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WOMAN IN INDIA

BY

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NOTE

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J. B. KRIPALANI
General Secretary

For favour or review.

WOMEN: THEIR ROLE IN THE RE- CONSTRUCTION OF INDIA

BY

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

In as much as it is an acknowledged fact that there can be no real progress in any country unless and until women, no less than men, contribute their full share towards the promotion of the general well-being of the population, it follows that we women in India must take stock of our position and so adjust ourselves that we may be enabled to shoulder cheerfully and efficiently the burdens that we are called upon to bear for the moral and material salvation of our country.

There is no disputing the fact that of recent years there has been a real awakening amongst the women in India. As is natural, however, women's organisations for political, social and educational reform have been confined, generally speaking, to the educated and upper classes; and it is heartening to feel that in such spheres of work as women have been called upon to undertake responsibility, they have proved that they do possess powers of organisation and have shown a sense of duty and capacity for suffering and self-sacrifice in keeping with the best traditions of Indian womanhood.

But while we can take heart from the little that women have been able to do either individually or collectively in recent years, the problem of the regeneration of and the building up of a new order in India, is so vast and fraught with such difficulty that educated women must now map out clearly for themselves a constructive programme by which they will be able to share their gifts with their poorer sisters who constitute the vast majority of our population and in which the latter will be able to give their whole-hearted co-operation.

To this end it is as well for us to realise that educational and social reform and the alleviation of economic distress are just as important to us as, if not even more than the political power for which we in common with the manhood of India have striven, are striving and must continue to strive.

Educational Reform

It is sad to contemplate that in this sphere we are one of the most backward countries in the world. Not even 2 per centum of women can lay claim to being literate and the entire system of education for girls, meagre as it is, has been on a wrong basis. True education is that which fits every human being to contribute his or her quota of work in the best manner possible, in whatever circumstance or environment he or she may be placed. It is the birthright of all to have the opportunity of acquiring such knowledge as is best suited to their mental capacity. But what actually obtains in India? Education, as far as the manhood of our country is concerned, is looked upon primarily and often merely as a means of livelihood; and as far as our girls go, it has, in many instances, been the means of making us adopt false standards of life, given us an imperfect knowledge of English and Western culture, failed to impart a real knowledge of our own languages and literature; and while giving us nothing tangible has made us lose the best in our own culture to the detriment of our economic and moral well-being. It has not touched 98 per centum of us with the result that the real India that lives in our villages is still steeped in ignorance.

To remedy the existing defects and to carry the torch of light and knowledge to these sisters, is of the utmost importance. Women's organisations have, ever since their inception, been pressing for universal, free and compulsory primary education; but it has been a cry in the wilderness and the money spent on female education is far far short of what is necessary. The entire expenditure on education for boys

and girls for the year 1931-32 amounted to 5·8 per centum of the total expenditure of Government and from this amount the benefit to women is infinitesimal and wholly insufficient for our needs. Lack of the proper type of children's and girls' schools where they do exist, their non-existence, generally speaking, in rural areas, a dearth of sufficiently or properly trained women teachers; in short, a universal lack of facilities for female education constitute a problem which is by no means easy of solution.

Socia Reform

Even if we consider a few of the problems that we are all anxious to solve in this sphere, the task lying ahead of the reforming section of men and women is again stupendous. Harmful customs and practices have taken such a firm hold of the general mass of people, have, alas, got so entangled in their minds with religion that it seems well nigh impossible to rid ourselves of the superstitions and prejudices in which we have been steeped for centuries and which have become so much a part of us that we cannot very often wean ourselves easily from them even if we have the inner conviction that they are wrong. The continuance of the practice of such customs, however, has such a deteriorating influence on the character of our nation that unless we take steps for their early removal, India will never be able to take her rightful place in the comity of nations.

It is not necessary to say much regarding the evil of untouchability, for our revered leader has brought this into the limelight with all the force of that spiritual power which is his God-given gift. Suffice it to say that until and unless India has atoned in full for her many sins of omission and commission against the Harijans, she cannot hold up her head and fearlessly face the world.

