



## Vivekananda's views on women empowerment

Reshma Khatun<sup>1\*</sup>, Nasir Ahmed<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Aliah University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Teacher, Department of English, Adhikari Krishnakanta High School (H.S), Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

### Abstract

Throughout the history of the Indian civilization it is clearly visualized that women enjoyed a very considerable position in society and their status was much better than at present. As several civilizations evolved, their status was gradually deteriorating. After the realization of women's contribution to the development of the family in particular and the society as a whole, several attempts to empower women have been made by different social reformers, and this is an ongoing process. Swami Vivekananda, one of the great religious and social thinkers of India, thought about the empowerment of women in the context of traditional Indian philosophy. His thoughts reflected throughout his work and speeches, which are much more socialistic rather than religious in nature. He believed that in the future, Indian women would cross the chapter of glorious achievements made by the ancient Indian women instead of making them only as a reflected glory. Every manifestation of power in universe is "Mother". He tried to increase awareness, develop and empower women not only through education but also by enlightening them through the philosophy of Indian spiritualism, which might be considered as an effective system or approach in the process of empowering women. Nowadays the profession of social work also plays a very important role in this matter. But it is also clear to us that in spite of the best efforts, the women's empowerment movement is not up to the mark. Emphasis is given on physical and economic development rather than intellectual development. Thus this paper focuses on the process of women's empowerment, in which the thoughts of Vivekananda were very much applicable.

**Keywords:** women empowerment, consciousness, spiritualism

### Introduction

India of the Vedas entertained a great respect for women amounting to worship. But during the time of Swami Vivekananda, the condition of women in Mughal-ruled and British-ruled India was deplorable. "It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious self is present in all beings. You always criticize the women, but what have you done for their enlistment?"<sup>[3]</sup>

Swami Vivekananda was of the firm opinion that women should be put in positions of power to solve their own problems in their own way. The welfare of the world is dependent on the improvement of the condition of women. Vivekananda repeatedly told that India's downfall was largely due to her negligence of women. The great images of Brahmavadinis like Maitreyi and Gargi of the Upanishad age, and women missionaries like Sanghamitra carrying Buddha's message to Syria and Macedonia, all were lying buried deep due to millennium of foreign domination. The mid-nineteenth century India saw women, the great mother – power shackled and degenerated to mere "child producing machines" as Vivekananda saw it.

Swami Vivekananda views woman exactly as he views man, an individual with a destiny. In the sphere of the pursuit of spiritual realisation, which is the highest reach of life, woman as well as man, has to walk in a single file. Perfect freedom, independence and responsibility are involved in the

individual, be it man or woman, who longs for God alone. "In India the mother is the centre of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the universe. It was a female sage who first found the unity of God, and laid down this doctrine in one of the first hymns of the Vedas. Our God is both personal and absolute, the absolute is male, the personal, female"<sup>[4]</sup>.

Vivekananda was against the early marriage. Early marriage was the very reason for the existence of so many widows, so many women dying early and the birth of emaciated children who would only increase the number of beggars in the country.

What was the way out to save and elevate Indian woman? Education was the answer. But what kind of education? What is women's education? Sister Christine wrote that for weeks and months Vivekananda would be buried in thought, creating and recreating the splendid image of the Indian woman of the future. Would a combination of the western spirit of independence, freedom, and dynamism with Indian austerity, purity and chastity in woman's life be possible? A nation that has educated itself to look upon God as Mother has learnt to invest its view of woman with the utmost tenderness and reverence. Swami Vivekananda is the first monk to uphold and do work for the freedom and equality of women and realising her importance for the functioning of home and society. He defended the marginalization of women and empowering women and the poor a priority of the Ramakrishna Mission.

He visited England in 1895 and met Margaret Elizabeth Noble, an Irish lady who was in the midst of her learning about the Buddha. Influenced by Vivekananda's teaching she became the first Western woman to become a Sanyasin named Bhagini Nivedita. Nivedita played a major role in promoting the rights of women in rural India. In November 1898, according to Vivekananda's instruction, she started a school for girls, allowing them to receive basic education. The school is today known as Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School, situated in Baghbazar of North Kolkata.

