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## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Indian society in the nineteenth century had fallen into a stage of degeneration after centuries of Afghan and Mughal, and then British rule. The British rule, specially, had created widespread poverty and hunger, and the propaganda of their missionaries had created a sense of insecurity among the people about their traditional customs and beliefs. Faced with this threat, the caste-ridden society had retreated into a shell, and in order to protect them from this attack became more orthodox and repressive. At this crucial period rose a number of important reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayan and Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. They strived ceaselessly to reform the Indian society, and in doing so, raised a new voice of pan-Indian nationalism. They were thus the vanguards of the Freedom Movement. This first voice of protest was not so much against the political exploitation by the British but against their moral exploitation of the Indian society, and this was to guide and provide the unique feature of the Indian Freedom struggle.

Among these leaders, Vivekananda position was unique in that he was in close touch with both the core of Hindu religious thought and with the Western philosophy. He was thus able to take up the best features of both in his work and attempt to fuse them in his dream of the future. The message he preached in India was not the one of renunciation and mysticism that she was used to hearing. Instead he cried for work – work for the downtrodden and poor of the country, work to revitalize the society as a whole. Strength, strength was his message to Indians– physical strength, moral strength, strength to work for others. He railed against the weakness that had crept into the society, and preached self control for the young. And it was a message powered by his own example and his tireless work throughout the country.

Swami Vivekananda is one of the most enduring icons of the rise of Indian nationalism in modern India. We know him today as being one among the first generation of leaders who raised the voice of Indian nationality. Equally important is that he was an intensely religious man who lived a life immersed in spirituality. His position was unique in that along with a modern education which gave him a critical attitude, and his account of his experience and the importance of this in his life are as important as his work in nation building.

“In spite of her innumerable linguistic, ethnic, historical and regional diversities, India has had from time immemorial a strong sense of cultural unity. It was, however, Swami Vivekananda who revealed the true foundations of this culture and thus clearly defined and strengthened the sense of unity as a nation.

Swami Vivekananda gave Indians proper understanding of their country’s great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past. Several eminent leaders of India’s freedom movement have acknowledged their indebtedness to Swamiji. Free India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “Rooted in the past, full of pride in India’s prestige, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life’s problems, and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present ... he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past.” Where can you find a man like

him? Study what he wrote, and learn from his teachings, for if you do, you will gain immense strength. Take advantage of the fountain of wisdom, of Spirit, and of fire that flowed through Vivekananda!

Vivekananda strongly reasoned the cause of such degradation of Indian women “The principal reason why our race has so degenerated is that we had no respect for these living images of Shakti. Manu says,” Where women are respected, there the Gods delight, and where they are not, there all work and efforts come to naught.” There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness. The Swami was particularly worried about the degradation of women in India.

Vivekananda strongly believes that there is a huge difference in the attitude of Indian men and their western counterpart's. Indian men believes that the women are born to please them. The real Shakti-worshipper is he who knows that God is the omnipresent force in the universe, and sees in women the manifestation of that force. In America men look upon their women in this light and treat their women as well as can be desired, and hence they are so prosperous, so learned, so free and so energetic.

Swami Vivekananda glorified Indian women of the past for their great achievements as leaders in various walks of life. He proudly states that “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.”

Swami Vivekananda was a monk who at one time saw women as an obstacle. However on realizing the highest truth he saw no distinction between sexes and saw in women the presence of the Divine Mother. For Swami Vivekananda, It is real difficult to understand why in this country [India] 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 say what have you done for their uplift? Writing down Smritis etc., and binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into manufacturing machines! If you do not raise the women, who are living embodiment of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other way to rise.

Swami Vivekananda once rightly questioned “In what scriptures do you find statements that women are not competent for knowledge and devotion? In the period of degeneration, when the priests made the other castes incompetent for the study of the Vedas, they deprived the women also of all their rights. Otherwise you will find that in the Vedic or Upanishadic age Maitreyi, Gargi, and other ladies of revered memory have taken places of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. In an assembly of a thousand Brahmans who were all erudite in the Vedas, Gargi boldly challenged Yagnavalkya in a discussion about Brahman. Since such ideal women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, why shall not the women have same privilege now? What has happened once can certainly happen again. History repeats itself. 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. **Manu says, “Where women are respected, there the gods delight; and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught.”** There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness.

Swami Vivekananda, rightly observed that the condition of women in Mughal-ruled and British-ruled India was deplorable. 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.

When people are discussing as to what man and woman can do, always the same mistake is made. They think they show man at his best because he can fight, for instance, and undergo tremendous physical exertion; and this is pitted against the physical weakness and non-combating quality of woman. This is unjust. Woman is as courageous as man. Each is equally good in his or her way. What man can bring up a child with such patience, endurance, and love as the woman can? The one has developed the power of doing; the other, the power of suffering. If woman cannot act, neither can man suffer. The whole universe is one of perfect balance.

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. **The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence.**

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?

Women have many and grave problems, but none that cannot be solved by that magic word: Education. 'Daughters should be supported and educated with as much Care and attention as the sons.' As sons should be married after observing Brahmacharya up to the thirtieth year, so daughters also should observe Brahmacharya and be educated by their parents. 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.

### **“WOMEN – I SHOULD VERY MUCH LIKE OUR WOMAN TO HAVE YOUR INTELLECTUALITY, BUT NOT IF IT MUST BE AT THE COST OF PURITY.”**

Our Hindu women easily understand what chastity means, because it is their heritage. First of all 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 lives, 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.

Swami Vivekananda views woman exactly as he views man, an individual with a destiny. In the sphere of the pursuit of spiritual realization, 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," he said.

But what are we actually doing? They have all the time been trained in helplessness and servile dependence on others; and so they are good only to weep their eyes out at the approach of the slightest mishap or danger. Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world.

Swami Vivekananda glorified Indian women of the past for their great achievements as leaders in various walks of life. India's reverence for women as the symbol of chastity brought such words from Vivekananda 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.”**

There she will always be, this glorious Sita, purer than purity itself, all patience, and all suffering. She who suffered that life of suffering without a murmur, she the ever chaste and ever pure wife, the ideal of the people, our national Goddess she must always remain. She has gone into the very vitals of our race. Any attempt to modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure as we see every day.

Studying the present needs of the age, it seems imperative to train some of them up in the ideals of renunciation, so that they will take up the vow of We-long virginity, fired with the strength of that virtue of chastity which is innate in their blood from hoary antiquity. Our motherland requires for her well-being some of her children to become pure soul Brahmacharins

Female education should be spread with religion as its centre. All other training should be secondary to religion. Religious Training, the formation of character and observance of the vows of celibacy these should be attended to Brahmacharinis of education and character should take up the task of teaching. In villages and towns they must open centers and strive for the spread of female education. Through such devout preachers of character, there will secular education .The real spread of female education in the country.

## **WOMEN – “BE EMBOLDENED”; “EMBODIMENT OF GODDESS OF MOTHER”**

Men and women in every country, have different ways of understanding and judging things. Men have one angle of vision, women another; men argue from one standpoint, women from another. Men extenuate women and lay the blame on men; while women exonerate men and heap the entire heap on women.

## **IN THE WEST ITS IDEAL IS WIFE, IN INDIA IN THE MOTHER**

“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, and female. And thus it comes that we now say: ‘The first manifestation of God is the hand that rocks the cradle’.”

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.

## **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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