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Women and Village Industries



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By

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WOMEN AND VILLAGES

In an effort to introduce as much non-violence as possible into the basis of human society, Gandhiji has inaugurated the Village Movement with many schemes, the principal ones being represented by the programme of the Charkha Sangh, the Gram Udyog Sangh, the Harijan Sevak Sangh and the Talimi Sangh. We shall restrict ourselves, in this article, to a consideration of the economic aspect of the movement sponsored by the first two Sanghas and still further limit the scope to the part educated towns women can play in such schemes.

Gandhiji has time and again said that women have to contribute a large share than men towards the achievement of a society based on non-violence. This applies, of course, equally to women of the town as well as to those of the villages. In the nature of the case, the contribution of the two classes will be different, and as most readers of this will be drawn from the former class it will be a convenience to address them here specially.

Duty vs Rights

One of the chief attributes, which distinguish a society based on non-violence from that of a group of the lower order or from a human society based on violence, is the emphasis it lays on the duty of an individual rather than on her rights. In the economic sphere, if we create wealth, we have a duty laid on us to see that in the process of such creation we contribute to the welfare of others. No one's gain should arise out of another's loss. Welfare does not mean merely material welfare, which is often the least important, but signifies the spiritual, moral, physical and

social well-being of everyone. If we hold wealth, we hold it, not as an exclusive privilege, but as trustees with heavy duties attached to the ownership. If we enjoy such wealth, we cannot use it as a right in purely personal, sensual and exclusive pleasures, but should obtain our higher satisfactions in a conscientious discharge of our duties. With this general principle in mind we shall proceed to examine our daily economic life.

We have assumed that our readers are not likely to be engaged in the creation of wealth and so we shall not go into that aspect of the problem here, but confine ourselves mainly to the duties relating to the consumption of wealth.

Education

Efficient consumption of wealth is as great a problem as, if not even greater than, the efficient production of wealth. The latter naturally, concerns mostly with men and the former is peculiarly the women's sphere. Therefore, just as production and consumption are complementary parts of one integral whole, so also, the economic life of men and women are complementary. In passing, we may note here the fundamental requirements of the education of men and women. At present men's education is based on the production phase of economic life and women's education is but a poor copy of it and is not based, as it should be, on the consumption aspect of life. If this is to be done it would entail a complete recasting of the curriculum of women's education, which will take us much beyond the scope of this article. We can, however, indicate the lines on which women will be called upon to solve the everyday questions which are part and parcel of our economic life, and the methods of solution of which contribute towards the

development of our own personality and the progress of society as a whole.

A satisfactory curriculum for women should, therefore, be so designed as to fit the students to carry out effectively their share in adult life.

Consumers' Duties

Often buyers are only concerned with satisfying their own requirements as near as possible and as cheaply as they can. This way of going about the business is to shirk one's duties. What are the duties of an efficient consumer or buyer? When buying an article of everyday use one has to take account of the full repercussions of one's transaction. 1. One should know where the article comes from. 2. Who makes the article. 3. From what material. 4. Under what conditions the workers live and work. 5. What proportion of the final price they get as wages. 6. How is the rest of the money distributed. 7. How is the article produced. 8. How does the industry fit into the national economy. 9. What relation has it to the other nations.

Discriminate Buying

If the buyer has to make her influence felt the further afield she goes for her goods the less will be the power of her influence at such distance, the less the chances of her information on the various points raised being accurate, and the less will be her personal interest. If the goods come from a source which may be tainted with exploitation, either of sweated labour or of the political, financial or economic hold over classes, or races, then the buyer of such goods will be a party to such exploitation just as a person who buys stolen articles from a chore Bazar creates a market for stolen goods and thus will be encouraging

the art of stealing. Therefore, anyone who buys goods indiscriminately is not discharging her full responsibility when the sole criterion of her buying is merely the low price or the good quality of the goods. Hence, we should buy goods only from sources from which full information is readily available and which can be brought under our influence; otherwise we shall have to shoulder a share of the blame for sweated labour, political slavery, or economic stranglehold. We cannot absolve ourselves of all blame by merely pleading ignorance in regard to the source.

