

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **WOMEN AND SWAMIJI**

Swami Vivekananda once said that he is the condensed form of India. Nobel laureate Visva guru Rabindranath Tagore mentioned that if anybody wants to know India then first know Vivekananda and in him everything is positive and nothing negative<sup>1</sup>. Swami Vivekananda was one of the most influential personalities of his time. He gave his views on many issues which India suffered from many centuries to the present era. His philosophy reached each corner of the societies and provides a new solution to the problems. It is a fact that in his initial life Vivekananda was interested in the metaphysical myths especially related to mind and its control. From his childhood, he was attracted towards meditation. Ramakrishna helped him to reach the highest position of mystical experiences i.e. Samadhi. When he experienced he told his guru to live in that stage forever but it was Ramakrishna who criticized him and told that he thought that he was a banyan tree under which many people take shelter. This incident had a deep impact on Vivekananda's mind and he decided to dedicate his life not only for his spiritual growth but also for the socio-economic growth of the masses. This is the reason for which some scholars Vivekananda as patriot saint. There is a fundamental between Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo another great spiritual personality of India of that period. On the one hand, Aurobindo in his initial life was a great revolutionary with vigorous external activities and gradually turned into lonely spiritual seeker but on the other hand, contrasting Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda neglected his initial silent celestial life and showed his giant workforce for the upliftment of the poor, destitute and oppressed people of India. Swami Vivekananda once advised his colleague that throw the bells and drums. Stop to sing Bhajans. Go to the masses and teach those physics,

chemistry and geography so that they can be enlightened with modern scientific approaches and come out of the evil practices and blind belief. They can stand with their feet by using that knowledge which changes their economic position and leads to a stage where their reason is not confined with bread and butter. It fulfills the intellectual appetite. He also said to one of his followers that the heaven is nearer not by reading The Gita but by playing Football. It again showed he did not totally reject the importance of the materialistic development. He considered that each community should learn better ideas from other communities as well as share its knowledge with others. He categorically rejected the isolation and hyper-glorification standpoint of a community. Vivekananda satisfied both intellectuals of India as well as the general public. So now the question arises that can Vivekananda strongly oppose the traditional drawbacks of our societies or being silent in these issues. In this chapter the researcher wants to study the viewpoint of Vivekananda on the issues related to women and her position in both traditional and modern societies. The researcher divided this chapter into two segments. The first one deals with women of Vivekananda's pre-monastic life, exclusively focused on Vivekananda's view on his own mother. The last one discusses about the views of Vivekananda after his achievements. This section overall deals with the opinion and ideas of Swamiji on women.

#### **4.1. Women in Narendra's Life**

There are few persons who directly have an impact on Vivekananda's life. Among them his mother was prominent. Bhubaneswari Devi, the mother of Vivekananda was a pious lady. She was the only child of her parents, Nandalal Basu of Simulia and Raghmani Devi. She was born in 1841 and married to Viswanath a prominent lawyer at

the age ten. She came to Dutta house in her youth and struggled till her old age. She had six daughters and four sons. After the death of her husband, the whole burden of family came to her shoulders. She on the one side fought against her family member and for the property right and on the other hand took care of her children. Though she was born in a traditional orthodox Bengali family but her mind was very liberal and modern. She did not have any kind of biases towards unscientific Hindu practices. She learnt little English with the help of personal tutor. She sent her young daughters to Bethune College and Rambagan Mission School. She encouraged her daughter to learn crafts. She has also interest in reading literature and composed some verses. One incident of her life shows her open mind and reasonable decision making capacity. One of her daughter had committed suicide in 1890<sup>2</sup>. She advised husband to marry again and later took the new bride to her home and treated as daughter. One of the disciples of Swami Vivekananda mentioned about the personality of her mother, Her very appearance commanded respect. She was a strongly built lady with large fine eyes with long eyelashes. She had a remarkably strong personality that made her obeyed without any questioning. No wonder that Swamiji had inherited these qualities from her<sup>3</sup>.

