



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S THOUGHTS ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Women have always been the life force of the Indian civilization, and therefore, like many ancient civilizations, are properly regarded as expressions of Indian values, culture, and traditions. In this article, through an examination of Swami Vivekananda's views on women, I have discussed the need to emphasize the need for emphasis on the above-mentioned values and attempt to drive home the point that by upholding these values we shall be able to remain culturally rooted and prosper as an eternal civilization. My sole aim in this piece is to focus light on the views of Swami Vivekananda on women empowerment that are worth discussing and cherishing, so far as they contribute positively to our argument for a need for emphasis on certain Indic values and comprehensive development.

KEYWORDS : Women empowerment, Civilization, Values, Ethics, Female education.

INTRODUCTION

Manu says -"Where women are respected there the gods delight; and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught."¹ Women make up almost half of the world's population. The direct and indirect contribution of women in the progress of every nation can be noticed. Although his contribution to women is mostly denied. Even in the political, economical, socio-cultural spheres, women are deprived. UNO has declared 1975 as 'International Women's Year and the period from 1975 to 1985 as 'Women's Decade'. Recently, the government of India also marked 2001 as the year of 'Women's Empowerment'. Thus, by identifying any year or decade, special importance has been given to the problems of women. However, the progress of women's emancipation in many countries is very low. Therefore, it is very important to find a way to achieve equal rights and employment for women. Vivekananda's 'thoughts on women' are very relevant in the context of exploring the path.

The basis of Vivekananda's views on women

Vivekananda's feminine thinking originated under the influence of various events, individuals, and the environment. The propagation of western education and culture gave rise to a rationalist mentality in India especially Bengal in the 19th century. At that time everything was questioned and people especially men of Calcutta started accepting with logic. While studying at the Scottish Church College, Vivekananda became a rationalist, influenced by western knowledge, science, philosophy, and culture.

The generous and independent environment of his family helped to shape his rationalist mind. His mother was a progressive and educated woman. She had educated all her daughters. At that time Datta family was famous for education, progressive and liberal mentality. Besides, his sister Jogenbala's suicide also affected his feminine thinking. Nivedita later wrote that the death of his sister contributed-"in some part to his burning desire for the education and development of Indian women"².

The meeting with Sri Ramakrishna turned the corner of his life and his feminine thinking was also affected. How he has honoured, respected and worshipped women is a rare example in the history of religion in the world. Swamiji says-"He was the saviour of women"³. He saw women as mothers of the world. His adored goddess was 'Ma Bhobotarini'. He adopted a woman, Bhairavi Bhramhani, as his 'Guru Or 'Master'. It was almost impossible to accept a woman as a guru at that time. Even he worshipped Sarada Devi as the mother of the world. He had given the responsibility of preaching the religion to Sarada Devi. Apart from Ramakrishna's life, Sarada Devi's life and teachings had a direct effect on his feminine thinking.

Besides, he travelled throughout the length and breadth of India mostly on foot after the passing away of his Master. At that time he was allowed to study India and its needs first hand. He observed the weak points of India, like poverty, discrimination of caste, neglect of the masses, oppression of the women, and faulty system of education. His feminist thinking originated in the context of India's solution to these critical problems. His feminine view was also affected by the American tour.

The historical context of the position of women in India

The position of women in India is contradictory. In Hinduism, women are worshipped as goddesses. But in the society, politics, economy, and culture of Hindu-dominated India, women have not been given equal rights and dignity. Although in the Rig Vedic age there is no disrespect towards women. At that time women had the right to education, weapons, religion, etc. However, from the later Vedic age, the complexity of religion increased. The Brahmanical community wanted to establish its dominance. Women's rights were violated in religion, education, politics, society, culture, and the economy. In the age of Protestant religion, the status of women was more glorious than the later Vedic age, but they didn't have the same rights as men. The place of Nuns in Buddhist Sangha was in the second row. The age of Smriti was the beginning of the extreme degradation of women. Moreover, after the foreign invasion, the discipline and restriction on women increased.