If the raw materials for making cocoa are obtained from plantations on the West Coast of Africa, which use some form of forced native labour, are carried by vessels on sea routes monopolised or controlled by violence, manufactured in England with sweated labour and brought to India under favourable customs duties enforced by political power, Then a buyer of a tin of cocoa patronises the forced labour conditions in the West Coast of Africa, utilizes the navy and so partakes in violence, gains by the low wage or bad condition of workers in England, takes advantage of the political subjection of India. All this responsibility and more also is put into a little tin of cocoa.

Are we prepared to shoulder this grave responsibility and pander to our palate or shall we content ourselves with a cup of nutritious milk drawn from a well-kept cow at our door? These considerations are not far fetched but actual. Anyone who looks on life seriously and as a trustee, cannot afford to ignore these far-reaching consequences of her actions,

If we are not able to do this by ourselves we should draft in the help of bodies like the A. I. S. A. or the A. I. V. I. A.

which certify certain products for sale. It is for this reason that khadi should be bought at the certified Bhandars.

Swadeshi

If we feel it is beyond us to guarantee the concomitant results of all our transactions, it necessarily follows that we must limit our transactions to a circle well within our control. This is the bedrock of Swadeshi. Swadeshi is no rabid political slogan. It is circumscribed by our own limitations. The smaller the circumference the more accurately can we gauge the results of our actions and more conscientiously shall we be able to fulfil our obligations as trustees.

Merit of True Buying

These considerations will naturally restrict the field of selection of goods, and therefore, will entail the curbing of the satisfaction of our wants. When you go to buy a saree the shopman may place before you endless attractive varieties of silks from Belgium, Paris and other places at very reasonable prices; but as a trustee you are prompted to buy the coarse khadi cloth, spun and woven by your poor neighbour. It is comparatively expensive, heavy to wear and not artistic enough for your taste. You will be fulfilling your duty by deciding on the khadi in preference to the finery from abroad. This means a great sacrifice.

This control of self is our *tapasya*. *Tapasya* does not consist in sitting on a board of nails or putting a pin through the cheeks. In everyday life, when we forego a want or put up with the inconveniences of a restricted satisfaction in pursuance of a principle of life, we are performing *tapasya* no less ardently than the great *rishis* who have renounced the world and chosen the life of the recluse. We

find this ideal set out in all religions. "Take up thy cross and follow me". Whenever we stand for a principle there will be a cross to take up. It is not a beautifully carved ivory one or a golden one, embedded with gems which can be hung round one's neck on a gold chain, but is a real heavy cross, which has broken the back of many a well meaning stalwart. But there is merit to be earned from the effort.

This sacrifice, tapasya or cross will take many forms in our endeavour to follow the spirit of Swadeshi. When you go to buy salt you are tempted by the purity and the convenient containers in which Cerebos salt is offered and the attractive manner in which it runs out of the container will almost make you decide in favour of it as you glance at the alternative of buying the black looking, dust-laden pebblelike, country salt kept in open heaps, in dirty gunny bags. It requires a strong character to resist taking the easier course, buy the country salt, dissolve it and purify it at home. With a little tapasya you can convert it into a purer article than the Cerebos variety. An American woman doctor always buys gur from the bazar, boils and cleans it, and keeps it in liquid form for her children's use, not because she loves the village industries, but because she prefers it to sugar on nutritive grounds. There are many reasons why we, more than this American sister, should take particular care to patronise such industries. Have we that steadfastness of purpose ?

Similarly, when sales facilities—such as credits, sending on approval, providing of samples, execution of orders promptly—to which capitalistic methods of production and high pressure salesmanship have made us accustomed, are lacking, we shall again feel disgusted if we do not whip up

our altruistic self into following our goal regardless of difficulties. We may rest assured that it will not be always thus. Our artisans, who had produced goods which could not and cannot be copied by machinery, have fallen low as their flanks were not guarded by dauntless customers. Shall we not now gather round those, whom we had let down in the past, and enable them to get on their feet again? Once they recover their balance we can regain the convenience we now associate with foreign and capitalistically produced and marketed goods.