### Swamiji on women

- All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future.
- With five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women, not more than a few weeks.
- Every nation, every man, and every woman must work out their own salvation.
- The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence.
- There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved.
- Women – I should very much like our woman to have your intellectuality, but not if it must be at the cost of purity.”

Vivekananda declared that the Western ideal of womanhood is wife, while the eastern ideal is mother. “The very peculiarity of Hindu women which they have developed and which is the ideal of their life, is that of the mother.....” Swami Vivekananda glorified Indian women of the past for their great achievements as leaders in various walks of life. “Women in statesmanship, managing territories, governing countries, even making war, have proved themselves equal to men, if not superior. In India I have no doubt of that. 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. And thus as governors and rulers of their state, they prove—at least in India far superior to men. John Stuart Mill mentions this fact.” India's reverence for women as the symbol of chastity brought such words from Vivekananda's lips: “I know that the race that produced Sita – even if it only dreamt of her – has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on the earth.” The rise of outstanding women administrators, statesmen, scientists, writers and spiritual teachers, is gradually proving the truth of these prophetic words. Today Swamiji's words have proved true. Following the footsteps of Sarada Devi and Sister Nivedita hundreds of women all over the world are coming forward with a combination of the ‘mother's heart and the hero's will,’ a combination of the purity of Holy Mother and the dynamism of Rani of Jhansi or Joan of Arc.

### Concept of womanhood

Vivekananda concentrates and believes in the ideals that Vedanta says on women's position. He glorifies the ideals contained in the rich Indian heritage and Vedic scriptures. It is

in the background of Vivekananda's understanding of the causes of the degeneration of women in the modern age that he evolved his ideal of “Indian womanhood”.

Vivekananda saw that there is no distinction of sex in the highest reality of Parabrahman. He observes, “The more the mind becomes introspective, the more the idea of difference vanishes. Ultimately when the mind is wholly merged in the homogeneous and undifferentiated Brahman, such ideas as this is a man or that a woman do not remain at all....Therefore,... though outwardly there may be difference between men and women, in their nature there is none. Hence, if a man can be a knower of Brahman, why cannot a woman attain the same knowledge? Therefore... if even one amongst the women became a knower of Brahman, then by the radiance of her personality thousands of women would be inspired and awakened to truth, and great well-being of the country and society would ensure” [5]. Swamiji pointed out that any idea of privilege and superiority, either mental, physical, or spiritual, for anyone was inadmissible to a true Vedantist. He said, “The idea that one... is born superior to another has no meaning in the Vedanta; that between two nations, one is superior and the other inferior has no meaning whatsoever. Put them in the same circumstances and see whether same intelligence comes out or not [6].” According to this position if men and women are also given same opportunity, it is possible to attain same level of development. He said, “We should not think that we are men and women. But only that we are human beings born to cherish and help one another”. He warned that until the women learn to ignore the question of sex and to meet on a ground of common humanity they will not really develop and remain merely as playthings in the hands of men [7]. There were times when Vivekananda's mind was dwelling in a transcendental realm and those times gave rise to expressions like these: “There is neither man or woman (in Vedanta) for the soul is sexless... It is a lie to say that I am a man or a woman or I belong to this country or that. All the world is my country, because I have clothed myself with as my body.” Such was his sense of identity at that moment. He never tried brushing off the well meaning concerns of men who would ask him about “women's problems”, “Hands off”, he exclaimed “women will solve their own problems”. “Men had no business attempting to solve them for them”. Always Swamiji's call had been that women have to develop their own personality and try to know themselves and their problems.

In the Vedic and Upanishadic age, Maitreyi, Gargi and other ladies of revered memory had taken the places of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. When such women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, Swamiji asks, then why shall not the women have the same privilege now? What has happened once can certainly happen again. History repeats itself [8]. Swamiji pointed out another example for female eminence that when Yajnavalkya was questioned at the court of Janaka, his principal examiner was Vachaknavi, the maiden orator– Brahmavadini, as the word of the day was. Due to her skill in questioning, her sex was not even commented upon. The Vedas proposed feminine modesty in the qualities such as their character, skill, courage, spirit of service, affection, compassion, contentment and reverence. He felt that it was much against the ancient ideal of India that

women were not given enough opportunities for self development. It is the spiritual ideal of Sita or Savitri that Indian women have been following through the ages. Faith in god, self abnegation and service also marked their character. Chastity has been the guiding motive of their life. It is necessary to intensify the ideal of womanhood in the Indian woman so that they may feel the necessity of coming up along with men. Indian women should try to attain greatness and strength that Sita had shown.