Child marriage is eating as a canker into the vitality of our national life. Girls become mothers while they are still children themselves and bring into the world offsprings which

are, in the very nature of things, the victims of disease and ill-health. The conviction in the minds of parents that every child must be married, whether physically or mentally fit for procreation, is again responsible for untold misery and the physical degeneration of our population.

The seclusion of women contributes in no small measure to the ill health of those to whom this cruel custom denies nature's gifts of sunshine, light and air, and is helping the increase of the fell disease of tuberculosis which is fast becoming a veritable scourge in the land.

Polygamy and the denial of the right of remarriage to widows must be abolished and the legal disabilities under which women suffer remedied if woman is to be given her rightful place in society.

Economic Reconstruction

In the economic sphere it is an acknowledged fact that poverty is an ever growing menace in our land. The bare necessities of life are no longer available to the really poor who constitute the majority of our population. The villagers who should be and used to be self-supporting, are now unable to provide themselves and their children with adequate food and clothing. The dungeons in which they live, the total absence of sanitation and hygiene, either individual or collective, in the poor quarters of our towns and in every village tell a heart-rending tale of woe and misery. And, perhaps, the greatest tragedy of all is the fact that those who live under these well-nigh insufferable conditions, have become so abject and apathetic that they appear to be content to remain as they are. The wanton and wasteful expenditure on ceremonial occasions, not to speak of that on litigation, so ill-conceived in many cases, is the cause of the financial ruin of many a family, while the dowry system whereby girls are brought and sold in marriage,

is a disgrace to the entire conception of the ideals of marriage and parenthood.

Work before us

In the face of all these difficulties how are we women to whom God has given the light of knowledge and understanding and the material wherewithal, going to acquit ourselves honourably of the task that we are called upon to fulfil? It is obvious that whether it be in the realm of educational or social reform or economic reconstruction, it is to the women of the country that all must turn for the true regeneration of India. The problem, therefore, can only begin to be solved if each one of us is determined to subscribe her quota of energy, talents and funds towards this end.

The main difficulties we have to face are lack of workers and money, ignorance, age-long prejudices and superstitions, a strong wall of orthodoxy, and the fact that most of the intelligentsia among women live in cities, whereas the real work lies amongst the villages which connote the poor, struggling mass of Indian humanity.

As far as proper facilities for female education are concerned, until such time as universal, free and compulsory primary education as well as an adequate supply of infant and girls' schools equipped with trained women teachers are introduced, we must continue to do our utmost to have the system of education in our existing institutions changed. A little has been achieved in this connection by voluntary schools run on reformed lines; and in State schools also in so far as sewing, cookery, laundry, domestic hygiene, first aid and home-nursing, etc. are now often compulsory subjects for girls. But much still remains to be done. Efforts (a) to have the vernacular as the medium of instruction up to a far higher standard than obtains today, if not altogether, with English as

a compulsory second language, (b) to make Hindustani the universal language for India, (c) to abolish communal institutions for education, (d) to have technical and industrial training for our girls no less than for our boys so that they may be enabled to supplement the income of the family, (e) to stress the importance of the beauty of art and culture; (f) to ensure the addition of physical culture in all school and college curricula, (g) to provide facilities for adult education, (h) to provide ethical training such as will enable girls to understand the implications of good citizenship and the greatest of all callings, viz., motherhood,—must continue unabated and may not be relaxed for one moment. All these boons, however, can only, at this stage, be sought for those children and young girls who live in towns and where educational institutions exist.

What of the villages ? Here, indeed, lies a field of work the fringe of which even it is difficult for us to touch. Voluntary work can, however, avail us here with the aid of paid workers where funds for such are forthcoming.