In fact, on the eve of the modern age, the condition of women had deteriorated drastically. Their rights, dignity, and independence were very low in the society, politics, economy, and culture. "They live in complete control of men. They were ensolved. Right from birth to death, theirs was a life lived absolutely 'in dependence'".⁴ There were bad practices like child marriage, polygamy, the Sati system, abandoning children in the Ganges. At that time the female literacy rate was very less than the man literacy rate and the rate of dropouts among the girls was very high. "Any investment made on a girl-child is considered as waste"⁵. This misery of the women made the whole nation crippled and spineless.

Influenced by western education and culture during the 19th century, progressive figures like Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen were active in the cause of women's welfare. They came forward to eradicate women-centric evil practices. They were also trying to spread women's education. Some periodicals like Bamabodhini played an important role in this regard. However these reform movements were largely confined to the outside of the society, they could not awaken the women from inside. These reforms were made with the help of state law and administration. These were mainly centred in Calcutta and were limited to the upper class. Most of the people were not impressed.

Vivekananda and women empowerment

The word 'empowerment' is related to freedom or Liberty or emancipation. It is described in the dictionary as 'to make able'. More specifically, empowerment includes the physical, mental, social, economic aspects of development. According to Vivekananda "The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women"⁶. For this reason, he had emphasized the empowerment of women in the all-round development of India.

In addition to the Indian context, the high position of American women influences Vivekananda's feminine thinking. He was overwhelmed by the high status and independence of women in American society. According to him, America is a paradise for women. He wrote-"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 this country. All learning and culture are centred in

them.”⁷ He was delighted to see the high position of American women, but he was troubled by the miserable condition of Indian women. He blamed patriarchal society for the plight of Indian women. But in Indian society, men have taken away women's rights and freedoms for their benefit. It has imposed various disciplines on women.

He explored ways to alleviate the plight of women in India. Because with the all-round advancement of women, the overall development of a nation or state will not happen. By deeply analysing the Indian society of that time, he noticed the miserable picture of India. That's why he says -“In India there are two great evils, Trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restriction.”⁸ He emphasises his experience and Indian heritage in his quest for women's liberation from this predicament.

In this context, we have to talk about the reform movements of the 19th century. The main focus of this reform movement was the emancipation of women. The reformers mainly wanted to shoot reforms with the help of state law. Where western imitation was dimensional, but Indian tradition and values were not given importance. It is here that Vivekananda differs from the reformers. Although he saw American society firsthand, he didn't accept the American framework for the emancipation of Indian women. He wanted to liberate women based on Indian tradition and culture. He said,“ It is unfair to judge women in the East by the Western standard. In the West woman is the wife; in the East, she is the mother.”⁹

Vivekananda is an extreme supporter of humanism. He favours giving women equal status and rights with men. In this context, it is necessary to mention that, the Indian Constitution has adopted the policy of eliminating gender inequality. Even in recent times one of the themes of the feminist movement is to establish equal rights for women everywhere in society, politics, economy, education, employment spheres. But Vivekananda has spoken of equal rights for men and women in the 19th century. He says-“Is there any sex- distinction in atman (self)? Out with the differentiation between men and women- all are atman!”¹⁰ He said this from the point of view of Vedanta. When people reach the highest levels of development, there is no difference in gender, race, caste, class, etc. His Guru or Master Ramakrishna believed that all men and women, sinners, heaters, and prostitutes were the sources of eternal power. He says- “We should not think that we are men and women, but only that we are human beings, born to cherish and to help one another.”¹⁰

For the emancipation of Indian women, Vivekananda emphasised the spread of women's education. He said in an interview given to 'Prabuddha Bharat'-“Our right of interference is limited entirely to giving education. women must be put in a position to solve their problems in their own way.”¹¹ The main object of his scheme of women's education was to make them strong, fearless, and conscious of their charity and dignity.