Reason for Decay of Industries

The above paragraph contains a grave confession that we, the buyers, have betrayed the artisans into the hands of their enemies by not guarding their flanks. I may be permitted to give an instance as to how the mentality that prefers to buy foreign goods, progressively starves and kills our industries and ultimately reduces our country to poverty and degradation. Once, when I was touring in Travancore, I was looking into the condition of the screwpine mat-making industry. This industry was once very flourishing and now it is almost on its deathbed. There is apparently no reason for it as the workmanship is still excellent and the raw material is plentiful. Screwpine mats are made from the long leaves of a small hedge plant which is grown round the boundaries of each cottage. Cottages in Travancore, generally stand in their own garden, detached from other dwellings, unlike the row of huts we find in other parts of the country. Men, women and, children work with the leaf of the plant and produce beautiful, supple and soft mats which do not crack on drying, and can be washed clean. These were much in demand for sleeping on. The senior most matmaker was showing me and two friends round and was

asking me to tell him why this industry was on its last legs and how it can be revived. I was hard put to it, to answer his question. At last, he took us to his house and invited us to share his frugal fare. As we were washing he prepared a place for us on the verandah of his house, and indicated my friends to take their seats on two screwpine *asans* and assigned me a seat between them. As I caught sight of the mat spread for me I stood amazed and stared at my host. He was bewildered, and enquired what was wrong. I replied, "I have discovered the cause of the decay of your industry. It has dawned on me this moment." He begged of me to tell him. I told him, "The cause is your brain. It is a false standard of value." He was puzzled and asked me to explain. Then I pointed to the two *asans* provided for my friends and enquired where he got them from. He said he had himself made them from the screwpine leaves of his garden. Then pointing to the tiger-printed mat on which I was to have taken my seat, I asked, "Where did you get this from?" He replied he had bought it in the bazar. He thought of honouring me by spreading for me this gaudy Japanese mat. I pointed out to him that in his mind he valued the Japanese mat more than his own. If so, I asked, could he blame others for preferring Japanese products to his. If everybody did the same as he did, his industry would naturally die, so I suggested that he should take the first step necessary to revive his industry by placing a higher value on his own handicraft and not patronise foreign articles in preference. This illustrates how our country has become degraded and poverty-stricken.

Directing Industries

Every sister, who buys a foreign article, takes the bread out of the mouth of our artisans by causing unemploy-

ment in our own land. This is a fundamental fact we have to realise and grasp. In Tamil we have a saying that a crow regards its own little ones as the most precious. But we have become foster parents to foreign and mill industries, forgetting our own people. For witness, look round your household and count the number of foreign and mill-made things you have got. The prices you have paid for them will indicate the extent of unemployment in our land you have been responsible for. Every pice you spend makes or mars an industry by directing wealth into it or away from it. Woman, the home-maker, is the director of industries in the real sense. Is she educated to discharge this high calling? Other nations, like Russia, Japan, Germany and Italy are encouraging their women to bring forth children so as to swell the ranks in their armies, thus reducing the nobility of motherhood to the level of a stockbreeder or a soulless ammunition factory, and nurture their industries on the blood of their children when they wage war for economic purposes, while we give our all to destroy what little we possess.

A Modern Yatra

It may well be that sometimes we have to search for the goods we need. If you want a silk cord which is Indian made, you may have to wander from shop to shop and yet you may not find what you want and may have to rest content with a cotton substitute. If we have the necessary zeal, all such efforts, which prove apparently futile, will not damp our spirits. We shall look upon such wanderings as *yatras*. There are people who measure their length on the ground all the way from Kanya Kumari to Kashi (Cape Comorin to Benares) as a means of earning merit. Can we be thwarted by anything less?

We have to develop a burning religious zeal for the welfare of our villages.

“ Can a woman’s tender care
Cease towards the child she bare ?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee ”

Shall we remember our duty towards our fellow beings and fulfil our stewardship at all times and occasions ?

The Way to Freedom.

If we can resolutely refuse to buy foreign and mill-made goods, being content with what we can get from our neighbours, what interest will foreign nations have in holding us in subjection ? No doubt such an attitude will call for great fortitude under unparalleled privations, both due to our own actions and those of others. Only when we develop such indomitable courage and unconquerable will can we come upon the standard of non-violence set by Gandhiji, which will be necessary to free ourselves from foreign domination and ward off foreign invasions. This is the message of Gandhiji’s Political Satyagraha Movement.

We cannot attain this except by denying ourselves, taking up the cross daily and following steadfastly the principle of pursuing our duty to our fellowmen rather than enforcing our rights on them. By so doing we shall save the lives of millions and find our own through our tapasya and sacrifice. There is no doubt as to the capacity of women of our land to put forth this effort once they realize the need for it.

Will our readers rise to the occasion and give up the easy and broad way that has led us to destruction and discipline themselves to enter at the strait gate and follow the narrow way that will lead the nation to life abundant ?

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