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The Role of Women in Swami Vivekananda's Social Philosophy

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Abstract: Swami Vivekananda was a philosopher, social reformer, and humanist who deeply thought about the dignity, empowerment, and social status of women. In his view, a woman was the perfect manifestation of creation and held in the highest dignity as a mother. He believed that a nation can progress only when its women are given equal opportunities and respect. According to him, women should be liberated from slavery and guided on the path of education, self-confidence, and self-reliance. "Without the emancipation of women, the emancipation of society is impossible." Swami Vivekananda emphasized the education of women. He believed that education was the key to women's progress. However, this education should be focused on lifelong and spiritual development, which will make women not only educated but also characterful and confident. In his thought, the dignity of women was intact from religious, moral, and human points of view. He used to say, "Woman is the embodiment of power; ignoring her means insulting humanity." Although he admired the Western concept of women's liberation, he was in favour of walking the path of women's development in line with Indian cultural values. His idea of women had an eternal balance—a combination of freedom and responsibility, modernity and tradition. This progressive vision of Swami Vivekananda is still a source of inspiration in the struggle for women's rights, women's empowerment, and equality. His words and thoughts carry the message of respect, recognition of women, and the overall progress of society.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Equality, Motherhood, Spirituality, Swami Vivekananda, Womenhood

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1. Introduction

Sri Ramakrishna often told his disciples and devotees that women are one form of Jagajñani, so he instructed them to show sincere devotion and respect to girls. He left many examples in his life, including interactions with all women, even prostitutes. He told his disciples that motherhood is the “ultimate purity” and the “last word of sadhana.” Throughout Swami Vivekananda's life, women's dignity and welfare were the most important of his universal work-oriented vows, spread over many streams.

The manifestation of Vivekananda was completed after Sri Ramakrishna's Mahaprayan, during his India-wide tour. In this wandering life, he knew Sri Ramakrishna, India, and the Sanatana Shastra as one and the same [1]. With this recognition, he realised his inherent strength and his future role in fulfilling the needs of India and the world. It was in this wandering life that Vivekananda discovered the difference between the religion of science and the religion of conduct in the then society of religious-spiritual India. In the scriptures, there is talk of non-duality, ‘the great abheda,’ but ‘the great bhedabuddhi in action,’ or untouchability, exists. In fact, women are considered inferior to men, and this belief is prevalent in society. Of the many faults in national life, Swamiji considered two to be great sins—the first was the neglect of the masses, and the second was the long-standing collective injustice to women. Though women are a part of the population, Swamiji wanted to give special importance to women's problems by identifying them separately. We are well acquainted with Swamiji's words—“All castes have grown up worshipping girls. In a country where there is no worship of women, that nation has never been able to grow, nor will it ever be able to do so” [2]. “Where there is no respect for women, and where women do not live happily, there is no hope for the country” [3].

2. Men and women have equal rights in society

Famous saying of Swamiji: It is not possible for a bird to rise on one side. “If one wing of society is male, the other must be female—if both wings do not have equal nutrition and energy, the ‘bird’ cannot rise” [4]. This formulaic analogy of Swamiji is unique in saying that the participation of women along with men is equally necessary for the progress of society and the country.

One of Swamiji's basic and firm instructions on women's awakening: Men should not interfere in the affairs of women. He was strongly opposed to child marriage and polygamy. However, most of the contemporary movements in this regard did not have the support of Swamiji because most of them

were men. According to him, "Liberty is the first condition of growth" [5]. Therefore, he considered freedom essential for the awakening of both men and women. Swamiji wanted to leave the girls alone by arranging for their education, and then they themselves would find a way to awaken themselves.

3. Women of the East and West

Although Swamiji was aware of the misery of Indian women during his stay in India, his views on women's issues, or his ideas on women's awakening, developed only after seeing the women's society in the West. What he saw in India was the exact opposite of what he saw in the West. The woman of India is uneducated and ignorant of the world but strong in the ideal of chastity in spite of piety, domesticity, and all kinds of external weaknesses. On the other hand, women in the West are independent, educated, and accustomed to walking on an equal footing with men in society. In India, the head of the family is the mother; in the West, it is the wife. Spirituality is predominant among Indian women, while karma is predominant among Western women. According to Swamiji, in India, a woman is always conscious that she is a mother. Adolescence, the natural stage of youth, comes into her life with all its characteristics, but after a certain time, as a mother, she finds the meaning of her life, and she does not regret that her youth has passed or make artificial attempts to present what has passed. On the other hand, among Western women too, motherhood must exist; but they never want to let youthful feelings die, and this is more important than motherhood in their lives. Swamiji praised Western women. Many women helped him in many ways. They adopted him as a son and a brother. However, he was sad to see the lack of motherhood among the women there.

In his personal experience, he has seen how Western women get offended when they are called 'mother' in the Indian tradition. The Swamiji almost exclaimed, "Where is the All-Glorious Mother who has given me this body? Where is she in this Western country? Where is she, who is ready to give her life again and again if I need it? Where is she, whose love for me never fails, no matter how wicked or mean I am? Hey, American women! I shall not find her in this country; she is our mother. If we die before our mother, we want to die with our head in our mother's lap" [6].

4. Establishing a woman as a mother

Swamiji was completely uncompromising about this motherly ideal of Indian women—all the things he said in the scheme of women's awakening kept this motherly ideal intact. With an open mind, he compared Western women with the women of his country. Sister Christine says, "For days

at a time, his mind would be concerned with this problem. Pacing up and down, every now and then a few words would fall from his lips. He wasn't addressing anyone but thinking aloud" [7]. Which is better, American women's freedom or Indian women's restrictions? The American way of life is individualistic; it gives opportunities to even the smallest of people. There can be no progress without freedom, but there is also the danger of freedom. He's afraid of falling. Again, people learn from mistakes. There is no value for human life in Indian society. It depends on the society.