However, he opposed the teaching of the time. That education was confined to the upper classes and centred in Calcutta. The main purpose of colonial education was to create clerks and to form a British loyal class. He says-“They(Indian women)have many and grave problems, but none that are not to be solved by the magic world 'education’”.¹²

But he said that religion has been marginalised in the field of women's education at that time. He has opposed this teaching. According to him, the mother tongue is the best medium of mass education. He arranged a different curriculum which includes- moral value, literature, Sanskrit, grammar, craft, cooking, home science along with meditation, worship. He recommended the education for women that would help them build their character, increase their willpower, develop their intelligence and above all, help them stand on their own feet. He hope that through this education they would be modern Sita, Savitree, Gargy, etc. Wherefore he said that ideal female characters like Sita, Savitri, Damayanti should be used as examples for the students from their childhood, to imitate their character. At the same time, he spoke of awakening the spirit of heroism in women. To this end, he spoke of presenting the ideals and life of Rani Lakshmi Bai, Rani Bhabani, Rani Padmini, etc.

Vivekananda emphasised women's self-reliance. He spoke of religious education for women as well as science and technological education for self-reliance. According to him, women used to be self-reliant through education in religion, art, science, cooking, sewing, etc. He

said women to take charge of the teacher to develop women education. He hope that some educated women would adopt celibacy for life and educate the uneducated women of our country. That is why he called Nivedita to work for India. Nivedita came to India and played a major role in promoting the rights of women in India. She taught self-reliance at her school(Bagbagar). Moreover, Vivekananda wanted a women's monastery to be established and the women would manage it. He hoped that “In villages and towns they will open centres and strive for the spread of female education”.¹³ His dream came true with the establishment of 'Strimath' in 1954.

Along with education, he also emphasised women's emancipation. According to him, “Liberty is the first condition of growth”. Without liberty, no one can grow whether it's eternal or external. Liberty increases self- confidence and encourages them to do more progressive works by themselves. He says-“If you do not 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 women; she is the fox, but when she is no longer oppressed, she will become the lion.”Therefore, for the overall development of the society and country, the participation of women with men is equally necessary.

CONCLUSION

Critics have noted that self-contradiction in Vivekanand's feminist thinking. While he expressed concern to the people of the country about the plight of Indian women, at the same time he declared the glorious status of women in Indian society in the West. Critics say that he did not want to empower women in India. They also criticized the education policy of Vivekananda on women's empowerment. According to them, Vivekananda did not include modern Science, History, Geography, Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics in his curriculum. He emphasized education in various subjects like cooking, sewing, babysitting, etc, which are the work for girls in Hindu tradition. Critics say that Vivekananda did not like the protesting, independent, outspoken women. He wanted to re-establish patriarchal supremacy by emphasizing Indian tradition.

But Prabajika Amalprana explains Vivekananda's pragmatic and sociological analytical views on women's emancipation in her Bengali essay 'Swami Vivekanander Nari Vabna'. Vivekananda thought - which is better for Indian women- American women's freedom or Indian restrictions? just as no progress is possible without independence, so freedom leads to disorder. Moreover, individualism has not yet emerged in Indian society. The individual had to adapt to society. For this reason, he spoke of empowering women based on Indian tradition without blindly imitating American society.

According to Vivekananda, “The idea of womanhood in India is motherhood- the marvellous, unselfish, all -suffering, ever- forgiving mother”. He says, the mother is the ideal of love; she rules the family, she possesses the family. Motherhood is a source of energy. The energy help in the full development of women as well as human beings. Even modern feminists preach that femininity is inherent in motherhood. Motherhood embodies women's independence, self-reliance, self -confidence and sense of responsibility. This is why Vivekananda's idea of women is still relevant. The concept of equality must be applied as a basis for the mental attitude and behaviour of men and women, at least at the intellectual level, not at the level of perception. Only then will the possibility of patriarchal domination decrease. Moreover, women will also get a chance to become alternative empowerment.

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