There is no reason why every one of us should not forthwith devote a few hours every week to the reform at least of the villages lying nearest to us. We can band ourselves into groups and bring each village situated within easy reach of our headquarters under our care in turn. To teach the villagers the simple laws of health, hygiene and sanitation, the care of infants, maternity welfare, the importance of food values, the spirit of neighbourly love and co-operation; to hold classes for adults and children whether for the purposes of the encouragement of indigenous cottage industries or for making them literate; to teach plain needlework and embroidery and guide them to make their handiwork artistic and attractive; to find a market for their wares thus bringing them an addition to their meagre incomes; to encourage spinning and weaving amongst them; to instruct village women and young girls in the art of first aid, home nursing and invalid cooking; in short, to

bring a little light and happiness in these dark corners, is surely within the bounds of possibility for each of us. Not only to impart instruction but to give them practical demonstrations of our love for them by washing their babies, for example, ministering to the sick, etc., etc, will not only uplift us but will win for us the affection and confidence of the poor villagers whom we have been guilty of neglecting up till now. Moreover, it is this type of education which is far more essential to our village sisters to-day than mere literacy. The same applies equally to the poor inhabitants of our cities who are within even easier reach of us all.

In the realm of social reform we may not expect the ignorant poor to understand the implications of the terrible results of physical and moral deterioration consequent on the practice of harmful customs unless we help them to attain that mental and moral standard which will enable them to break away from the shackles which have bound them for centuries. To this end we must not only educate them by winning their confidence and carrying the message of reform to them in person but we must set them an example by practising what we preach in our own lives

The sin of untouchability is more deep rooted in our hearts than in the hearts of the poor. The visiting of Harijan quarters, the education of their women and children, seeing that they are allowed facilities for decent living and obtaining the necessities of life now denied to them, the employment of them on our domestic staffs, helping them in the development of industries such as tanning, shoe-making, disposal of carcasses and any other help, will not only purify us and raise the Harijans themselves, but will create a healthy public opinion for the speedier attainment of the ultimate end. If untouchability can once be eliminated and the dignity of human labour recognised by us, all the injustices of social inequalities whether they be rooted in birth or economic status will vanish of themselves.

The evil of early marriage still exists among the so-called educated classes. It is our duty to set our own house in order in this respect if we realise that such a practice is one of the root causes of our physical and mental deterioration. Not only must this custom be abandoned forthwith but the intelligentsia must refuse to marry their sons until the latter are earning the wherewithal to maintain properly a wife and family. We, as women, must consistently refuse to give our daughters in marriage to men who are already married in order to rid our society of the degrading custom of polygamy, and we must turn our faces resolutely against the dowry system which is equally degrading for the parents and for the girl who is thus made an object of barter. If woman is to regain her rightful position in society, if she is to be the true helpmeet and companion of man, the idea that she is but a means of perpetuating the family name or maintaining intact the material existence of the family through the production of male heirs must go and it is we women alone who can and must assert ourselves in order to attain the position which is surely our birthright and without which we will be guilty of denying to our own off-spring the rightful inheritance of every human being. Though India has been and still is a land of universal marriage we must assiduously refrain from marrying those boys and girls who are mentally, physically or morally unfit to undertake the responsibilities and duties of parenthood. Marrying at a later age and not marrying at all when unfit for it, will ensure for us a healthier progeny and, at the same time, check too rapid a growth in population. It is a blot on our social structure that while we often marry disabled children for monetary considerations, we willingly relegate to perpetual widowhood girls and women who would make fine mothers. We deny to whole classes of women not only nature's sunshine, light and air, so necessary for their health, but we also refuse them opportunities for those social and intellectual contacts which should ennoble and enrich our lives; and to all

we deny the right of any freedom of choice in marriage. How then can we expect, generally speaking, our offspring to be healthy and intelligent, our domestic lives to be happy and our homes radiating that light and joy which are essential to our physical, mental and moral prosperity ?

Women's organisations and individual reformers have for some time past been crying for the removal of the legal disabilities under which women labour but very little has been achieved in this direction. However equitable the law or laws may originally have been in regard to women, there is no denying the fact that to-day woman is not given her rightful status. While she has no voice in the selection of her husband, she cannot extricate herself from the eternal bonds of marriage however unhappy she may be through no fault of her own, while a man can, on the other hand, marry as many wives as he likes during the lifetime of his first wife. The laws of inheritance, property rights, right of adoption and guardianship all need overhauling and changing if woman is to regain her lost status. Law may not remain static in a dynamic society and it is the duty of the State to adjust and adapt the laws of a country to the requirements of the times. Legislation must, therefore, come to our aid in this as in a great many other matters relating to social reform, while reforming "panchayats" must be encouraged to use their good influence in enlightened ways and women should seek to be members of such organisations.

