But all women can emulate the example of Sita whom even the mighty Ravana dared not touch. Ranis of Jhansi could be subdued."

"Let no one dismiss the example of Sita as legendary," he proceeded and gave the example of Olive Doke who dared to go and live among the unclad primitive Negro tribes in the heart of Africa without fear of molestation. It was that higher type of valour which he wanted Indian womanhood to cultivate. The military and the police might protect them from abduction but what about those who had already been abducted or who might be abducted in spite of the police and the military. They ought to learn to die before a hair of their head could be injured. He averred that it was possible for a woman to put an end to herself by choking or biting the tongue.

DEATH BEFORE DISHONOUR

The next evening he had to revise the technique suggested above. Dr. Sushila who heard him the day before had told him — and Dr. B. C. Roy who saw him the next morning confirmed her statement — that one could not end one's life by choking or biting one's tongue. The only way known to medicine for instant self-immolation was a strong, poisonous dose. If this was so, he, the speaker, would advise everyone running the risk of dishonour to take poison before submission to dishonour. He had, however, heard from those given to *yogic* practices that it was possible by some *yogic* practice to end life. He would try to inquire. His was not an idle idea. He meant all he had said. The very fact of steeling oneself for death before dishonour braced one for the struggle. Woman in our country was brought up to think that she was well only with her husband or on the funeral pyre. He would far rather see India's women trained to wield arms, said the speaker, than that they should feel helpless. The vogue of carrying daggers and revolvers by women was on the increase. He knew, however, that arms were a poor weapon when it came to the matter of defending one's honour against odds. Arms were a symbol of one's helplessness, not strength. When one was deprived of them, generally there was nothing left but surrender.

From the Weekly Letter by Pyarelal

Harijan, 27-10-1946

ABDUCTED GIRLS

Q. you have called attention to the fact that girls who are forcibly abducted have not erred and that society would be wrong in penalizing them. In further exposition of your views, would you tell us, if any ceremony, purporting to be one of marriage forced on unwilling victims of such outrages, should be considered binding in any way, against the will of the girls concerned? Is it not right that both society and the family should be broad-minded enough to receive them back? In the case of unmarried girls, abducted or forced to undergo such mock ceremonies of marriage, should not a special effort be made by society not only to reclaim them, but to help them to contract marriage in the normal manner and thus be completely vindicated and restored to the fold?

A. You are right. All you say follows from my remarks referred to by you. I have no doubt that girls forcibly abducted have committed no crime, nor incurred any odium. They deserve the pity and active help of every right-minded man. Such girls should be received back in their homes with open arms and affection and should have no difficulty in being suitably matched.

New Delhi, 24-10-'46

Harijan, 3-11-1946

104

BE FEARLESS

Our women were easily scared away. It was so more or less all the world over. He wanted our women to learn to be brave. His advice to them to commit suicide rather than allow themselves to be dishonoured had been much misunderstood. They could keep a dagger for self-defence if they wished to. But a dagger was no use against overwhelming odds. He had advised them to take poison and end their lives rather than submit to dishonour. Their very preparedness should make them brave. No one could dishonour a woman who was fearless of death. They had two ways of self-defence — to kill and be killed or to die without killing. He could teach them the latter, not the former. Above all he wanted them to be fearless. There was no sin like cowardice.

From the Weekly Letter by Pyarelal

Harijan, 3-11-1946

105

ADVICE TO WOMEN

Addressing a gathering of women who had assembled at the courtyard of the house where he is residing in Chandipur, Gandhiji said that women should depend on God and on their own strength and not on others. They should be more courageous and should have more confidence in their own strength. If they were afraid, they would fall easy victims to the onslaughts of the miscreants.

"Indian women are not *abalas*. They are famous for their heroic deeds of the past, which they did not achieve with the help of the sword, but of character. Even today they can help the nation in many ways. They can do some useful work by which they can not only help themselves, but also the nation as a whole, thereby taking the country nearer her goal."

Gandhiji told them that not the men of Noakhali only were responsible for all that had happened, but women too were equally responsible. He asked them all to be fearless and have faith in God like Draupadi and Sita of the past.

Gandhiji also asked them to eschew untouchability. He said that if they still went on disowning the untouchables, more sorrow was in store for them. He asked the audience to invite a Harijan every day to dine with them. If they could not do so, they could call a Harijan before taking a meal and ask him to touch the drinking water or the food. This, Gandhiji said, would go a long way to cement the gulf created between different classes of people by artificial caste barriers. Unless they did penance for their sins in that way, more calamities and more severe ones would overtake them all.

