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**THE IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD IN INDIA AND THE VIEWS OF SWAMI  
VIVEKANANDA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Being one of the best, active and powerful disciples of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, though Swami Vivekananda is known mainly as a savior of Hindu religion along with the uniqueness of Indian philosophy and culture, like Sri Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, he was able to reformulate Advaita Vedanta as Practical Vedanta on the ground of ‘বহুরূপে সমুখে তোমার ছাড়ি কোথা খুঁজিছ ঈশ্বর । জীবে প্রেম করে যেই জন সেই জন সেবিছে ঈশ্বর ।’ In his course of work, he was also engaged to bring a revolution in the women empowerment. This paper— ‘THE IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD IN INDIA’ is an exposition of what Vivekananda deed in this regard.

**Keywords:** Women, Ideal, American, Literacy,

“The one thing that fulfils womanhood, that is woman lines in woman, is motherhood”.

Swami Vivekananda

**Introduction:**

It is well known to all that Swami Vivekananda is not only a monk, teacher, great leader, mystic, philosopher but also the incessant worker for India. Nineteenth Century India produced a number of eminent men and women who with their exceptional intellect and wisdom enriched different aspects of Indian heritage, culture, philosophy and thereby Indian life. The most important among them was Swami Vivekananda who has represented India’s unique culture, rituals and religious purity for the world. He also represented India as a country which is potentially divine.

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Swami Vivekananda is seen as a modernizer of the Hindu way of life, a reformer who made it relevant to contemporary times. He strode like a colossus across the Indian renaissance. As one of the greatest metaphysicians of the Vedantic school of thought of India, the idea of Swami Vivekananda, although conceived several years ago, is still relevant. As the greatest interpreter to Vedantic Philosophy, he was relentlessly engaged in teaching, preaching following the path of '*Karmayoga*'.

**Significance of female literacy:**

According to Swami Vivekananda, "education is the manifestation of perfection already in men" and it was not only collection of information, but something more meaningful, he felt education should be man-making, life giving and character-building. Swamiji identified and realized the main hindrance for the development of India is neglect towards the women if we neglect women as parallelly we neglect the human resource. He suggested not thinking that there are men and women, but only that there are human beings. Men and women are the two wings to a bird. Mankind cannot flourish without each other only. Man cannot change the world, and similarly only women cannot change the world along. I am we both, Men and Women, who can change the world and make it a better place to live in. He said that "There is no chance for the welfare to the world unless the condition of Women is improved"<sup>1</sup>. Swami Vivekananda wanted Indian women to have an education that would create great fearless women, our Nobel laureate Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore said that "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high? When we look back into ancient India, had produced women philosophers and scholars like Maitreyi and Gargi. In the Vedic age we found women belonged to an uplifted social status. But the beginning of the mediaeval age to colonial era we found women are dominate and exploited by the society. Swamiji almost one-hundred and twenty

years back, spoke about the freedom of women from all types of bondages. He said the women must be educated and they themselves must say about the reforms needed.

Before Swamiji, Raja Ram Mohan, Vidyasagar were also engaged for the service of women. They eradicated the burning of a chaste wife on the turned pile of her husband, child marriage and polygamy and so on. But Swamiji was the man of different pole. The main objectives of his scheme of women education were to make them strong, fearless and conscious of their charity and dignity. He observes that although men and women are equally competent in academic matters, yet women have a special aptitude and competence for studies relating to home and family. Hence, he recommends the introduction of subjects like sewing, nursing, domestic science, culinary art, etc. which not part of education at his time were. No doubt Swami Vivekananda was a visionary. Regarding women empowerment the progressive agenda that Vivekananda had put forward towards women of that time is quite well-documented. In his own words, he says “That country and that nation which does not respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future” in this context, Swami Vivekananda’s message of great reduction and equality for the female is pertinent specially with his visionary thinking of making female empowerment the benchmark for the measurement of any society’s growth.

Swami Vivekananda said lack of education as the fundamental cause of the downfall of women from the high Vedic tradition. He said remedy too in education. Education that will give strength and it must include the development of an ideal character. But what kind of education, especially women’s education? Sister Christine wrote, “some of us believe that if Swami Vivekananda’s ideas regarding the education of woman are carried out in true spirit, a being will be evolved who will be unique in the history of the world. As the woman of ancient Greece was almost perfect physically, this one will be her complement intellectually and spiritually a woman gracious, loving, tender, long-suffering, great in heart and intellect, but greatest of all in spirituality” Vivekananda believed that following these new

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ideals of education, a race of 'superman' and super women' would merge in future who could combine perfect freedom with perfect authority. Swami Vivekananda laid stress on education as a powerful weapon for this change. As an educationalist he believes in absolute values which have to be realized by a good system of education. Education should be the preparation for life. It should develop a feeling of nationalism and international understanding; it should lead to the development of character and make individuals self-dependent.

