

Swami Vivekananda's Perspective on Women and Womanhood


Banerjee S^{1*}

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^{1*} Satrajit Banerjee, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal, India.

Swami Vivekananda, following the path of his master Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa Dev, dedicated his life to the service of humanity. Learning the essence of spirituality from his Guru, Vivekananda realized that all human beings are the embodiment of the one supreme power, and each soul is part of the one and absolute soul or 'paramatma'. Hence, he believed that women are not frail and feeble beings, and are linked to the Paramatma. They have the similar capability as men. The prohibitive and suppressive measures prevalent in the social structure had been restricting the full-fledged development of women. Especially, nineteenth-century India was infested with a number of regressive customs and social practices. Women were the worst sufferers of most of the social maladies. With the introduction of colonial rule in India, a group of young and educated people felt the need to reform society. Under the sway of modernity in Colonial India, the enlightened people took the mission of rejuvenating the orthodox and stagnant social order. And some of them relied heavily on spirituality for the regeneration of society by abolishing certain age-old practices. It was evident that the women were more susceptible to the conservative social dictums. But the social reformers of the nineteenth century had rightly observed that a nation could not prosper without the enrichment and growth of women. Likewise, Vivekananda took initiatives to uplift the condition of women by promoting female education and developing an image of womanhood for preserving the rights and dignity of women.

Keywords: empowerment, female education, womanhood, motherhood

Corresponding Author	How to Cite this Article	To Browse
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1. Introduction

The issues related to women were considered one of the fundamental subjects of inquiry in the nineteenth century. Some social reformers unravelled the true face of customs and social practices, wreaking havoc on women. The women were denied freedom of speech and expression. The custom of self-immolation of the bride in the same pyre with her dead husband to become Sati was considered a symbol of dignity for women. Even child marriage and polygamy made the lives of women more valuable. Social reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar came forward and strived hard to prohibit Sati and introduce widow remarriage. However, most of the social reformers observed that limited access to education and abject illiteracy were among the major causes for the deplorable condition of women. In India, women had been relegated to the secondary position due to the conservative outlook of the Hindu social order. In the prevailing social structure, there were two different images of women. Firstly, motherhood had been celebrated and womanhood had been worshipped in the form of the deity of 'Shakti', a repository of limitless power. Secondly, the women had to live in a measurable condition within a family and in society. The women had been denied equal treatment and could not enjoy freedom. The social dictums and the Shastrik ordeals determined the course of action of the women. Vivekananda tried to liberate women from the restrictions of society. This article seeks to highlight Vivekananda's initiative to identify the cause of the vulnerability of women. This article will also present an illustration of Vivekananda's conceptualization of womanhood and motherhood.

2. Woman and Womanhood: Vivekananda's Conceptualisation

Vivekananda asserted that the greatest virtues of Indian women happened to be modesty, devotion, sacrifice, maintaining household chores, child rearing and humility. To his surprise, despite having such noble qualities, the miserable condition of the Indian women had not improved a bit. He was not only aware of the woeful condition of the women in India, but also in other countries of the world. He opined that no Nation could advance without paying respect to women.

His views on women were largely shaped by two distinct images of womanhood: Oriental and Occidental. His mother, Bhagwati Devi, and Sarada Devi, the wife of his mentor Sri Ramakrishna Dev, exerted immense influence on his mind. Vivekananda was also moved by several women associates of Maa Sarada Devi, namely Gouri Maa, Golap Maa, Jogin Maa etc. Vivekananda observed myriads of spiritual qualities in them. He was also immensely influenced by the well-educated and strong-willed Kate Chambers, Miss Hale, Mrs. Oli Bull, and Miss Elizabeth Margaret Nobel etc. (Majumdar 1965:114,121) Vivekananda venerated Indian women but he was aware of their limitations. During his sojourn to USA and Europe, observing the enthusiasm, academic excellence and active participation in the various avenues of society, Vivekananda acknowledged the decisive nature and prominent role of the women. He was enticed by the smart and forward women of the West so much so that he went to compare them with the celebrated and fearless warrior queen of Jhansi. However, he also pointed out that Indian women could not help but whining. In fact they could not resist themselves from puling over trivial issues. (Vivekananda, 1962:131,Vol.X)