Harijan, 26-1-1947

106

A WOMAN'S DILEMMA

Q. What is a woman to do when attacked by miscreants? To run away, or resist with violence? To have boats in readiness to fly or prepare to defend with weapons?

A. My answer to this question is very simple. For me there can be no preparation for violence. All preparation must be for non-violence if courage of the highest type is to be developed. Violence can only be tolerated as being preferable always to cowardice. Therefore, I would have no boats ready for a flight in emergency. For a non-violent person there is no emergency, but quiet dignified preparation for death. Hence whether it is a man or a woman, he or she will defy death even when he or she is unassisted; for the real assistance is from God. I can preach no other thing and I am here to practise what I preach. Whether such an opportunity will occur to me or be given to me I do not know. If there are women who when assailed by miscreants cannot resist themselves without arms,

they do not need to be advised to carry arms. They will do so. There is something wrong in this constant enquiry as to whether to bear arms or not. People have to learn to be naturally independent. If they will remember the central teaching, namely, that the real effective resistance lies in non-violence, they will model their conduct accordingly. And that is what the world has been doing although unthinkingly. Since it is not the highest courage, namely, courage born of non-violence, it arms itself even unto the atom bomb. Those who do not see in it the futility of violence will naturally arm themselves to the best of their ability.

In India since my return from South Africa, there has been conscious and constant training in non-violence with the result we have seen.

Q. Can a woman be advised to take her own life rather than surrender ?

A. This question requires a definite answer. I answered it in Delhi just before leaving for Noakhali. A woman would most certainly take her own life rather than surrender. In other words, surrender has no room in my plan of life. But I was asked in what way to take one's life. I promptly said it was not for me to prescribe the means and behind the approval of suicide under such circumstances was and is the belief that one whose mind is prepared for even suicide will have the requisite courage for such mental resistance and such internal purity that her assailant will be disarmed. I could not carry the argument any further because it does not admit of further development. It requires positive proof which, I own, is lacking.

Q. If the choice is between taking one's own life or that of the assailant, which would you advise ?

A. When it is a question of choice between killing oneself or the assailant, I have no doubt in my mind that the first should be the choice.

Palla, 27-1-'47

Harijan, 9-2-1947

NO DOWRY AND NO CHILD MARRIAGES

Q. Namashudra girls are usually married at the age of 12 or 13; formerly the usual age was 8 or 9. The bridegroom has to pay a dowry of Rs. 150 for the bride. The average difference between the two is about 12 to 15 years. As a result of this, the number of widows in the *namashudra* society is rather large. Among one section of the caste widow marriage was prevalent. But in imitation of another section which was looked upon as superior, the former are giving up that practice. What is your advice regarding child marriage and widow remarriage ?

A. Dealing with the question Gandhiji said that his opinion was definite. In the first instance there should be no possibility of child widows. He was averse to child marriages. It was an evil custom which unfortunately the *namashudras* had perhaps taken from the so-called higher castes.

Gandhiji was also against the system of dowry. It was nothing but the sale of girls. That there should be castes even amongst *namashudras* was deplorable and he would strongly advise them to abolish all caste-distinctions amongst themselves. And in this they should bear in mind the opinion the speaker had often expressed that all caste-distinctions should be abolished, and there should be only one caste, namely, *bhangis* and all Hindus should take pride in being called *bhangis* and nothing else. This applied to the *namashudras* as well.

When child marriages were abolished, naturally there would be few, if any, young widows. As a general rule he was for one man one wife for life, and one woman one husband for life. Custom had familiarized women in the so-called higher castes with enforced widowhood. Contrary was the rule with men. He called it a disgrace, but whilst society was in that pitiable condition, he advocated widow remarriage for all young widows. He believed in equality of the sexes and, therefore, he could only think of the same rights for women as men.

From Gandhiji's Walking Tour Diary

Harijan, 16-3-1947

DUTY OF CIVIL REBELLION

Q. You have referred to numerous social abuses prevalent among us. They are there; but then if the men are unwilling to effect the necessary social changes what can we women do about it?

A. Gandhiji said that there was no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men. Languages proclaimed that woman was half of man and by parity of reasoning man was half of woman. They were not two separate entities but halves of one. The English language went further and called woman the better half of man. Therefore, he advised women to resort to civil rebellion against all undesirable and unworthy restraints. All restraints to be beneficial must be voluntary. There was no possibility of harm resulting from civil rebellion. It presupposed purity and reasoned resistance.

From Gandhiji's Walking Tour Diary

Harijan, 23-3-'47

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