Bhubaneswari Devi did hard tapas to get Vivekananda. She observed Somevarvrata and pujas to Lord Shiva to get him. Swami's mother always teaches her child to be truthful, chaste and kind towards others. Vivekananda also acclaimed her mother's unique memory by which she told Ramayana as per verses. Bhubaneswari Devi not only influenced Swamiji in his childhood but also he remembered him in his monastic life. Though he led a life of monk but he did not forget her mother and her sufferings with poverty. He requested Pramadas Mitra to give some money to her mother. According to

Hinduism, there is a convention for the monk to boycott all the relationship with family. Because a monk himself sacrifices his all narrowness and widened his self with a universal acceptance. He did not believe any kind of societal bondage. Therefore everything is equal before him even if there is no special attraction or responsibility for the families. They believed that the whole effort of the life of a monk is devoted to the God. So family relations negligible before them. But Swami Vivekananda broke that traditional notion of sannyasin and continued his relation with his mother. He was more concerned about his mother and expressed that he was Swami Vivekananda because of her mother and her good teachings. He expressed his emotion in a letter to his friend HaridasViharidas Desai who is deewan of Junagarhon 29 June 2984. He criticized the principles of old monkhood and told that he was not hard-hearted brute<sup>4</sup> and any being he loved more was his mother. It shows what extent he respected the women. Swamiji gave many lectures. One of them was 'The Ideals of Indian Women'. On 17 December 1894, it was given by him due to the request of Mrs. Ole Bull. This lecture revolutionized the mind of the white women and they sent a letter to her mother along with a picture of Saint Mary. In that letter Mrs. Bull talked about the great devotion of Vivekananda towards his mother. She said:

Having given from the Vedas, from Sanskrit literature and dramas these Ideals, and having cited the laws of today favourable to the women of India, he paid his filial homage to his own mother as having enabled him to do the best he had done, by her own life of unselfish love and purity, the caused him by his very inheritance to choose the life of a monk.<sup>5</sup>

In another event, Swamiji himself glorified her mother. He said to his disciples :

It was consciously that my mother brought me into the world to be what I am. Whatever little good impulse I have was given to me by my mother, and consciously not unconsciously.<sup>6</sup> She was a saint to bring me into the world; she kept her body pure, her food pure, and her clothes pure, for years, because I would be born. Because she did that, she deserves worship<sup>7</sup>.

The above examples showed how much Vivekananda loved his mother and respect her. It was his idea which outwardly showed the exclusive devotion towards his mother but in a real sense, it reflected the general views of Vivekananda towards women.

## **4.2. Swamiji's View on Women**

Swami Vivekananda considered women as the base of any civilization. When the position of women is decreased then naturally civilization became endangered. Swami considered the development of nation is positively related with the development of women. According to his word, 'The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women'<sup>8</sup>. Swami Vivekananda saw women issues not as an exclusive problem rather than it has deep relation with Indian culture. For him, women are suffered due to man's perception towards women in relation to his relationship with her. So there is a need to change that perception. Women liberation is only come when there is man's liberation. Swamiji did not advocate any kind of special privileges for women. He only demanded education for the girls in a free atmosphere so that they can excel their efficiency up to maximum level. He said, 'There is no need of any set programme for the uplifting women. Give them education and leave them free. They will work out the solution of their own.'<sup>9</sup> Mentioning the importance of women in human society, sister Nivedita said, 'In her care lies the synthesis of life. As she determines the character of the

