SOME ASPECTS OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

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The subject matter of marriage is a major field of interest for students of Social Science. It has academic as well as practical values dealt with by various scholars. An attempt has been made in this paper to evaluate and to represent a bird’s eye view of the social trends affecting marriage and Family.

A remarkable feature of marriage at present is its secularization. In the ancient and mediaeval worlds, and to this day in the Orient, especially in India, marriage is a sacrament, with the sanctions that keep it, enduring and responsible, largely religious. It is obvious that the secularised attitude towards marriage is part of the general trend of life in civilized countries towards secularism and practicality. Some marriages are sealed today by signing names in a civil register. One of the manifestations of this secular attitude is to regard the obligations of marriage contractual. It is a contract ostensible for limited purposes and for certain practical ends.

In the sacramental marriage the man promises before God that he takes the woman unto him for a wife to cherish, honour and protect her and live with her to the ends of righteousness, until death. It was thus a solemn institution an association with a member of the opposite sex brought for the life-time of the partners. It was considered a union forged by God and ‘whom God has joined, let no man pull asunder’. The woman’s undertaking in this partnership was proclaimed to be unlimited lifelong devotion and fidelity to her husband, the bearing of children, and the acceptance of the role of a helpmate to him, through thick and thin, in the journey of his life on earth, and, perhaps, also beyond. In such a plan the woman’s worst sin against God, as also against her man, is infidelity or unchastity. The punishment for unchastity is not to be assigned by men, for as an offence against God, it is punishable by Him. But certain human agencies who conceive themselves the Executives of Divine Disapproval pronounce upon the offence and nullify the marriage. Social interest in securing stability and permanence of the marriage bond inserts itself into the scheme and joins social disapproval to Divine Displeasure which it expresses by withholding from the woman the sacramental status of any further marriage on her part. These observations are largely true to this day particularly with reference to (Roman) Catholic and Hindu communities. It is this sort of squeamishness towards women that has encouraged the mob-adventurous and less sentimental among them to resort to the Civil Register and prefer the unsanctified marriage to the Solemn
ceremonies before the altar or the fire. Male infidelity, in practice though not in theory, is not as much noticed as the women’s and no serious penalties on their side are ever attached to it. Perhaps, it is this very freedom from moral coercion that has schooled men and encouraged them to seek gratification of their desires in the sex sphere in modes of relationship, outside the cognizance and control of the prevailing church or other instrumentalties of religion. In the secular attitude marriage frankly is an institutional expression as much as of male jealousy and intolerance of rivals for the possession of and access to the female. All the way down the centuries men’s attitude to property also coloured and impressed itself upon that towards possession of women.

In the secular attitude to marriage men and women look upon the obligation of marriage partly as a social obligation and partly an answer to the logic of the sexual demand. Socially, marriage is still the respectable thing to enter into. It confers the status of a person socially acceptable and admitted to privileges, maintained by the social code. Employers consider the married man as staid, sober, and dependable; and married woman as more reliable for punctuality adherence and responsibility. There are, no doubt, services like the house maids, public vigilance services, (like police etc..) waitresses in restaurants, women’s auxiliary corps, actresses and governesses, which, for preference, elect the unmarried woman. But the ruling social sentiment is unfavourable to the unmarried women—a social sentiment in the making of which the women are even more uncompromising and insistent than the men. It is not necessary here to labour the point that men and women sobered in wedlock exhibit a poise, a capacity for absorbing shocks of life, a moral ballast that keeps the ship of life steady sailing upon its keel. Marriage in the case of men is an unfailing haven of refuge out of the storms and stresses of adolescence. Society would appear to be fully appreciative of this fact.

Social Change

Modern conditions in society are not adverse to throwing men and women together in various occupations. Society’s barriers at one time extremely rigid and frowning to meet strangers among men and women, meeting quite casually and getting acquainted, have practically vanished. There is no doubt that there is the persistence of class consciousness which is still effective in segregating individuals and groups. But the overall picture of contemporary society is that of unlimited opportunities for the members of both sexes to associate and discover the means for mutual understanding. Good many youths conduct themselves in camps, swimming pools, bathing beaches, carnivals, forest lodges, hikes, on voyages in steamers, and in schools and colleges where co-education exists.