The home being the unit of our existence it follows that for its general well-being it is again to the women that we must turn and no economic reconstruction is possible until we are capable of conserving our energy, health and material possessions and utilising the same to the best possible advantage.

The health of the nation is one of its greatest economic assets and, therefore, the right observance of the laws of

health, the avoidance of intoxicating liquors and drugs except for strictly medicinal purposes, hygiene, sanitation and dietetics, cannot be too strongly stressed. The more luxurious our life the more elaborate becomes our diet and it is now a matter of common knowledge that we do not pay enough attention to the fact that our food should contain those ingredients which are essential for health. Bread made from wholemeal flour, hand-pounded unpolished rice, uncooked fruit and vegetables, cow's milk, butter and "ghee" made from cow's milk, raw sugar, honey—it is these simple articles of diet which would benefit our bodies that we, from ignorance, are discarding for bread made from machine-ground flour, highly polished rice, spiced foods, over-cooked vegetables and all kinds of made-up dishes which are detrimental to our health. "The food that we eat should give us not only sufficient heat and energy for the work our bodies have to do, but it should be capable of bringing about normal growth and repair of the daily wear and tear of tissues, thus ensuring their normal functional efficiency". When whole masses of our population exist to-day on only bread or only rice it is doubly important that we should bring home to them the necessity of eating bread made from wholemeal flour and hand-pounded unpolished rice.

In the matter of the adoption of false standards of living, already alluded to, it is we who have got to set the example. *Pari passu* with the rise in prices and a fall in income we have, rich and poor alike, failed to adjust our social and ceremonial expenses accordingly. To revert to a simpler form of life, to spend the maximum on the essentials and to refrain from spending on the non-essentials in the way of food, drink, clothing and all our bodily wants, is to add to our economic assets. The lack of funds necessary for social work will be greatly mitigated if we will conserve our present wasteful expenditure on ceremonials, social pleasures, unnecessary luxuries and spend the same on the uplift of our less fortunate

fellow men and women. If we can realise that a large number of persons are living on an income of less than Rs. 20/- per head per annum, we will readily understand that their expenses must be in proportion to their income and borrowing for social and ceremonial expenses must be stopped. If we can persuade the villagers to feed and clothe themselves with their home products, help them to supplement their meagre income by encouragement and patronage of cottage industries, get them to reduce their social expenditure and refrain from litigation, we shall indeed be contributing to their general betterment. But in this as in all else we may not preach what we do not practise. It should also be our bounden duty to seek out all articles manufactured by our artisans and, in particular, hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, for our own personal and household requirements, remembering that every pie spent on all such means an increase in the income of the poor. It has, perhaps, not yet been borne in upon us how much women, as custodians of the home purse, can do for the building up of our national resources, but reform on these lines is absolutely essential for us if we are to take our full share in the economic reconstruction of our land.

While, nevertheless, we are struggling and working for political freedom, educational and social reform and economic reconstruction, we must never forget that all legislation, political or social, educational or economic, will avail us nothing if we do not lay hold on the most essential things of all—the moral and spiritual values of life. It is that anchor alone that will hold through the strain and stress of life, whether it be the life of an individual or a community or a nation. Civic and political and economic rights will mean nothing to us unless we realise to the full the duties that these rights imply. Mazzini's dictum that "every right that you have can only spring from a duty fulfilled" stands for all time. Women in the natural role of motherhood have the greatest of