The women of India should learn intrepidity and valiancy. He firmly believed that the limitations of common Indian women could be removed to a certain extent. To his mind the image of an ideal womanhood would be constructed by the greatest virtues of the orient and occident. He stated that the orient was the repository of the spirituality and the West was the power house of working –force and materialism. He mentioned in a letter, during his stay at USA, "The average American woman is far more cultivated than the average American man. The men slave all their life for money, and the women snatch every opportunity to improve themselves." (Vivekananda ,1986: 52) He noted further, "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." (Vivekananda ,1986: 59)Again he iterated that the Asia provided the foundation of glorious civilization to the mankind, Europe developed the man, but USA invested the whole energy for the progress of their women and the common masses. In admiration for the American women he uttered, "In this country, women are the life of every movement and represent all the cultures of the nation." (Vivekananda, 1962:362,Vol.VI)

Hence in America and also in Europe the materialistic concerns were considered as the sole guiding principle for the people. He also pointed out that the sharp contrast between the idea of femininity in the West and the east. While addressing the audience at Chicago on September 14, 1893 he categorically mentioned, "The Hindu women are very spiritual and very religious, perhaps more so than any other women in the world." (Vivekananda, 1962:125,Vol.X)

Hindu women were well accustomed with the idea of chastity as this sanctimonious customary practice had passed down through generations for several centuries. The devout Hindu women were so committed to preserve their dignity that they did not even hesitate to immolate her. He wrote, "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." (Vivekananda, 1962: 125,Vol .V) In India, Sita, character of a noble woman from the great epic Ramayana, had been portrayed as an effigy of an ideal woman. Again Vivekananda mentioned that Sita, in India, had been referred to as embodiment of purity, authenticity, and dignity. Sita even was considered as a symbol of dignified femininity and motherhood. Sita represented tolerance, patience and reliance. She was an incarnation of pious woman and dedicated wife. She has been revered widely in India for never hurling abuses against her husband, Ramachandra. Hence, Vivekananda asked every woman to emulate the principled and pure life-style of Sita. He showed the world how affectionate and compassionate Indian woman was in general. Vivekananda stated, "The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita. Sita is unique. She is the very type of the true Indian woman...." (Vivekananda, 1962: 255, Vol.III.) He also stated that they engaged themselves to render service to others. Vivekananda found the reflection of motherhood in every women of India. In fact, the women honoured the ideal of motherhood in this land and, for that matter they carry out the duty of an ideal mother with utmost priority. Therefore, the women tried to maintain an immaculate life-style. (Majumdar 1965:73-75) Vivekananda presented the example of Saradamani Devi as she performed duties as daughter towards her parents, as wife to her husband, and as mother to uncountable disciples.

Sarada Devi not only supported in Ramkrishna Dev's religious pursuits, but she was also actively engaged in the welfare activities of the common people.

3. Female Education: A Vision of Empowerment

A. The Curriculum

Vivekananda considered education as the greatest tool for bringing about social transformation and rediscovering human potential. However, his idea of education was not confined to the limits of bookish knowledge. In his opinion, the aim of the genuine education was to build a formative character, enhance the will-power, become self-reliant, and develop intellect. The true education equipped a person with the capacity of self-realisation. Vivekananda stressed on the necessity of education for the women, alongside men. He was confirmed that adequately learned women would be able to resolve their problems. Vivekananda mentioned that women should develop the attitude of combating their challenges and any other person, especially males, was not allowed to get involved in mitigating the problems concerning women. (Vivekananda, 1962:127-29,Vol.V) He assumed that Indian women were competent enough to emulate the problem-solving outlook, like the women from the other corners of the world. Vivekananda presented a blueprint of the subject matter to be taught to the women. He opined that the subjects the women should learn would be determined by taking into consideration the very unique and unorthodox nature of the problems women had to deal with. (Prabhananda, 2008: 17) He had incorporated religious scriptures, literature, Sanskrit language, grammar and English, in moderation in the syllabus prepared for educating women. He also suggested to include cooking, sewing, looking after family in the curriculum. In the western world, Vivekananda noticed competitiveness between men and women, and the inclination of the female to attain masculine features. On the contrary, Vivekananda stressed on the natural and innate qualities of women. The academic curriculum developed by Vivekananda would make the woman a self-sufficient and dauntless being and they would realize the essence of femininity. (Prabhananda, 2008: 19). In his scheme of female education Vivekananda sought to bring together two very different trends,

i.e. in the one he upheld the qualities like service, sacrifice, maternity, tolerance etc which the Indian women internalized from regular worship and reading and listening to religious texts and mythological texts, on the other hand he identified most effective elements of west i.e. strong work force, courage and self-reliance.