On Indian womanhood he said, “The highest of all feminine types in India is mother, higher than wife. Wife and children may desert a man, but his mother never. Mother is the same or loves her child perhaps a little more. Mother represents colourless love that knows no barter, love that never dies. Who can have such love? – only mother, not son, nor daughter, nor wife”<sup>[9]</sup>.

### Position of women in India

Vivekananda’s position on women is scattered around his numerous sermons, speeches, comments, conversations, writings, etc. When he travelled through America one of the important topics of discussion was of women’s position in India. He compared the position of Indian women with those of the West. In this comparison he found no reason for the inferior position of Indian women. In a letter written from Chicago when he was there to participate in the Parliament of World Religions, he mentioned “Nowhere in the world are women like those of this country. How pure, independent, self relying and kind hearted! It is the women who are the life and soul of the country. All learning and culture centered in this country....

There are thousands of women here whose minds are as pure and as white as snow of this country”. Then he said about the Indian women, “Look at our girls, becoming mothers below their teens!... I now see it all”. He understood the paradox of Manu’s dictum, “The Gods are pleased when the women are held high in esteem” and the reality of women’s position and says, “We are horrible sinners, and our degradation is due to our calling women ‘despicable worms’, ‘gateways to hell’ and so forth<sup>[10]</sup>” He was aware of their subordinate position. He was not satisfied with the condition of women during his days. He had seen the misery of his own younger sister, Yogendrabala who committed suicide, and it had deeply affected his thinking. “If women cannot act, neither can man suffer,” he responded. The tragic death by suicide of Vivekananda’s sister as well as his experience with western women had made him conscious of the tribulation and degradation of the Indian women. In a conversation with a visitor at Belur he expressed his indignation, “Look here Baba, you have cried enough about sati [chaste woman] and burnt thousands of widows on the bamboo pyre ... are all women guilty of passion and lust? [You] hypocrites and selfish to the bone!... quit humiliating the Mother of the Universe and you will see how quickly the country prospers”<sup>[11]</sup>.

Swamiji wanted women to be worshipped as the same way as Goddess Kali is worshipped. Selfishness and greed are the evils which bring suffering. According to him the principal reason why India has degenerated is that there is no respect for women. Though the ideal of mother has its own merits, the

millions of women in villages are still the victims of violence, ignorance, superstition and disease, and are relying still on age- old distorted customs and traditions. Even today despite the constitutional guarantee of gender equality, women’s position has not improved for the better.

### Education of women

“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing<sup>[12]</sup>.” The Swami was particularly worried about the degradation of women in India. He was emphatic that women must be educated, for he believed that it is the women who mould the next generation, and hence, the destiny of the country? In Vivekananda’s educational scheme for India, the uplift of women and the masses received the highest priority. It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same self is present in all beings. Writing down Smritis etc., and binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into mere manufacturing machines. Vivekananda repeatedly told that India’s downfall was largely due to her negligence of women. The great images of Brahmavadinis like Maitreyi and Gargi of the Upanishad age, and women missionaries like Sanghamitra carrying Buddha’s message to Syria and Macedonia, all were laying buried deep due to millennium of foreign domination. The mid-nineteenth century India saw women, the great mother – power shackled and degenerated to mere “child producing machines” as Vivekananda saw it. In the period of degradation, when the priests made the other castes incompetent to study the Vedas, they deprived the women also of all their rights. You will find in the Vedic and Upanishadic age Maitreyi, Gargi and other ladies of revered memory have taken the place of Rishis. In an assembly of a thousand Brahmanas who were all erudite in the Vedas, Gargi boldly challenged Yajnavalkya in a discussion about Brahman, Swami Vivekananda was of the firm opinion that women should be put in positions of power to solve their own problems in their own way. The welfare of the world is dependent on the improvement of the condition of the women. To make a beginning in women’s education, his argument centred on chastity because it is the heritage of Hindu women. Firstly, “intensify that ideal within them above everything else, so that they may develop a strong character by the force of which, in every stage of their life, whether married or single if they prefer to remain so, they will not be in the least afraid even to give up their lives rather than flinch an inch from their chastity”<sup>[13]</sup>. Therefore he advised, “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them who are you? Liberty is the first condition of growth”. He advised the Indian women to believe in India and Indian faith. Be strong and hopeful and unashamed, and remember that with something to take, Hindus have immeasurably more to give than any other people in the world”.

