

CELEBRATING THE SPIRIT OF WOMANHOOD APROPOS TO SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S IDEALS

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Abstract: The history of Indian women, from ancient to post modern period, has been eventful. Especially, the medieval Indian society saw the disempowerment of women. During this period, social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, M. G Ranade, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, etc. campaigned for female emancipation. Amidst them, a visionary, Swami Vivekananda, stood for the rights and regeneration of women. He presented to the world, Vedantic wisdom that treated woman not only as a 'Shakti' but more so as a 'Vyakti'. This paper revisits the ideals of the Vedic age and combines it with the present era. Thus, it redefines the true meaning of 'being woman'. It reflects the radical yet contemporary ideas of Swami Vivekananda on the lines of his practical Vedanta. It elucidates Swamiji's thoughts pertaining to 'ideal womanhood' by combining the ideals of freedom and spirituality. He also delineates education as a means for empowerment, self development and self expression. This presentation attempts to bring about a paradigm shift in the societal constructions of gender and hegemonic male supremacy over women. It is based on the thought that - "There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness". (From Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume VII.)

Keywords: Education, Ideal Womanhood, Practical Vedanta of Vivekananda, Vedic Age.

Introduction: "The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women."

- Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda - a monk par excellence and spiritual genius was a promoter of gender equality. With his enthralling vision and divine wisdom, he showed a remarkable understanding of human life. He passionately campaigned for the elevation and emancipation of women. He was a believer in 'Practical Vedanta' and intended to remodel and revive ancient Vedic teachings.

The ancient Vedic society was egalitarian and tolerant. Women were held in high regard as 'Shakti Swaroopa'. They were adept in dealing with their issues. Eminent, learned women scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Apala, Romasha, Shasvati, etc. composed Vedic hymns and participated in intellectual debates. They were revered as 'Brahmavadinis' or expounders of Vedas and as 'Rishikas' or female seers. When Vachaknavi, the maiden orator questioned Yajnavalkya in king Janaka's court, her gender was not even mentioned. Hence Swamiji asked, "When such ideal women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, then why shall not the women have the same privilege now? What has happened once can certainly happen again. History repeats itself." (CW Vol. 7: 215). According to Swamiji, self development is possible only by following the footsteps of these great women. Furthermore, the Vedic polytheism venerated not just Gods or Devas but Goddesses or Devis. A hymn from the tenth chapter of Rig Veda, "I am the Empress of the Universe, the Fulfiller of all Prayers" demonstrates this. No Yajna or Karmakanda was considered as complete without the female counterpart of the male performing it.

Vedanta or the pinnacle of Vedas revolves around the ideal of self realization or Atmashashatkara. Upanishads say, "Know this Atman alone, give up all other vain words, and hear no other." Swamiji refers to all beings as Amarasya Putram, i.e. Children of the Ultimate or Immortal Bliss. Shvetaashvetara Upanishad states, "Thou art the man, Thou art the woman. Thou art the girl and Thou art the boy..." At the highest plane, there is no distinction. The Dvaita or duality becomes 'Advaita' or non-duality, accentuating the Ultimate unity and thereby leading to a harmonious existence. Swamiji, therefore, says, "In the Atman, they found the solution - the greatest of all Atmans, the God, the Lord of the Universe, His relation to the Atman of man, our duty to Him, and through that our relation to each other." (Swami Tattwavidananda, 273). Behind the body is the Atman which is an eternal and spiritual principle, unconstrained by space and time. It is Nitya Mukta. It assumes multiple forms as Jivas in its empirical existence. Names, forms and divisions are superficial and do not apply to the infinite and eternal Atman. Gender is more than just biology. It is a social construct that leads to gender stratification. Swamiji says, "Therefore do I say that outwardly, there may be difference between men and women; in their real nature, there is none." (Swami Bodhasarananda, 332). When the mind is illuminated, 'woman' seems to be the absolute manifestation of Brahman. Swamiji opined, "Total freedom and independence is the symbol of total womanhood." (Shodhaganga, Ch11). Being free implies physical, social, mental and spiritual autonomy. He contemplated ideal womanhood as motherhood with the quintessential of infinite energy, magnanimous love and valiant strength. This ideal was shaped by three strong