Vivekananda envisioned an illustrious plan of promoting female education. He was concerned about the structure, method and content of the curriculum to be adopted for female education. He recommended three different types of subjects to be taught to the learners. Firstly, he stressed on the science education. He suggested that the women should come to know about the modern sciences without abandoning religion. Besides, he suggested to teach them English, history, geography, mathematics and so on and so forth. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 39) The women would be able to develop rational outlook if they acquired scientific temper and they would be able to develop the ability to identify and validate the real issues. Vivekananda also noted that mathematics would develop modern approach within the women and they would learn to be disciplined. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 42) Apart from that, it would also equip them with an inquisitive attitude that would help them to understand the true essence of knowledge. Vivekananda also stated that by studying history, women would have a clear understanding of the relation between cause and its outcome. Hence, they would remain watchful and restrict them from repeating blunders time and again. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 43) The educated woman would be turned into an ideal person by acquiring knowledge in various fields. Moreover, Vivekananda felt the need to learn the Sanskrit language. These would develop the spiritual consciousness within the women. By reading the Puranas, women would be able to combat all odds in their daily lives. Ultimately, Vivekananda thought of establishing suitable institutions for the dissemination of knowledge among women. For that purpose, primarily, he established a girls' school, intending to understand the requirements of the pupils. He also stated that the teachers should be aware of their duties and devote themselves to the Welfare of society as well. He was optimistic about the fact that all efforts of the teachers would be favourable for spreading Modern Education among women. (Vivekananda 1943: 64-65)

B. School for the Girls

Vivekananda approached Mrs Sarala Ghoshal first for the promotion of female education. Subsequently, he entrusted the responsibility of female education in India to Sister Nivedita. She had a vast knowledge of the Western education system. But she understood that the Western model could not be emulated in India. She came to know about the spirit and ideals of India while travelling the country with Swami Vivekananda. Afterwards, under the guidance of Vivekananda and Maa Sarada Devi, sister Nivedita dedicated her life to the cause of India. In 1898, she established Ramkrishna Girls' School in Bagbazar, Kolkata. Primarily, this school was established to provide education to young girls. (Nivedita, 1975: 82) In the subsequent period, considering the growing popularity of female education, a new section called 'Purastree' was opened for the married women. In this section, elementary education was provided to the women. Besides, they had been trained in handicrafts like pottery and Sewing. The prime objective of this mode of education was to make the women financially self-reliant. This section is executing the duty of empowering women sincerely even today. The Purastree section also promoted the importance of education among the widows and offered them an alternative to live a stable and financially independent life. (Nivedita, 1975:162-64) While advocating for female education, Nivedita faced strong opposition from the powerful and conservative elites of Indian society. Since child marriage was a widespread practice in India, the girls were not allowed to go to academic institutions. Despite the difficulties, like not getting an adequate number of female students in the school, Nivedita never retreated from the initiative of promoting female education. In 1899, she even made voyages to the West for raising funds for the Girls' School. (Nivedita, 1975:327)

C. Role of the Monastery in Promoting Female Education

Apart from establishing a girl school, Vivekananda expressed his willingness to set up a separate and autonomous monastery for women. In a letter written to Ramakrishnananda, he mentioned about constructing a monastery for Ma Sarada and her associates. He mentioned that the monastery would be managed by women.

He opined that men would not be allowed to intervene in the daily business of the monastery. He asserted that the monastery would take initiatives to proliferate education among women. He recommended that the unmarried and the celibate women were to be allowed to stay inside the monastery. Those women would carry out the responsibility of providing education to women and preaching religion. (Vivekananda 1943:63-64) In 1894, Mriradi Chattyopadhyay founded the 'Sri Sri Saradswari Ashram' at Barracpore. This Ashram was dedicated in various welfare activities, like promotion of female education, providing aid and assistance to the widow and impoverished women, and guiding women to secure their financial stabilities. In 1954, 'Sri Sarada Math' was established at Dakhsineswar. Gradually, this 'Math' had established a number of branches in different countries throughout the world. These branches also have been involved in promoting female education in abroad. They also organized various educational programmes, medical and relief camps occasionally. Besides, this institution provided aid to the distressed and vulnerable people. In abroad, 'Sri Sarada Math' funded old-age homes for the elderly women. In fact, with all these initiatives, 'Sri Sarada Math', and all its branches have been trying to actualize Vivekananda's vision for the development of Women. (<https://belurmath.org/womens-monastic-organization/>)

4. Idea of Motherhood and Image of a Responsible Woman

Vivekananda contemplated that mother occupied a central position within the Indian family system. Motherhood and mother had been revered as the lofty ideals to the people of India. In India various goddesses had been worshipped in the image of holy mother and mother had been depicted as the mother of the universe. He stated that the great men were born to a pure, pious and educated mother. "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 awaken in the country." (Vivekananda 1943:67) He was astonished because the overall development of women had been overlooked for decades and the women had been looked as the child-producing machines.