Vivekananda proposed education as the prime remedy to the social malaise faced by women. Since it was mainly the field of education that had shut its door to women and hampered their overall growth, opening up its doors would surely help women in the India civilization has for most of its history had a well-entrenched education system reaching out to the masses at large, available in equal proportion to both men and women. This was the case at least until the advent of the medieval period or the dark ages for our civilization. The village education system was in a good shape until the eighteenth century with both boys and girls participating in it, as is very well documented by DharamPal.<sup>2</sup> In this backdrop, Vivekananda's proposal for the upliftment of India women by educating them seemed fit in the state of things. For him, education in itself was societal purifier and a driver towards its betterment.

Swami Vivekananda, while contemplating on the emphasis on European education in the modern era, remarked that it was strange that in spite of the high status in which people in India held foreign education, foreign universities such as Oxford and Cambridge were themselves shut for women while Calcutta University was producing women with an excellent education,<sup>3</sup> he stated that: "How can there be any progress of the country without the spread of education, the dawning of knowledge? Even no real effort or exertion in the cause is visible among the few in your country who are the promise of the future, you who have received the blessings of education. But know for certain that absolutely nothing can be done to improve the state of things unless there is a spread of education

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first among the women and the masses. And so I have it is my mind to train up some *Brahmcharins* and *Brahmcharinis*, the former of whom will eventually take the row of *sannyasa* and try to carry the light of education among the masses, from village to village, throughout the country, while the latter will do some among women. But the whole work must be done in the style of our own country. Just as centers have to be started for men, so also centers have to be started for teaching women. *Brahmcharinis* of education and character should take up the task of teaching at these different centers.

History and the *puranas*, housekeeping, and the arts, the duties of home life, and principles that make for the development of an ideal character have to be taught with the help of modern science, and the women students must be trained up in ethical and spiritual life.

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 distinguish the mothers. It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born. And you have reduced your women to something like manufacturing machines, also, for heaven's sake, is this the out com of your education? The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good com about for the country, for India"<sup>4</sup>.

He stated that: "Educate your women first and leave them to themselves, then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them" - this golden quote of Swami Vivekananda, explain how significant female literacy is. Unless the gap between males and females' literacy is abridged, it is very difficult to steer and propel national development. He said, the progress of a nation depends on its treatment of women. So, according to him, there is no chance for welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is one of the foremost concerns of the Government of India as well as of the society at large. Swami Vivekananda's vision on women education and Today's mission of

eradicating gender gap in literacy rate both indicate one goal ..... progress.....progress of women and thereby the progress of entire nation.

### **Indian Ideal of Womanhood:**

Swami Vivekananda the young vibrant monk of 19th century India, was proud of belonging to a culture with a long tradition of respecting the womanhood. He was very much influenced by the tradition of India's gifted women who were intellectually and spiritually enlightened. Swami Vivekananda inspired by the culture of India which regarded woman as embodiment of Divine Mother, he taught the world to respect the ideal of motherhood in every woman. Giving a talk on The Ideals of Indian Women he once expressed his ideal of womanhood through highlighting the ideal of motherhood. The Swami was proud of his country's Social System which held aloft the ideal of motherhood. According to Swami Vivekananda "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. He is of the 'Arian' race, who is born through prayer, and he is a non-Arian, who is born through sensuality.'<sup>5</sup> Swami Vivekananda believed that a woman is blessed who looks upon her husband as fatherhood of God, and blessed is the who looks upon women as the motherhood of God. This again indicates, that the ideals of Swami Vivekananda on Men both Man and woman are divine one represents fatherhood and the other represents motherhood respectively.

According to Swamiji, the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood. He said that "The idea women, in India, is the mother, the mother first and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the

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mind of the Hindu, Motherhood; and God is called Mother”<sup>6</sup>. that marvelous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever for giving mother. Where the Vedas teach morality, the first words are, “let the mother be your God”<sup>7</sup>and that she is when we talk of the woman is India, our idea of a woman is a mother. He believed that the dynamic character present in a woman rest on that she is mother, mother of the family guiding and controlling the household attains and catering to the needs of all the family members. The feminine grace in each woman gets perfection with her becoming a mother. “Mother represents colorless love that knows no barter, Love that never dies. Who can have such Love? Only mother, not son, nor daughter, nor wife”<sup>8</sup>

Swami Vivekananda had highlighted “Indian Ideal of womanhood’ throughout the length and breadth of the world. He strongly believed that woman characters in ancient Indian literature were embodiments of Indian Ideal of womanhood and were inspiration for generations of women to com. Citing the examples of women characters of Ithihasas and puranas, he highlighted the roles the Indian woman played to selflessly fulfill her duties or Dharma at different stages of life. He would wax eloquent on Sita, the central woman character in Ramayana and exhort Indian women to make sita their role model. “She is the very type of the true Indian woman, for all the Indian ideals of a perfect woman have ground out of that one life of Sita; and here she stands these thousands of years, commanding the worship of every man, woman and child throughout the length and breadth of the land or Aryavarta”<sup>9</sup>