The only bar for such understandings to ripen into physical intimacies, hither to, was the woman’s fear of maternity outside marriage.
The unmarried mother is even to this day socially despised and ostracised. But modern technological and scientific developments on the one hand and, in civilised countries the institutional provision for unmarried mothers and unwanted children have to a certain extent softened the barrier and have made sexual experiences prior to marriage a common affair. These practices restore to modern civilised man and woman, the liberties of some primitive communities.

Birth control is openly advocated in modern society primarily to protect the married women from too rapid a decline due to frequent births and of limitation of size of families from economic considerations. But these methods and appliances for birth control are today within the reach of all and their procurement is easy. The advocacy of birth control has also removed the moral deterrent to sexual relations outside marriage. A reckless youth above personal honour and decency would not place himself in jeopardy and his girl intimate is no longer in trouble as she could protect herself against the risks of pregnancy.

Under these circumstances the motive of immediate sex gratification has ceased to be the central motive of marriage. More men and women would appear to marry in modern times at ages when the violence and blinding rage of the sexual passion are things long past and forgotten.

We may say that marriage today has lifted itself above the level of biological agencies and is fairly engaged in the service of man’s and woman’s highest personal ideals. There is no handicap of blinding passion or compelling impulse for persons to agree to live together in lifelong association and creative companionship. Modern marriages are elective. Two persons of the opposite sexes meet, inspire one another, fall in love. They fight long and hard if they are so minded against false impressions and against self-delusions over each other. They discover in the process of some months or years, as real as their own personal lives, that each is a counterpart and hope of fulfilment for the other. With such realization they confess themselves and build their united life and love upon that realization and confession. These are love marriages. The bliss of love is the personality transformed and elevated through the continuous shining into it of the other personality—a marriage of souls more than of bodies. Each becomes the alter-ego of the other. The sanctification of the purposes of life through the rituals of religion cannot rise to the level of this sort of sanctification of life through love. Modern marriage consummated at this level is a recapture of the old Vedic ideal and practice of Swayamvara which even in the Dharmasastras is held to be the highest and the noblest form of marriage. In all advanced countries, the same progress towards the secularized attitude to marriage keeps equal step with an ever deepening and ever advancing insight into human love and human self-giving through love. We cannot understand anything human without an adequate understanding of things divine says Sir S. Radhakrishnan. We ought to match those wise words with the observation that neither can we
understand things divine without an adequate acquaintance with things deeply and spiritually human. Man can walk boldly ‘released of all bonds.’ He can make or unmake himself. It is for each man to appoint into himself his heaven or his hell. This new spirit expresses itself in marriage as well. Especially the modern women is conscious of her worth, of personality, of spirit, of idealism. She is the one who fixes the level at which her soul should be met, inspired, drawn and enveloped by the one who is to be her lord—the lord of her heart.

**Attitudes towards Maternity**

It is difficult and uncertain to establish any conscious attitudes to motherhood which one can offer as part of developing modern outlook among women themselves or in society. There are fluctuating attitudes as for example what seemed a passing phase in France when women felt ashamed of being seen in the stage of pregnancy. The gravid woman considered herself an offender of prevailing fashion. Here was an attitude so grave in consequences to the national well-being that France had to adopt public measures to combat the fashion. There was a similar tendency in Germany which the rise of Hitler to power terminated such an attitude. So also in Italy; the social programmes of the Fascist Movement encouraged maternity, and after Mussolini came to power, women of many children were publicly honoured with medals, pensions, etc. A Woman who gave birth to quadruplets received a personal decoration from the Duce. The new enthusiasm for the mother’s contribution to National Economy was obviously prompted by motives of colonization. A theory was evolved that the fitness for survival of the modern highly civilized nations is partly insured by the pressure they could exert in a programme of expansion. Population pressure was conceived as one of the signs of vitality of a forward moving race. Nations which contemplated going to war for the assertion of their rights to self-preservation, interpreted aggression as the most effective form of defence. In this programme of aggressive expansion through resort to war, man-power looms large in the leader’s calculations. The World War I demonstrated that it is easier to replace casualties to machinery and weapons of war than to reimburse the grave inroads upon man-power. War is primarily and essentially a trial of physical or material strength which engages large bodies of men in the field of conflict. Further, one of the grave consequences of a large scale war is the depletion of the male-section of the population resulting in an overwhelming or disproportionately large number of women in proportion to men in the community. Such a result is apt to overturn society even for the victor country. We might venture to say that at no time in history did the leaders of nations appreciate as they do today that the most precious part of national wealth is its man-power for industry, agriculture, art, science and educational needs, as well as for war.
With the rapid rise of specialized techniques of modern production comes a new and growing appreciation of the need for men to promote exploitation of those techniques in the service of a progressive community. Any alarming fall, or even a stationary equilibrium of man-power in society is viewed by the leaders of the community as a threat of grave calamity.