He opined, "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." (Vivekananda, 1962:489-90, Vol.VI) Woman of this land were happened to the repository of compassion and selflessness. Usually the common people in India addressed a woman as 'mother'. Vivekananda mentioned that women in India considered every other male, except her husband, as her child and every male should treat women, other than his wife, as a symbol of motherhood. In the western world the women got significant recognition in the public sector. But, in India, the role of a woman as mother within the family had been acknowledged. (Majumdar 1965:122-123) However, the role of a woman as a suitable better-half had also been extolled in the East. In the East motherhood had been celebrated, but in the West Women's image as a wife had been prioritized.

Vivekananda had absolute faith in the ability of women in executing duties and responsibilities. He laid the responsibility of the chief Patron of the Ramakrishna Mission on Sarada Devi. During this period, it was a unique issue that a woman had been offered the highest post in a religious organisation. He also conferred the challenging task of educating Indian women to Nivedita. Sarada Devi was a dedicated wife and came from a remote rural background. But Vivekananda saw in her the emblem of the 'mother of the universe'. He was enthralled to see the dedication towards service, compassion, and sacrifice in Sarada Devi. (Vivekananda, 1962:120, Vol.IX) Essentially, he was deeply moved by the unconventional nature and visionary outlook of a semi-literate and rustic woman. Though she did not receive a formal education, she had a rational bent of mind and a liberal approach. Vivekananda visualised that an empathetic and rational figure like Sarada Devi would be the liberator of the toiling masses of India. Realising her potential, Vivekananda placed Sarada Devi at the top of the decision-making process of Ramakrishna Mission, instead of confining her to an ideal position away from the crowd. In many important events, Vivekananda sought suggestions from Sarada Devi and agreed with her opinions unconditionally. Even while combating the outbreak of plague, he asked Sarada Devi for the course of action. On many other occasions, such as selling the property of the monastery to contribute to relief work in the wake of an epidemic, or for introducing any new plan of action, Vivekananda looked forward

to the observations and sanctions of Sarada Devi. (Vivekananda, 1962:336-38, Vol.X)

5. Conclusion

Vivekananda tried to preserve the dignity of women in society. He also tried to upgrade the status and the standard of living of the women. He identified that, for the overall development of society contribution of women was as significant as that of men. In his vision, women should be responsible, self-sufficient, and independent people. Hence, on the one hand, he asked for developing the intellectual capabilities of the women; on the other hand, he told them to become brave so that they could resolve their problems. He advocated for the growth of the literacy rate of women. During this period, women who belonged to the upper strata of society sometimes got access to education. With the introduction of placement in the British-owned sectors, the Bengali 'bhadralok' also encouraged their wives to become literate. But this education could not transform the outlook of society towards women. The curriculum Vivekananda suggested for women was not sufficient for their empowerment. Moreover, the curriculum envisioned by Vivekananda had a gender specific outlook. He believed that learning sewing, cooking, and handicrafts would be propitious for the realization of their inner perfection. This form of education would not be able to liberate women from the prevailing structure of gender stereotypes. He also espoused that self-suffering and sacrifice were the greatest moral virtues to be followed by women. The busy, workaholic, and independent women of the West enthused him to a large extent. But the masculine attitude of the Western women disheartened him. Once, he supported the child marriage as he believed that the proximity between the partners at a tender age would be favourable for a stable conjugal relationship. However he also mentioned that pregnancy at an early age not only brought several health hazards for the mother but also create health issues for the new-born babies. However, he went to Chicago for attending World Religion Conclave where he mentioned about the plight of the Indian women and also stated his plan of action to end the misery of the women. Like a person with practical experience, Vivekananda urged the Indian women to follow the independent, active and self-reliant attitude of the Western women.

But he also mentioned the role of the male counterpart for providing suitable space favourable for the development of the women. Further, he envisaged that woman of the East should not forget their root embedded in the cultural tradition of India. Thus he visualized woman as an autonomous individual, a responsible wife and a compassionate mother.

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