all duties to perform in the ethical training of children. It must be their sacred task to instil into their young hearts love of humanity, hatred of wrong and injustice, to train them to follow the paths of virtue, to live and sacrifice for truth and thus to make them worthy citizens of India of the future. It is not so much in the actual attainment of the goal as in the earnest endeavour to accomplish what we believe to be a noble purpose that the measure of success lies. Aristotle truly said: "The State comes into existence to make life possible, it continues to exist to make life good." The women of India must see to it that our State is a great moral agency. We must at all costs, stand by principles, for principles alone are constructive and ideals are never translated into facts without faith. Great things are never achieved except by "the rejection of individualism and a constant sacrifice of self to the common progress." Women as the embodiment of devotion and self-sacrifice, have got to realise that the things most worth having cannot be had without much toil; and self-denial is a lesson that began to be inculcated in man from the earliest ages and has never ceased to be reiterated generation after generation. "Religious thought is the breath of life of Humanity; at once its life and soul, its spirit and its outward sign." But ours must not be the religion of dogma and ritual which breeds superstition and intolerance. It must be the religion of love which "creates for us that theory of duty which is the mother of self-sacrifice which ever was and ever will be the inspirer of great and noble things." If this spirit of love dominates our lives, of it will surely be born the spirit of service—service not in the sense of patronage but of sharing our gifts with others—and that faith which can move mountains. It is through the religion of love that India's women must rise to their full stature and become worthy citizens not only of our own loved country but of the world. For it is the gospel of the brotherhood of all men that must inspire and guide us so that rising above the man-made barriers of caste, creed, community and

race, we may make our humble but lasting contribution towards the ushering in of a new era of peace and happiness into a stricken and suffering world. May our capacity for the spiritual life still be our crowning glory and enable us to give and not count the cost; to fight and not heed the wounds; to toil and not seek for rest; to labour and not ask for any reward.

INDIAN WOMEN AND NATIONAL PROGRESS

BY

L. M.

1. The Historical Background

The position of women in Indian society today, in spite of recent improvements is, one of the most unenviable in the world. For centuries she has lived the life of suffering and degradation. The inevitable result of such unnatural conditions has been the lowering of Indian society as a whole. The glorious position she once occupied remains only a distant memory in the race consciousness. Time was when India took her stand in the forefront of the nations of the civilised world. India was the leader in thought and culture. She held that proud position because of the very nice balance she had evolved between the positions of her sons and daughters. They were comrades, equal partners in life. She was the *Sahadharmini* of the man to share in his duties and responsibilities in this world and the next. In the great ceremonies of that distant past she was accorded a position of honour; leaving her behind, it was not possible for the man to proceed on his onward march of life. She was man's perfect equal.

Naturally, as the mother of the children and the mistress of the home, her sphere of work was more or less inside the home. Yet no field of activity was barred to her if she chose to develop and exercise her natural talents. In the sphere of learning she took her position with perfect assurance. The glorious achievements of the women of old, such as Gargi, Kshana, Lilavati and others are well known. Portions of the Vedas were composed by women. Among them were serious students of philosophy, who took a conspicuous part in the great debates. Draupadi took an active share in the adminis-

tration of the state. Even in the battlefield a sphere of activity from which she might seem to be barred by her physical weakness—were to found women like Kaikeyi and Satyabhama. No social or legal disabilities hampered her freedom of movement and action. Such pernicious institutions as child marriage or purdah did not then exist. She freely chose her partner in life and took an active and lively share in the common duties and responsibilities. Naturally mythology and history record only the rare ones of the sex, but the heights could not have been reached by the few except when the average had attained a high level. In the Buddhist age also we find women of culture and learning. They are seen leading missions and founding monasteries and educational institutions, in their own and distant lands. They sat in the Councils and Assemblies and freely discussed with the learned of the time. The Buddhist revival, as it energised all national activities, instilled fresh vigour in them and expanded their sphere of activity.

The picture of the middle age is not altogether dark. There were women then of learning, refinement and even practical ability. Who has not heard of the famous debate between Sri Shankar Acharya and Pandit Mandan Misra wherein the latter's wife Bharati acted as the arbitrator and awarded the honours of the debate. Lilavati spent her widowhood not in lamenting over the dead but in making valuable contributions to the study of mathematics and philosophy. Later on we see Nurejehan wielding the sceptre. The daughter of Aurangazeb—Zebunnissa—was a poet of no mean order and a great patron of learning. In the annals of Rajputana many a name shine forth in golden letters. Donning the armour the brave women of the race of warriors sallied forth to the battlefield to uphold the honour of the country. Even in more recent history, when India was already caught in the grip of decline, rare glimpses can be had of great women as Ahilya Bai Holker and Luxmibai of Jhansi.

