

Basic Ideas of Lohia : Selected Writings

Preferential Rights for Women

With this issue Dr. Ehrenfels completes his plea for preferential rights for women. Some women may not themselves have liked such a plea because of its assumption that woman is inferior to man in certain spheres. A large number of men must have felt awkward, if for no other reason than that they would, in the new situation, inherit their names from their mother rather than from their father. But this problem of woman must not be treated on the level of temporary annoyances; it must be tackled as its root. Woman is undoubtedly among the most exploited sections of humanity, together with the poorest and lowliest of men. She may try to forget her condition with love or trinkets and her charitable generosity. But ugly practices of society and certain dark recesses of the soul have both combined to turn woman into a sphere where socialism is most needed. If socialism and democracy are a battle for equality, they are cut out specially as creeds of women. Furthermore, the new mode of this battle for equality comprises of civil disobedience, which alone promises a new civilization, and man without woman is totally unsuited for this new type of fight. If groups of women in considerable numbers are ever present in the ranks of civil resisters, the possibility of degeneration into street fighting or violence is greatly minimized. Woman is a truer agent of civil resistance than man. She is undoubtedly superior to man in this as in other spheres of generosity. When a scheme of preferential rights is demanded for her, that is in no way a stigma or a traducing. Rights more than duties belong to the sphere of politics and political action belongs to the sphere of organization. In the sphere of organization, man is the superior of woman. An attempt must be made to reduce this superiority in such measure as is possible through a scheme of preferential rights for women. Human ingenuity may be able to propound a scheme other than that outlined by Dr. Ehrenfels. Dr. Ehrenfels had once given an exceedingly interesting slant on the overwhelming presence of Malayalis in Delhi and its central government. Delhi itself has lots of fun about its disease which it rollickingly calls Menongitis, and Dr. Ehrenfels thinks that Menons, Nairs and Pillais make such wonderful secretaries to government ministers precisely because they have been brought

up in a matrilineal tradition. Men brought up in the matrilineal tradition learn the art of life and adjustment with their mother's milk, for they have to adjust their way through the triple authority of the mother, the father and the maternal uncle. This gives them an unexampled capacity for adjustment. Adjustment and creativity are undoubtedly two different capacities and neither should be sacrificed to the other. It is therefore of deciding consequence that the problems of man and woman, of matrilineal and patrilineal society, of adjustment and creativity, of the demand for preferential rights for woman should be deeply studied in order that woman's inequality may be reduced to the minimum and that she may help banish the methods of violence from human pursuits. The more enduring problems of mankind tend to suffer neglect against the cacophony roused by passing economic or international problems of the day. But the problem, for instance, of the single woman of today or of the step-child is certainly more enduring and consequential to mankind than many others which are constantly causing controversy. Cruelty is a state of the human mind, as much as it is an expression of certain economic and political relationships. As long as man lives and there is family and marriage, the step-child would be there, perhaps in diminishing numbers, and its soul must be protected against any kind of cruelty. How often is the soul of a stepchild of tender years singed by a callous word or a discriminating deed from its parents, one of whom is a substitute and has received later admittance into the family. Similarly, the single woman of today is an extraordinary person and deserves deeper study and more sympathetic treatment than she has so far received. She is probably no more unhappy than many married women and, if there are some exceedingly happy ones in her ranks, they can be matched by the ranks of the married. The single woman of today differs from the married woman not in the extent of this or that emotion or quality but in that she has an entirely different status. Her numbers keep on steadily increasing. The single woman need not necessarily be a lonely woman, but her status does deserve to be studied with greatest sympathy and objectivity. The thought of her makes one tender. She may be like a sunless day which is

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always on the verge of rain or like the moonlight filtering through casuarina leaves or she may alternate between the two states. In either case, her status requires deep study. As long as it is not possible for woman to bathe herself into purity after wading through a mire of dirt, in the style of Flaubert, at will and through payment of a few pieces of silver, the overwhelming loneliness that occasionally overtakes the single woman of today and the cruelty that an unthinking society metes out to her deserve the attention of sociologists as well as poets. So also the widow is the recipient of much cruelty in all the world, but she is overwhelmingly so in India. The 1951 census counted a total of 1,34,000 widows out of 61,18,000 females between the ages of five and fourteen. With widowhood goes the stigma, to say the least, of bad luck in all the world, and definitely so in India, where nearly 13 per cent of all married females are widows. The child widow is like a single woman with the possible difference that she is more of a rainless but cloudy day and less of casuarina moonlight. Widows, not yet old and particularly those who have no male children, become the recipients of special cruelty and, if the single woman is sometimes resignedly disconsolate about life, the widow is disconsolately resigned. The condition of the widow had, in the past, excited sympathetic attention in the country. In the beginning, there was a furore against widow remarriage. The controversy died out. Social reformers were happy that they had won yet another encounter. But India is a great big bog into which everything sinks beyond recognition after having caused a few ripples and eddies. A recent disclosure made by Mr. Gatubhai Dhruv, of a Gujarat social

reform organization, showed that over 1,200 widows of Gujarat had defied social barriers and remarried since the widow remarriage legislation was enacted a hundred years ago. That gives an average of ten widows remarried each year. The story is indeed not so bleak, for the backward castes are not so cruel with their widows, as are the high castes, and much happens in the country without any social organisation being involved in it. Nevertheless, a problem of very serious import exists. It goes much beyond widow remarriage and other specified sources of cruelty. Will the Indian bog ever dry up sufficiently or will persons and parties be able to drive such firm stakes into it as to recover from it some firm ground? Social reformers and revolutionaries who are content with scoring a debating point over conservatives and reactionaries must learn their lesson properly. An endless round of profitless controversy would otherwise go on in relation to every subject of renewal. Every reform occasions a heated controversy in the early stages and then that massive society which is conservative accepts intellectual defeat by allowing a few venturesome persons to go their own way, on the fringes, in respect of widow remarriage or the single woman and similar phenomena, while it is overwhelmingly victorious in that it keeps unaltered the main arena of life. Cruelty is the greatest source of life's ugliness. Its forms are manifold. It has burrowed itself into the darkest and the innermost recesses of the human mind through hundreds of centuries. It must be patiently ferreted out so as impatiently to be destroyed. Mankind hopes to have documents and other contributions on this and similar topics of enduring cruelty.

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