True, Indian society has produced great spiritual leaders, but what about the thousands of ordinary people? Are they not spiritual beings? What is good for the nation: Indian society's restrictions on the individual or Western society's freedom for the individual? Swamiji saw the great significance and benefits of social freedom in American society. But who was more aware than he of the immense benefits that the Indian social structure has brought to the country? When other great countries rose to the heights of glory but were lost in the flow of time, only surviving in the pages of history, it is this social structure that has kept India alive for ages. So how can this structure be eliminated? There is breadth in American society and depth in Indian society.

How can we keep them both? How can Western expansion be combined with Indian deepening? "The freedom of America... makes for breadth, while the intensity of India means depth. How can we keep the Indian depth and, at the same time, add breadth?" [8]. He earnestly wanted to find a way to keep the Indian structure intact and integrate the best of other countries with it (...to find out whether there was a way of adding to this structure the best of other countries without endangering the structure itself [9].

5. Women's Education

He figured it out that way. That's education. "Swamiji used to think that if real education is given, both women and common people will be able to solve their problems on their own." What will be the form of such powerful teaching? Nivedita says that the first condition of that education will be purity. Swamiji was not ready to call education that in which purity is not given importance" [10]. "It will be intellectual, national, and spiritual" [11]. Along with intellectual development, that education will lead to the spiritual development of the student, and, of course, that education will be in the national pattern. Because, Nivedita was sure, Swamiji spoke of his man-making vow for India. Man-making is his mission. It is the vow to make people in the national way— 'national man-making.' Sister Christine says that in the education of women, there will be a place for all the modern knowledge of

the West, including mother tongue, English, Sanskrit, geography, history, cooking, sewing, and even science. But the Indian ideal must always be taught to be pure knowledge. "Indian ideals and Indian traditions must always be held sacred; education will come by the assimilation of the greatest ideas of the East and the West. Any kind of education that undermines the faith of the Indian woman in the past culture of her race, its religion, and traditions is not only useless but detrimental; she had better be left as she is" [12].

The greatest ideals of the East and the West must be combined in the ideal of education. If education deprives an Indian woman of respect for India's past, it will not only be meaningless to her but also harmful. Swamiji even thought that women should be uneducated rather than ill-educated. Nivedita says, "Swamiji was not willing to accept that a man of great luxury, devoid of any sense of nationality, no matter how educated he was, should be considered educated. He felt he was demeaned. On the other hand, if a modern woman possesses purity and other virtues in her heart and is bound by faith and love to her husband, she is, in the eyes of the Swamiji, the ideal Indian housewife, despite all her external modernities. Because Swamiji believed that true womanhood, like true sainthood, depended on the richness of the heart and not on anything external. Women's education will not be successful unless it awakens true femininity in women" [13].

6. Awakening the power of women

Among the 'true womanhood' that Swamiji spoke of, he gave utmost importance to chastity. He always said that He loves purity. But along with this, he would repeatedly mention another quality that no one before him could possibly imagine as a part of womanhood. That is the spirit of Rajput feminine heroism. Over and over again, he would speak of the warhorse led by Padmini or the Rajput woman who put her husband in battle gear and said, Come back with your shield or on it. "Either you win the battle and come back with this shield, or you become a martyr. Let this shield come back to hold your severed head. He used to talk about the Queen of Jhansi again and again. This sense of heroism must also be considered essential in the ideal woman that Swamiji has envisioned.

Sister Christine says, "Instead of sympathizing with the trembling, timid woman, full of fear for the one she loved, she said, Be like the Rajput wife!" [14]. Nivedita said, "Strength, strength, strength was the one quality he called for, in woman as in man" [15].

He wanted to see the manifestation of power again and again in women as well as in men. But his

view of true power was different. He didn't think of excess self-declaration or excess emotion as strength. He understood the ancient great stream of Shakti—where Shakti manifests itself in the beauty of silence and stillness [16].

The ideal woman in Swamiji's vision will have physical strength, but this spiritual strength will be even greater. This education will create a new group of women educators who will be the protectors of the country and the nation. What will they be like? Completely devoted to life. They have no home; their work is their home; there is no bondage; their religion is their only bondage; there is no love for anyone— Guru, the people, and the motherland are their only loves.

They will implement Swamiji's planned teachings with all their might. They will not only provide education but will also try to make women economically independent because many women in the country are enslaved by men only because of poverty. So Swamiji clearly said, "They (the women) must be economically independent" [17]. Swamiji did not say how they would achieve economic independence because the women would show the direction for the women—this was the main tone of his entire plan for women's awakening.

7. Conclusion

The women of India must not only be highly educated, but at least some of them must be endowed with rare intellectual knowledge so that they can compete with any intelligent woman in the world. At the same time, sacrifice and service will be the national motto of their lives. In the past, women have sacrificed their highest self-interest for personal reasons. They have the power and habit of self-sacrifice. Now at least a few women have to give up that self-interest for the sake of the country. Only a few such women can solve all the problems of the country. Swamiji himself said, "It may take fifty years to conquer India with the help of five hundred men, but it is possible only in a few weeks with five hundred women [18].

He has drawn a unique picture of the life of Sita, or Shree Shrima, as a unique woman who is ever shining and incomparable in purity, grace, sacrifice, devotion, service, selflessness, and immortal love, power, and glory. In that unique picture, Vivekananda's attitude towards women as a whole is enshrined and reflected. Those girls and mothers who are proud that we are Vivekananda's followers should look at that picture and see whether our life and character are in harmony with his. If it is not good and if it does not match, then we have to beautify ourselves with all those qualities.

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