To reform Indian women he suggested such an education with which women will solve their own problems. However, he disapproved of their modern education. According to him, “education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We

must have life building,... character making, assimilation of ideas. If education were identical with information, the libraries would be the greatest sages of the world and encyclopaedias the rishis.” For him the use of higher education was to find out how to solve the problems of life. Swami Vivekananda warns that “getting by heart the thoughts of others in foreign language and stuffing ... brain with them and taking some university degrees, you consider yourself educated?... education which does not bring out the strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a lion is not worth being called education.” It is true that our modern education system in post independent India is not free from this defect. This also points out that the tendency in the feminist movement to emulate and transplanting the western theories should be taken care of for not repeating the same defect. Swamiji supported the indigenous system of education in which the history and culture of one’s own nation would be taught. He was against the alien model of education in tune with the West which compels the youth to study the alien culture, traditions and practices at the cost of what has evolved and developed in their own countries. He held that the mind of an individual is an infinite reservoir of knowledge, and all knowledge, past, present and future is within the individual, manifested or non-manifested.

### Conclusion

“In India the mother is the center of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the universe. It was a female sage who first found the unity of God, and laid down this doctrine in one of the first hymns of the Vedas. Our God is both personal and absolute, the absolute is male, the personal, female. And thus it comes that we now say: ‘The first manifestation of God is the hand that rocks the cradle’ [14].

Vivekananda declared that the western ideal of womanhood is wife, while the eastern ideal is mother. “The very peculiarity of Hindu women which they have developed and which is the ideal of their life, is that of the mother.....”A nation that has educated itself to look upon God as Mother has learnt to invest its view of woman with the utmost tenderness and reverence. Swami Vivekananda is the first monk to uphold and do work for the freedom and equality of women and realizing her importance for the functioning of home and society.

So shall we bring to the need of India great fearless women? Women worthy to continue the traditions of Sanghamitta, Lila, and Ahalya Bai and Mira Bai women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and fearless, strong with the strength that comes of touching the feet of God.” We must see to their growing up as ideal Matrons of home in time. The children of such mothers will make further progress in the virtues that distinguishes them. It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers are born.

It is the strong belief of Swami Vivekananda that if the women are raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awake in the country.

With five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women not more than a few weeks. The rise of outstanding women administrators, statesmen,

scientists, writers and spiritual teachers, is gradually proving the truth of these prophetic words. Today Swami Vivekananda words have proved true. Following the footsteps of Sarada Devi and Sister Nivedita hundreds of women all over the world are coming forward with a combination of the ‘mother’s heart and the hero’s will,’ a combination of the purity of Holy Mother and the dynamism of Rani of Jhansi or Joan of Arc.

All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future, amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Said by Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>2</sup> Said by Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>3</sup> Said by Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>4</sup> Said by Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>5</sup> Complete Works of Vivekananda, Vol.7: 219. Bose, 1998: 285-86 and Ranade, 1963: 108.

<sup>6</sup> Complete Works of Vivekananda, Vol.7: 219. Bose, 1998: 285-86 and Ranade, 1963: 108.

<sup>7</sup> Complete Works of Vivekananda, Vol.7: 219. Bose, 1998: 285-86 and Ranade, 1963: 108.

<sup>8</sup> (CW, Vol. 7: 215), (CW, Vol.6: 149).

<sup>9</sup> (CW, Vol. 7: 215), (CW, Vol.6: 149).

<sup>10</sup> (CW, Vol.6: 252- 5 53), said Swamiji.

<sup>11</sup> (CW, Vol.6: 252- 5 53), said Swamiji.

<sup>12</sup> (CW, Vol.6: 252- 5 53), said Swamiji.

<sup>13</sup> (Vol.5, 542).

<sup>14</sup> (CW V.4 p.170)