The History of Doing

An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990

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kali for women

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Excerpts From Lajpat Rai's
A History of the Arya Samaj

The Relations of the sexes

It must be frankly admitted that when the Arya Samaj came into being the lot of Hindu women was deplorable. In certain respects it was even worse than that of men. A proportion of the men (though comprising only a very small percentage of the population) had received some sort of education, in the schools and colleges opened by the Government, the Christian missionaries and other private agencies, but very little had been done to further the education of Indian women. This system of Government introduced by the British, necessitated the education of Indian men for administrative reasons. Among the agencies that have worked for improvement in this respect, the Arya Samaj occupies a high position in the Punjab and the United Provinces of Agra and Oude. It can be safely said that there has occurred a metamorphosis in the outlook of men towards women.

English education and Western ideas have played an important part in engendering this change, but an equally great, if not even greater, part has been played by an appeal to the ancient Hindu ideals of womanhood and to the teachings of the ancient Hindu religion in the matter of the relations of the sexes. A study of ancient Hindu literature made it abundantly clear that the present unenviable lot of Indian women was due to a deterioration of their old ideal. In Ancient India, both in theory and practice, women were placed on a pedestal in society: equal to that of men, if not higher. As regards education and marriage they held an equal position. The girls were equally entitled to receive education, and no limitations at all were set on their ambition in this direction. Study was equally enjoined for the girls as well as the boys. The only difference was that, in the case of girls, their period of education expired sooner than that of boys. The minimum age of marriage for girls was sixteen, as compared with twenty-five for boys. This was based on Hindu ideas of the physiological differences between the sexes. It is presumed that as regards the choice of a mate, both parties enjoyed equal freedom and equal opportunities. The ideal marriage was monogamic, and one contracted with the mutual consent of the parties. Yet, so many varieties of legal marriage are known to Hindu law as to leave no doubt as to the sensitiveness of the Hindus to the extreme difficulty, and indeed unnaturalness, of attempting to impose a single law upon both sexes. Some forms of marriage suggest that courtship was not altogether unknown in Hindu society, and furthermore, it was not regarded with any grave disapprobation. Though as a rule subject to control by parents, husbands and even sons, Hindu mothers, wives, sisters and daughters occupied a higher position than their counterparts ever had in Christian Europe before the nineteenth century. In the family the position of the mother was higher than that of the father. According to Manu she is entitled to a thousand times greater respect and reverence than the father. She was in supreme control of the house and at the helm of household affairs, including finances.

Hindu law recognizes the rights of the mother, of the widow, of the daughter, and of the sister to possess property in their own right, with exclusive control over it, even when a member of a joint family. A mother has an equal right with the father to the guardianship of her children. On the death of the father her right is absolute. An ideal Hindu wife is never expected to earn her livelihood. She has been exempted from this burden by virtue of the superiority of her mother-function. Male members have been made responsible even for the maintenance, etc. of unmarried girls and widows, though the latter are not debarred from acquiring property by inheritance, by gift, or by their own skill. In no case have males any legal control over the property of females.

The Hindu marriage is a sacrament, and as such, in theory, indissoluble. Says Manu:

"The whole duty, in brief, of husband and wife towards each other is that they cross not and wander not apart from each other in thought, word and deed until death. And the promise is that they who righteously discharge this duty here shall not be parted hereafter, by the death of the body, but shall be together in the worlds beyond also".

Swami Dayanand interprets the ancient Rishis as disapproving of second or third marriages on the death of husbands and wives (Manu is supposed to lay this injunction on widows only). In any case, Dayanand does not lay down any rule for women which he does not apply to men also, and in so doing he is merely following the spirit of the ancient lawgivers. There are certain conditions in which men are permitted to remarry even in the lifetime of the lawful spouse; for example, if she be barren, or addicted to strong drink or guilty of immorality, or even when there is complete incompatibility of temperament. In similar conditions the wife, too, has the option of remarrying in the lifetime of her husband; for example, if he be impotent, or deserts his wife, or falls into dissolute
habits, or disappears without trace for a number of years, and so forth.

In special cases, Hindu law sanctions polygamy also, though only under very exceptional circumstances. It follows from what we have stated above that the Arya Samaj is strongly opposed to child marriage.

It has conducted a fiery crusade against this unnatural custom, and may be congratulated on its success in rallying public opinion to favour its view. It fixes sixteen as the minimum marriageable age for girls and twenty-five for boys, and it encourages celibacy up to the age of forty-eight.