womanly powers in Swamiji's life, viz. his mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi, his Guru's consort Sharada Ma and his inspiration Goddesses Kali. Swamiji felt that women need to identify their status and recognize the immense potential within them. This has to happen at an individual level through self enquiry and introspection. Swamiji felt that it is wrong for any man to say, "I will work for the salvation of this woman or this child." (Tattwavidananda, 134) He was very vocal in expressing that women should work for their own emancipation. They should command self respect and dignity so that no one dares to abuse them. Women are not weak or fragile. A woman is as courageous and strong-willed as a man. When given an opportunity, they should show the spirited facet of their personality and deal with any challenge that comes their way. He did not support jingoism that portrayed women as 'Abala Nari'. Once while treading a stony path with his disciples, Swamiji showed a neutral attitude towards female adherents who were finding it difficult to climb. Sister Christine says, "All fine men revere womanhood; the higher the type, the greater the reverence. But here was one who gave no heed to the little attentions which ordinary men paid us. We were allowed to climb up and slide down the rocks without an extended arm to help us. When he sensed our feeling, he answered - if you were old or weak or helpless, I should help you. But you are as able as I am. Why should I help you? Because you are a Woman..." (Banhatti, 267). Men may bow low and show their chivalry by offering a seat to women. But the very next moment, they will start flattering by showering compliments. Swamiji states that we should learn to ignore questions pertaining to sex or gender. We should assimilate and assemble on the common grounds of humanity. Only then women will develop. He asserted that any decision regarding women's welfare should rest in their hands only. He wanted women to walk their own path, resolve their problems and create their own destiny. Women should imbibe not just the unselfish love, ungrudging sacrifice and immense patience of Sita and Savitri but also demonstrate ferocity, courage and might like Goddesses Kali.

For Swami Vivekananda, the key to social reform was 'Education'. It is only through education that liberation at ontological, social, religious and ethical levels is possible in the true sense. It is education that helps achieve self development, self expression and self esteem. Education will help women take charge of their own lives and reform themselves. Their potential will be actualized and they will be able to break the shackles binding them. The main objective of female education is to kindle the spirit of being strong, fearless and mindful about dignity in women. Swamiji restates the Upanishadic statement, 'One, who is always conscious to the idea

of freedom, becomes free and one, who entertains the thoughts of bondage, endures it eternally'. Hence, he says, "The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses, must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country, for India. (Tattwavidananda, 133). Though Vivekananda insisted upon the indigenous education system, he wanted to combine it with ideas of the west. The western idea of freedom along with intense ethico-spirituality of the east would help women accomplish great success. He observed that women in the west were well versed in science and philosophy. They were very learned and intellectual. To elevate the status of Indian women through education, he, along with Sister Nivedita, started a school for girls under the Ram Krishna Order. It promoted a blend of modern and traditional styles of erudition. This comprised of religion, arts, science, housekeeping, etc. leading to an overall spiritual development. He also asserted that women be taught self defense so as to protect themselves. He started with an order of nuns or Brahmacharinis who set out on the mission to help women become self sufficient.

This year, we celebrate the 153rd birth anniversary of Swamiji. The ideals he envisaged remain eternal and universal as Sanatana Dharma. The humanistic, spiritual philosophy he propounded brought about immense changes in the society. But complete empowerment of women is still a far cry. The lives of Indian women have been very eventful. Right from the medieval period to the modern period, the changing roles of women have created an aura of empowerment. However, there still exists gender discrimination due to the dominance of patriarchal power. The medieval period was a 'dark age' for Indian women. Foreign invasions and the prevalent feudal system resulted in social ills such as child marriage, sati, purdah system, devdasis, maltreatment of widows, etc. Women, thus, became the sole property of their male counterparts. In the twenty-first century, women have achieved great success. They are proficient in various walks of life. They voice their opinions and express their ideas. They are aware of their constitutional rights. But, behind this facade, they are still under hegemonic masculinity, which subjugates the 'so called' freedom bestowed upon their 'female gender.' The situation is worst with the rural women who live in deplorable conditions and are denied basic rights. Domestic violence, female infanticide, poor health care, sexual harassment, etc. plagues our society. Woman continues to be regarded as an object or a plaything and is subordinated and suppressed by patriarchy. In the words of Vivekananda, "If you don't allow one to become a lion, he will become a fox. Women are a power, only now it is more for evil because man oppresses woman; she is the fox, but when she is no

longer oppressed, she will become the lion.”(Tattwavidananda, 125).

Swami Vivekananda as a neo-vedantist, initiated to revisit and revive the Vedanta teachings in the light of modern times. He glorified the majesty of the Vedic age and propounded a humanitarian philosophy. His radical ideas about gender equality and thereby an ideal society seems to be utopian. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift in thinking is possible only when one realizes that, the recognition of individuality in woman is a precondition for the wellbeing of man. His categorical insistence, that

there is no chance for welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved, is true. The spirit of dignity and celebration of womanhood as humaneness is essential for independence and harmonious interdependence. This will in turn foster strength and growth of the nation. Egalitarian society will materialize only when we see each other not as men and women, but as human beings born to cherish and help one another. Prakriti – Purusha and Shakti – Shiva make each other complete and bring about creation. As Swamiji puts it, “....It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.”

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