What then is the cause of the demoralisation of Indian women that we see to-day and that we have been accustomed to see for the last century and a half ?

2 The Downward March

Since the Vedic times the picture of Indian womanhood has been becoming increasingly gloomy. In that age of political liberty both legal and social custom accorded to woman a position of virtual equality with man. This free and ordered society was replaced by political strife and chaos, when constant invasion by foreign races from the north wrought havoc in the State. Physical valour then became the primary need of the nation. In such a society woman lost her position as a citizen. The depreciation of her status thus begun has gone on increasing through the centuries. Need of protection necessitated her confinement within the four walls of the house. Thus with the loss by the nation of political liberty she lost all the opportunities of receiving education and of taking her share in the larger activities of life. As she lost her initiative and her capacity to stand by herself in the world, she was relegated to a definitely subordinate position. With the advent of the Musalmans, the necessity to preserve the purity of the family took away whatever vestige of freedom she enjoyed. The purdah and child marriage held her in their vicious grip. In course of time women acquiesced in this position and became mute and inarticulate. Society began entirely to be regulated by man for his convenience. Woman's grievances were neither voiced nor remedied.

In course of time the social evils acquired sanctity. Customs which had arisen through the force of circumstances began to be regarded as sacred. Tradition and vogue placed before woman an ideal of service within the home. She was to find her highest self-realisation within this narrow sphere. She was to know no other world, she had no other ideals or

aspirations, she knew no other duties or obligations. Here within the home she was born, here she lived and died. All other avenues of life were closed to her. Confined to the four walls she brought even to her narrow task a rare purity, strength of will, sacrifice and courage and evolved in it an ideal of household purity, service, love, devotion and harmony never surpassed before, in the annals of the world. She sanctified the new life and as an individual found her highest good; she became the DEVI, the goddess, an object of love and adoration.

But this was a narrow and one-sided ideal. It did not embrace the whole of her life. The intense devotion to father, brother, husband and child made her own life only a means to the life of these others. It became a life of complete self-effacement and self-abnegation.

3. The Marriage System

This narrowing of the spheres of her life left Indian women after the lapse of centuries, ignorant and superstitious, bound by evil social customs, economically and politically entirely dependent upon man. The law of the country knew little of her rights. Finding her highest fulfilment in a narrow circle, she was even unconscious of her lowly position. She lived in pathetic contentment, blissful through ignorance. Parents made no attempt to educate the daughter and thus equip her for the struggle of life. Rather they thought it undesirable to spend money on her as a heavy dowry had to be paid at her marriage. Her short childhood was cut still short by pious parents who wished to secure merit in this world and the next by getting her married even before she completed her eighth year. She was tied down to an unintelligible and senseless partnership. She took the marriage vows she could hardly repeat, much less understand; yet, by the force of these vows, she was irrevocably bound to a person she had not

chosen. This child's play of a marriage brought a tremendous change in her life. It made or marred her happiness for ever—more often marred than made. It was no marriage, but a mere change of guardianship from that of her farther and mother to that of a father- or mother-in-law who for all purposes had absolute rights over her as over her lord the husband.

A Hindu woman's rights in marriage are not protected. The husband has absolute possession of her. She has no redress whether he be suffering from the worst of diseases or guilty of adultery, cruelty or desertion. She has no redress even if he marries another wife. The law permits him to do so. This means though divorce is not allowed by law, that the man practically enjoys the right to dissolve marriage at will. The only obligation upon him is that he has to maintain the discarded wife. The wife in no case can break from an unhappy marriage. Recently the rulings of the law court have declared a marriage to a lunatic as invalid, but social opinion has not accepted it. A judicial separation is not allowed in Hindu marriage except in cases of cruelty amounting to personal danger to life. Even the little protection that law gives is not within her reach as she is either too ignorant to avail of it or has an exaggerated idea of PATIVRAT-DHARM. She refuses to take just remedy against a cruel and tyrannical husband. Though social opinion has now ranged itself against polygamy and it is increasingly becoming rare, yet it is not entirely gone. Law to-day gives progressively more protection to women but still she suffers from heavy disabilities. If a girl is fortunate enough to be married into a happy home she enjoys a few years of comfort during the life-time of her husband. Yet even here the young child-wife has often to lead a life of drudgery and misery under the strict and oppressive regime of a mother-in-law. If she happened to be childless her life is made an unmitigated burden to her.