Accordingly measures are adopted, especially in countries whose leadership assumes dictatorial forms to make contributions to man-power a national obligation on the part of women. Enthusiasm for birth control, the fashion of narrow waists and girlish attire, occupations for women as are deemed prejudicial to child bearing, attitude of avoiding marriage and living single, the ease and frequencies of divorce, living for preference in treatments, hotels, flats, or dormitories, all such are sternly discredited, put down and in some instances punished by the State. During Hitler’s regime in Germany there was the cry heard all over the country that woman’s place is primarily in the home. Hitler himself taught that a patriotic German woman has only three major concerns in life, children, ministrations of food to the household and conservation of Germanic culture and handing it down to generations. Woman was lauded as the mother of the Race, as the guardian of national culture and as the light of the hearth. Accordingly the scale of values applied to estimation of women swung to the extreme opposite pole. The matronly woman was idealised; the ‘petite’ wasp-waisted, doll-like woman (in English circles dubbed ‘Frenchy’) with lip-stick and satins who brandished cigarettes and lived at large, was frowned upon, if not denounced as ‘the Butterfly’. Women’s education, recreation, club-life, professions, church affiliations, in fact all aspects of women’s life were vigilantly watched and regulated to the new ideal of devotion to national weal and the state lost no time in gaining effective control of all forces that were entering into the striking of the modern woman. This was done, not merely as part of the programme of rehabilitation and preparation for war, but also from an awakening to a new sense of values of culture, happiness and national prosperity;—i.e., as much a part of the armour of peace as of war. In such developments the European consciousness was eye-ing with alarm as well as admiration, the populous countries of the Orient especially those which had preserved their culture in tact through millennia, under historic vicissitudes that had wiped out formidable western cultures. The new proposals therefore appear as symptomatic of an European awakening to wisdom of the Orient (especially of China and India) and the latter’s enthusiasm for familial virtues.

**Family and Motherhood**

In certain respects the restoration of the family and the new insistence on marriage and maternity would appear to be a wave of reaction. In England, France and America the cry was heard that the
new proposals of Fascist countries meant a restoration of the Dark Ages and the beginnings of an era of suppression of women. Democratic countries interpreted the new-won franchise for women as public recognition of freedom or right to self-determination for women in all spheres of activity.

Modern developments have made woman's choice of motherhood a voluntary one. But maternity and the tasks of upbringing the child cannot be abstracted from the social milieu of the family, while the mother-child relationship is essential and central to these tasks. They are better performed with the presence and better co-operation of a husband (i.e., the father), grown up children, elder woman members of the family, and in fortunate homes a grandparent or other senior who is never hurried for time. Accordingly the woman's attitude to motherhood is intimately bound up with and is a part of her attitude to the family. While the choice of motherhood is voluntary now-a-days, the forces that tend to disorganization of the modern family invariably act as a bar, or work as a check, upon any care-free indulgence in that choice. Under conditions prevailing in urban areas, where both man and woman have to work for living, maternity presents problems which none but the most civilized countries have sought to meet or alleviate. Even in such countries, the subjective psychological attitude to child bearing is so overlaid with anxieties and fears that more women than ever shirk the prospect of becoming mothers or consent to become mothers only at a relatively later period of their maternity.

Atttitudes of Women

Women's attitude to child bearing is also affected by their attitude to house-work. In civilized countries house-holding has been stripped of a large number of cares to which women were subject from some four generations ago. The drudgery of house tasks has also been largely relieved by technological and industrial developments. Food half-prepared is procurable from the grocers. Kitchens look like dainty parlours, with many improved gadgets for economy, speed and cleanliness of cooking. The household laundering, recreation, educational tasks that fall to the mother have largely been taken over by other agencies. With improved methods of flooring, walls, roofing, etc., tidying and house repair operations, have ceased to worry women. The work that still falls to the lot of women—especially in middle class homes—is that of personal management of children, cultivation of emotional and cultural values of the association of members in the household and occupations of leisure.

