

## Vivekananda's Vision of Indian Women and the Situation Today

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The concept of womanhood holds a special place in the Hindu mind. It embodies what is noblest and best in Hinduism. The basis of this ideal is a deep religious consciousness expressing the moral genius of the strength of personal character of the Indian women. The concept of *Shakti*, the female representation of infinite energy, though evident even among the pre-Aryan races, took deep roots in the Vedic age and gained strength in the form of the Shākta movement. *Shakti* is the symbol of universal motherhood, for the mother is the highest ideal of women in India. *Shakti* has been portrayed as all-merciful, all-powerful and omnipresent, the sum total of the energy in the universe comprising the known as well as the unknown. The elevation of womanhood to the status of divinity is unique to Hinduism, and as such there can be no greater honour to womanhood than this idea.

Sati, Sāvitrī and Sitā have been idealized and revered by the Indians for centuries. Women too had contributed to the corpus of Vedic knowledge, and the centre of the Hindu family was the mother who assumed the role of a spiritual leader for the entire family. But today's realities are quite different. Age-old repressive social systems have worsened the lot of womenfolk in this land. The Eastern women of the 19th century led a cloistered existence, subsisting on whatever her husband provided and having

almost no freedom of expression and action. She was relegated to the status of an instrument for bearing children and cooking meals. More or less, this had been the situation when Swami Vivekananda stepped in. But he brought about a social awakening, and, among other things, upheld the cause of the womankind to redefine and re-establish our ancient ideals of womanhood. Swamiji called upon women of all castes and creeds from all lands and all social strata to make themselves competent instruments for the dissemination of the highest ideals by cultivating a strong moral and intellectual character and a life marked by uprightness.

Sri Ramakrishna revealed the truth that there is inherent divine strength in all women. He saw the Goddess Kālī in all women and elevated Sarada Devi, his blessed consort, to the pedestal of divinity by worshipping her. She, in turn, played a great role in impressing the ideas of perfect womanhood in the mind of young Vivekananda. She could do it because she herself was the acme of a perfectly chaste Hindu woman, a woman of great moral fibre, so much so that even the cyclonic monk of the stature of Vivekananda felt scary and had to drink the holy water of the Ganges before meeting her<sup>1</sup>.

Swami Vivekananda believed that all great nations are worshippers of women. In fact, the secret of their greatness lay in their respectful attitude towards their women. He

had a conviction that a nation which does not respect women can never achieve greatness. He said, India's decline to a large extent was due to the disrespect and trampling upon its women by the male members of the society.

Swamiji talked at great length on the high status of women in ancient India, especially in the Vedic period. He asserted that the degradation of women started in the post-Vedic age. The idea of suppression of women was developed by the Assyrians, a Semitic race, when they proclaimed the doctrine that woman had no voice and no rights. This idea subsequently spread to Persia, Greece and Rome and slowly the status of women started declining universally to give way to a male-dominated society. In India, the ascendancy of the priestly class led to the rapid inculcation of the same idea when all other castes along with women were deprived of their rights enjoyed earlier. *Smritis* continued to be written binding them by hard rules in every walk of life<sup>2</sup>.

Vivekananda said categorically that the development of India will remain incomplete in the absence of the awakening of women, because both men and women are equally important for the development of a nation. Therefore he always preached the ideals of Vedanta which make no distinction between man and woman. Of course, he was aware that in some of the sacred books of Hindu religion women were regarded as inferior to men. He said 'I admit that in our sacred books there are many passages which condemn women as offering temptation; you can see that for yourselves. But there are other passages that glorify women as the power of God. And there are other passages which state that in that house where one drop of a woman's tear falls, the gods are never pleased and the house goes to ruin'<sup>3</sup>.

Vivekananda, while lecturing at Cambridge in 1894 on 'The Women of India' said, 'Women in statesmanship, managing territories, governing countries, even making war, have proved themselves equal to men—if not superior. . . . Whenever they have had the opportunity, they have proved that they have as much ability as men, with this advantage—that they seldom degenerate. They keep to the moral standard which is innate in their nature. . . . Even at the present day, we see women in India managing vast estates with great ability'<sup>4</sup>.

Swamiji felt that there were contradictions between the Purānas and the Vedas as far as the participation of women in religious rites was concerned. While the Purānas regarded women as subservient to the males, the Vedas held that men and women had rights in respect of religion. An American newspaper reported Vivekananda as saying that 'some of the most beautiful portions of the Vedas, the Hindu bible, were written [sic] by women, but that there was no other bible in this world in which they had any part'<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless he was not satisfied with the condition of women he found in his lifetime. According to him, the duty of the male persons was to oversee that woman received proper education which should enable them to solve their own problems. He said: 'Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them'<sup>6</sup>. Their education would help them to deal with their own troubles and tribulations, for they are as capable of doing it as any in the world'<sup>7</sup>.