4. Curse of Widowhood

What is the social and the legal position of the widow ? A hundred years ago the SATI system prevailed, but now it is a matter of thankfulness that the inhuman practice is no more. The law allows the widow to marry again but the law has remained a dead letter to a great extent. It cannot alter the status of women unless social prejudices are removed. Social opinion has on the whole not accepted the remarriage of widows. Thousands of them are therefore yet suffering. How does Hindu society treat its widows? She is not only an object of pity but very often she becomes an object of contempt. She ushers ill omen. The sight of her face brings evil luck. She has to shun all festivals and social gatherings. She cannot be present at the marriage of her children lest she should bring ill luck. She can wear no ornaments; her food, clothing and society are strictly regulated. Nothing aesthetic or artistic is allowed to break the dull, gloomy monotony of her life. Parents dread nothing as much as the widowhood of their daughters. They would rather pray that their child was dead than that her husband departed from this world earlier than she and left her a widow.

With the death of her husband not only does she lose her life-long companion but also, with one stroke, she loses her money, her status, her possessions and her all. She realises that she had all these things because she belonged to the man who had a recognised position in society. He was a citizen enjoying certain rights and privileges. She had enjoyed all those on sufferance, as the partner of the man, or rather as forming a part of his possessions. With the death of her husband she loses everything. The law gives her no protection. She cannot inherit her husband's property. She can only claim a bare maintenance. In this case the childless widow enjoys a better position, because she is given a limited interest in her

husband's property. But as long as the father is alive, the son's childless widow has no claim even to maintenance. Thus she has no rights in her husband's home or in that of her father. Married in childhood, ignorant and unable to provide for themselves, the widows of India either lead a life of drudgery in the house of a relative or are often driven to lead a life of shame and degradation. These are some of the vagaries of the Hindu social and legal system. India makes much of the motherhood and its glories are sung unceasingly. Yet it is a fact that the mother who rears up her children with her very life-blood, has very little right over them. The father is recognised by law as the guardian of the children, and as such he is entitled to the custody of their person and property: even the minor children come under his guardianship in preference to that of the mother. Not only the wishes of the father but even those of other male relations take precedence over those of the mother. The great moral and natural rights of the mother over the children cannot be denied. Yet Hindu Law knows no such rights. Such unnatural conditions have been possible only through the age-long economic and social dependence of woman on man.

5. Law of Inheritance

With regard also to the right of inheritance woman is a sufferer. As no uniform law prevails all over the country, it is difficult to generalise. Yet most of the Hindu systems give woman no right or property except under certain strictly circumscribed limits.

The widows and daughters are excluded from any rights in property except the claim to a bare maintenance. The property may go to the furthest male heirs and the daughter and the wife may be entirely excluded, it being not unusual to deprive them of their rights to maintenance even.

In case of divided families and self-acquired properties

the woman gets a limited right of ownership. She can enjoy the income but she cannot alienate the property by sale or disposal.

Woman's rights to property are so ill-defined and limited that in legal phraseology the term "widow's estate" has come into existence and as often as not the widow finds it impossible to dispose of the property, as her rights to do so can be questioned by her heirs.

She has absolute right only over *Stridhan* but even in this case she cannot dispose of the *Stridhan* that she acquires after marriage without her husband's consent, even if it were her own earning. The legal position of a Muslim woman however is much better because she enjoys greater rights both in marriage and in inheritance.

Such are some of the legal disabilities under which women are suffering to-day. Attempts are being made by liberal minded people to remedy the evil, but social opinion still requires considerable education before any amending laws can be passed and can be of effect. Women of old enjoyed better property rights than their sisters of to-day. The code of *Yajnavalkya* says that a share equal to that of the sons should be kept apart for the mother and that unmarried daughter should receive one fourth of a son's share.

General as are the legal disabilities of the sex, her social disabilities are even greater. Child marriage, the purdah system, the stupendous ignorance of the mass of women, their acquired inferiority complex of ages, the helplessness of widows—all these make the position of woman in modern India a matter of serious concern to the nation.