### **To compare Indian and Western Women:**

Though Vivekananda had made an attempt to compare Indian and Western women, he never judged them with Indian standard of womanhood. He believed that each and every nation has its own traditions and culture and it is unfair to judge the people of another country with one’s own standards. “The great lesson to learn is that I am not the standard by which the whole universe is to be judged;

each man is to be judged by his own idea, each race its own standard and ideal, each custom of each country by its own reasoning and conditions”, he said.<sup>10</sup> But he was drawing a sharp contrast between the approaches of the East, specifically India and West to womanhood. According to him, this dichotomy was reflected in their representative ideals of womanhood. “The ideal woman in India is the mother and God is called Mother. But, in the West, the woman is the wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there as the wife. To the ordinary man in India, the whole force of womanhood is concentrated in motherhood. In the Western home, the wife rules. In an Indian home, the mother rules. If a mother comes into a Western home, she has to be subordinate to the wife, to the wife belongs the home. A mother always lives in our Indian’s homes: the wife must be subordinate to her”<sup>11</sup>

Swami Vivekananda was firmly against the modern Indian woman’s tendency to imbibe Western thoughts and culture through imitation. He strongly believed that imitation of Western materialistic thoughts and culture will not help to bring about any social progress in a country like India, where spirituality and morality determine the social life of the people. He was not against the social and intellectual progress of woman in India, but strongly contented that it should be by preserving their individuality and cultivating faith in them. He believes that women will be fit enough to hand over the Nation’s cultural heritage to the future generation only if they become fearless, faithful to one’s own self and preserve the grace of womanhood in their very character. In an interview to the Editor of Prabuddha Bharata in ‘on Indian women their Past, Present and Future’ he said that India needed, “great fearless women-women worthy to continue the tradition of Sanghamitra, Lila, Ahalya Bai, and Mira Bai - women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and selfless, strong with the strength that comes of touching the feet of God”<sup>12</sup>

### **Women in the Vedas:**



“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 crudit  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. The principal reason why your race has so much degenerated is that you have no respect for these living images of Shakti. Manu says, “where women are respected, there the God’s delight; and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught”. “It is very difficult to understand why in this country (India) so much difference in 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 smites etc. and binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into manufacturing machines! It you do not raise the women, who are living embodiment of the Divine Mother, do not think you have any other way to rise”<sup>13</sup>

#### **Swami Vivekananda views on American women:**

Vivekananda in letter to Swami Ramakrishnanda 1894 “About the women of America, I cannot express my gratitude for their kindness. Lord blesses them. In this country, women are the life of every movement, and represent all the culture of the nation, for men are too busy to educate themselves”.

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“Now here in the world are women like this 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 centered in them”.

From Swami Vivekananda’s letter to his Madras disciples, dated 24, January, 1894.

“Nowhere on earth have women so many privileges as in American. They are slowly taking everything into their hands; and, strange to say, the number of cultured women is much greater than that of cultured men”.

**Conclusion:**

The exposition and analysis of Swami Vivekananda’s ideas of the ideal of womanhood in India brings to light its constructive, practical and comprehensive character. As a renaissance figure, Swami Vivekananda’s Contributions to the national life of India extended beyond religion and spirituality with which his name is perhaps most associated. He identified education, fitting with India’s culture, as the way of rejuvenate India’s national life. His prescription for women’s education however was one that encouraged them to value ‘chastity and purity’, more than any other aims of education. He realizes that if the women of our country get the right type of education, then they will be able to solve their own problems in their own way and make them strong, fear-less and conscious of their chastity and dignity. He states it emphatically that if society is to be reformed, education has to reach everyone high and low, because individuals are the very constituents of society. As a matter of fact, it is today considered as one of the strongest phenomena is the history of the mankind, that India, which, since time immemorial had honored woman as shakti. the living embodiments of the Universal Supreme Mother, could even think if fit, to deprive them of their legitimate birth rights to education, freedom, properly and what not, as bracketed with Shudras.<sup>14</sup>

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The earliest religious texts of Hindus show freedom for women. It is clearly stated in the Rig Veda that a woman is free to choose her life partner. “Bhadra Vadhur bhavati yat Supesa Swayam Sa mitram Vanute jane cit”<sup>15</sup> Swami Vivekananda too strongly held that in ancient India, those along worship god who worship women as the manifestation of God. “Total freedom and independence is the symbol of total womanhood” Vivekananda believed.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, he suggested that women should be guided by their inner voice, controlling their sense organs which help them cultivate the power of concentration, dedication and renunciation in their work. This is how Ramakrishna had this idea of divine motherhood in every woman, of whatever caste she might be, or whatever might be her worth. Educated women will instill a fresh light in the family. They will be the prime initiators of awaking of the next generation. So “The great ideal of Indian womanhood was not romance but renunciation”<sup>17</sup>

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