These have become such marked characteristic of the average middle class household that critics have accused women as gilded dolls in the house, largely unemployed and parasitical upon the income of the Bread-winner. They are however not parasitical. If they appear so
they can no more help the situation than men who find themselves the sole bread-winners of the family. The causes are historical and reflect the transition from an age of the co-operative productive families of a century ago to an industrial age in which men sell their labour as a commodity in the competitive market. Home-making is a far more attractive occupation today for the woman who can afford it than it was ever before. The preference for a house-maker is clearly indicated when we watch the trends in higher wages for wage-earners in the heavy industries. Whereas with poor income workers had their wives also as wage-earners, where the incomes improve and standards of life rise, the wife is sent back to the home i.e., where standards of living are appreciably higher, women return to home-making as their primary occupation. It would appear therefore that if the necessary economic foundation for home-making could be found more women would return home and accept the tasks of bringing up a family.

The deepest subjective psychological attitudes in women are all thus in favour of the tasks of motherhood, rooted as they are in that deep and original impulse, universal in woman, viz., philo-progenesis. ‘Women’ by Nature’s design is the mother of the race; and in their right frame of mind and unhampered by economic or social repressions, they would as spontaneously embrace maternal roles as ducks take to water. If more women, under modern conditions are exposed to mental and nervous disorder than at any time in the past, one of the causes is obviously the frustration of this impulse, especially in the early years of women’s maturity. Women will move back into homes and prefer home-making whether pushed there to or not. The problem of our day is rather that of affording facilities thereto, and the more exacting one of making home-making tasks yield the personal satisfactions that women demand of them.

**Superior Home-lover**

The deeper personal satisfactions of home are the aesthetic and moral ones. We may venture to suggest that while men’s satisfactions in these fields are those of achievement, power, display, or execution, women’s satisfactions are largely those of attitudes, feelings, things endured, suffered, yielded, shared—values discovered in the giving rather than the getting. It is in these terms that writers distinguish the masculine and feminine natures as extroverted and introverted respectively. Other external conditions being equal the superior homemaker is the woman of the richer sentiment, the woman whose spirit is inwardly nourished through acts of surrender or self-giving love. A woman who has never lost her heart to an overmastering spiritual passion is the empty shell of a physical female. Her depths are revealed to her in the measure of her capacity to endure suffering and privation for those she has embraced with her heart. Judged by this measure the
central fact of a woman's existence is the child in her lap. More than the physical continuity between her and her child there is an identification, a fixation, a projection of her whole psychic being into the new life she has brought into the world. The home is a resting place for weary bones—not merely the lovers of bed and board. From the woman's point of view it is 'the child in our midst' that lights up the woman's soul and incarnates the home. Home is a temple where the Deity is the child and the high priest the mother.

It is the attitude of the male partner that has in recent times perverted the sanctities and solaces of home. In no sphere has the psychology of male dominance and assertiveness brought more havoc than in the home. As the sole-bread winner, man has developed the prejudice that the woman is a parasite. As her part in home-making is not translatable into wage-equivalents or money-values, she is looked upon as an unpaid attendant. She is assigned the role in the house, the Minister of the Board, Bed, Recreational and other functions. Inferiority is stamped upon her and she lives her life out as the slave in attendance upon the Overlord. Men imagine that a relieving feature of this scene is the partnership in the management of the sex impulse and that ought to compensate and does compensate for women, all the other, depressing features and limitations of domesticity. If the roles were interchanged—i.e., if women become the 'sole-bread-winners' of the family and men accepted the tasks of domestic life, men would not hesitate to swear that sexual partnership however satisfying can by no means compensate for the deformities of soul inspired by such an arrangement. What is true of men here is a hundred times more true of women.

The deeper satisfactions of home-making are thus from the women's point of view, those of the spirit—i.e., satisfactions that attend on inspirations, abundances of heart and thrills of the deeper personal levels. These come to women in those unique relationships and mutual claims of mother and child which weave around them a sort of closed-in-universe.

Confucius wrote that a man has no place in society unless he understands Aesthetics. With equal truth we ought to say that no one has a place in a home unless one can enter there as the rotary of a child. The morally great man, says Mencius (330 B.C.) is one who has preserved his infant heart. Through the knowledge of the virtues of an 'Infant heart' and getting back much into the sweetness and graces of childhood spent at the mother's knee, it is not difficult to estimate the values of motherhood.
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