6. The Awakening

In recent years there has been some awakening. This is not only due to the spread of literary education, but it is also

a part of the present all-comprehensive uprising, national, social, educational and spiritual. History moves in cycles. After periods of decline and degradation follow periods of progress. India to-day is awaking after a profound slumber, and the mighty wave of awakening is carrying women also forward. They have become conscious and articulate. As Kamala Devi puts it: "It is nature adjusting the scales of justice by bringing to the woman a realisation of the larger life and responsibility." The reform movements of Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj laid the foundation of woman's awakening in India. Their vigorous propaganda against purdah, child-marriage, illiteracy has some effect and to-day the position of woman is much better than what it was a few decades before.

Within the last 50 years all prejudice against the education of women has worn away. Increasingly large numbers of them are receiving education in schools as well as colleges. They are found in research halls and laboratories. Quite a good number have been abroad and have received higher education. But it must be remembered all this is confined entirely to women of the upper classes. The masses remain untouched. The present system of education is both too expensive and too academic for their needs. Besides, this hybrid importation has not often given the best results. It has produced an exclusive sect of women with outlook and mental attitude totally different from that of their average sister. They can hardly adjust themselves to the environments which they have outgrown. The gulf separating the educated and the uneducated is wide and deep. It has divided women into two classes, one enjoying all kinds of rights and privileges, the other still living in utter darkness.

Thus the present system of education has not improved the condition of the masses. Yet its achievement must not be minimised. Recent years have witnessed women making some

contribution to the economic and political life of the country. A few of them are to be found in the learned professions, specially in education and medicine. Other avenues of work are progressively opening to them. They are no longer excluded from the bar. Some are practising as lawyers in the different provinces. As economic difficulties are increasing women are taking to professional life, and social disapproval of an earning woman is gradually disappearing. Holding increasingly responsible positions they are becoming conscious of their obligations as citizens.

7. In the Wider Civic Life

They have recently emerged into the field of Politics with rather amazing rapidity. Here all gratitude is due to our men, who have accorded us the greatest sympathy. Through the All-India women's organisation they have carried on a systematic propaganda for their own betterment. It was through the efforts of the organisation that they secured the franchise. The Government hesitated in the matter, but Indian opinion approved of it and both the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress supported it. To-day they are free to exercise the vote and some of them are taking their seats in the legislatures.

Some mass movement was still necessary to break the inertia of ages and to awaken society. In the last few years we have seen glimpses of such a movement. During the civil disobedience campaigns when men were being crushed under a policy of ruthless repression by the forces of a foreign Government, they tore off their veil and came forth to take their stand beside their oppressed brothers at the bidding of our great leader, the Mahatma. They unflinchingly bore the most terrible of hardships. Women, old and young, educated and illiterate, women from the most aristocratic and cultured families and those from the lowliest, stood together and suffered along with their

brothers. Their long training in the school of adversity gave them the necessary strength. The years of sacrifice and selfless devotion to their homes had fitted them to stand up courageously in the day of trial. What years of education could not have achieved was achieved in a trice by a mass movement. Rights can never come as gifts from above. They have always to be acquired. Mazzini said: "Every right must spring from a duty fulfilled." Thus through suffering is the Indian woman securing her rightful place in the life of the nation. She is making her own contribution towards the general national revival. As a consequence she is becoming conscious of her old glorious status and gradually regaining her self-confidence. It would appear that in spite of age-long degradation and suppression, her honoured position in society was not altogether lost.

The women's movement in India has however differed from all such movements in other parts of the world. It has followed the national genius of non-violence. It has not come in the form of a revolt. Though woman had been excluded from all spheres of life, and society had been entirely dominated by man, yet, when she chose to come out of her narrow world, no path was blocked to her by man. He has been her most sympathetic helpmate in her struggle for emancipation.

It is but the dawn of an awakening—the great task³ of uplifting the whole mass of Indian womanhood still remains to be done.

प्रकाशक—

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अखिल भारतीय काँग्रेस कमिटी,
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मुद्रक—

माधव विष्णु पराङ्कर,
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