Vivekananda regretted that the state of women's education in India was not satisfactory. What type of education he recommended for women? The one that would help them build their own character, increase their will-power, develop their

intelligence and, above all, help them stand on their own feet. Besides, he always stressed the importance of religion in education. He said, 'I look upon religion as the innermost core of education'. He lamented that education in modern times had relegated religion to an insignificant position. But education without religion is incomplete as it produces man and woman who are not self-sufficient. So, he said '... now female education is to be spread with religion as its centre. All other training should be secondary to religion<sup>8</sup>. While education would intellectually equip Indian women, Vivekananda was not in favour of intellectual accomplishments 'at the cost of' morality, purity and spirituality<sup>9</sup>. Therefore he thought of establishing a 'math' especially for women.

#### **In the present situation**

Swamiji had praised profusely certain positive qualities which the Western women had. He wanted Indian women to inculcate those qualities. The Western women were educated, beautiful, intellectually sound, and they enjoyed freedom to decide the course of their lives themselves. Women in India too, Swamiji believed, must adopt these good qualities. However, he had cautioned that a balance must be struck between the 'angel in the house' and the 'professional woman' in public life. Women must be allowed to have their own choice in respect of things ranging from very personal matters like marriage to the profession they choose to go for. The new woman must equip herself with knowledge which may help her in asserting her own identity, confidence and self-respect. For the development of a nation like India, the emancipation of women, their liberation from religious, legal, economic and sexual oppression, and their access to higher education are absolutely necessary,

because Swamiji said, 'Liberty is the first condition of growth'<sup>10</sup>.

A woman should be given equal opportunity in various fields so that she gets the scope to develop her talents. She must be made to realize that she is capable enough to rub shoulders with men in professional fields. Spiritually also women are as capable as men. In the words of Vivekananda, '... though outwardly there may be difference between men and women, in their real nature there is none. Hence, if a man can be a knower of Brahman, why cannot a woman attain to the same knowledge?'<sup>11</sup> So, empowerment of women is one of the necessary steps for achieving the spiritual unity of our nation which was the declared goal of Swami Vivekananda. Improvement in the status of women contributes to the overall progress of a nation and such improvements make the world more equitable and more humane. Swamiji said, 'No man shall dictate to a woman; nor a woman to a man. Each one is independent. What bondage there may be is only that of love. Women will work out their own destinies—much better, too, than men can ever do for them. All the mischief to women has come because men undertook to shape the destiny of women'<sup>12</sup>.

Swamiji's great confidence in women was evident from his utterance that there was no task before India which could compare with that of women's education. He believed that, 'with five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years: with as many women, not more than a few weeks'<sup>13</sup>.

It may be said that Swami Vivekananda's idea of womanhood reveals a unique amalgamation of the past, present, and future, the East and the West, of strength with sweetness, fire with the calm. This he based on a dream of the grandeur of spiritual awakening and development of the

soul, where the distinction between man and woman is but the phantasm of *māyā*. It transcends all physical differences and social customs to rest on the evolving soul, the true consciousness.

Swami Vivekananda's thought reflected a maturity of social ideas that was beyond his times. He foresaw the women of the future who would receive a full education in science and sports, but with an equal or more emphasis on ancient spirituality. They would be in a position to make their own decisions and solve their problems in their own way. He dreamt of each individual woman reinstating into herself the greatness of all the women of the Indian past. Thus, his was a synthesis of ideas set against the background of the reality of the *Parabrahma*. And what a synthesis that was! It is awe-inspiring to think of sports, education, and homework for girls and the idea of the undifferentiated Brahman together as components of the same integrated concept, like the spectrum of colours that make up a single beam of light.

The transformation of Indian women has been brought about to a great extent. The

forces that have helped in the emergence of new women in India have been a number of laws passed by the government and the efforts of women's organisations. In the villages, the panchayats are making efforts for women's uplift. The education and literary rates are improving. The Indian women have started their march towards progress. While the government through constitutional and democratic processes is providing opportunities to women to participate in the political field, there are non-governmental efforts as well to initiate change in the lives and activities of women. Women's organisations, in particular, are playing a significant role in this respect.

Therefore, women have opportunities today to participate in political and social activities. The women force occupies roughly fifty per cent of the total population and this tremendous 'energy' of the nation can no longer be kept idle. So the energy is now being utilized. This 'Development of Women' to 'Women in Development' is observable in the technology-ridden modern times. Life shows that our women, if motivated, are capable of giving their best. ■

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#### REFERENCES

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- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 346.
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- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 464.
- 6 *The Complete Works*, Vol. VI, 1963, p. 115.
- 7 *Ibid.*, Vol. V, 1963, pp. 229-230.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, 1972, p. 220.
- 9 *Op. cit.*, Vol. V, p. 412.
- 10 *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 246.
- 11 *Op. cit.*, Vol. VII, p. 219.
- 12 *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, 1959, p. 91.
- 13 Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, Udbodhon, Kolkata, 1977, p. 260.

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