home, out of which man goes forth to his day's labour, so also it is her conception of what life as a whole should be that dominates and creates the world'<sup>10</sup>.The above statement showed that the women is not a subordinate in the family rather than she is the one who change the fate family as well as society. Vivekananda believed the highest manifestation of the divine energy has seen in the women as mother. He had deep respect and firm believes that motherhood can solve the problems of a society that's why every educated man should respect her. In his words, 'He indeed is a learned man who looks upon all man as mother'<sup>11</sup>.But this was not the initial position of Vivekananda. It was developed when he met with Ramakrishna. In his early days he was reluctant to accept Kali, the glory of feminine (Shakti). He said, and all her ways. That was the ground of my six years' fight, that I would not accept her. But I had to accept her at last. Ramakrishna Paramahansa dedicated me to Her, and now I believe She guides me in everything I do .... The thing that made me [accept] it is a secret that will die with me.... She made a slave of me.<sup>12</sup>The above statement showed that Vivekananda was self-critical to his previous understandings and accepted the modified view of his guru Rama Krishna which showed that there is no such orthodox outlook exist in Vivekananda's life. Though he was experienced the Nirvikalpa Samadhi he also recognized women as the manifestation of the Divine Mother or Brahman. He mentioned in the below stanza:

When you realize that all- illuminating reality of the Atman, then you will see that this idea of sex- distinction has vanished altogether, then only will you look upon women as a veritable manifestation of Brahman. We have seen in Sri Ramakrishna how he had this idea of divine motherhood in every woman, of whatever caste she might be, or whatever might be her worth.<sup>13</sup>

It showed that Swamiji recognized the spiritual significance of motherhood in the transcendental world. Swamiji was more concern about the problems of women in the empirical world. He criticized the male community and expressed his pain in front of his disciples,

“To what straits the strictures of local usages have reduced the women of this country, rendering them lifeless and inert, you could understand if only you visited the Western countries! You alone are responsible for this miserable condition of the women, and it rests with you also to raise them again.”<sup>14</sup>

Swami Vivekananda wanted to re-establish the life of Vedic spiritual women in modern periods. He believed in the positive exchange of ideas between eastern and western women and its effective retaining. Vivekananda believed women should be like the erstwhile Vedic women viz. Gargi, Maitreyi, Viswavara, Lopamudra etc. He argued that women proved herself as equal to man whenever she got opportunities. Not only in home managing but also difficult professions like statesmanship, managing territories governing countries even if in war. He advised his disciple Sister Nivedita not to forget “Women and the People”<sup>15</sup> This ever caring attitude of Swamiji was largely influenced by His guru’s response towards other women specially Rani Rasamani ,SaradaMaa.RaniRasamani was a wealthy lower caste lady whom Ramakrishna gave motherly status. Though Ramakrishna was a Brahmin but he did not discriminate her rather than he considered her son-in-law as a noble devoted religious person. Swami Vivekananda advocated to teach women both Sanskrit mantras as well as English. He

wanted to give them inner strength through liberal education and also emotional softness through cultural practices. Swami Vivekananda was questioned about the ideal womanhood of India in California during his second visit to America. Before answering that question he cautioned the questioner not to be the victim of the over generalization. Though he believed in universal moral parameter which judge the human's position in different cultural and geographical conditions but he argued that it should be philosophical instead of ritual. Because rituals and cultures are shaped according to historical causes and geographical conditions. If someone is opposed on the basis of mere practices then he also falls into same basket. Because ritualistic paradox is laid in each society. He gave a beautiful example of Chinese lady and Western women. Western women criticized the Chinese culture of cramping the feet of women for the beautiful appearance. They considered it as a torture and the violation of human rights but Swamiji criticized the former one and said they forgot their own corset, a kind of garment which tightens the upper body part women which is also a kind of human right violations. So he suggested every society should study on their own parameter with universal philosophical code, based on humanity. According to Swamiji The base of Ideal Indian women's life is 'Motherhood'<sup>16</sup> which totally different from the Eurocentric notion of 'Wife'. In Indian family-life everything starts with Mother and ends with Mother. In Western Society, Mother is subordinate to wife but in Indian society, wife is subordinate to mother. It showed that worship of mother is always glorified. Women life in western society is very much individualistic but In India it is very much socialistic. The development of a women is directly affected the life of the family where she belongs to. Her social position showed the position of a country. The eurocentric approach of feminism always



differentiates women from the society. They considered women as ‘self’ and society as ‘other’ which is a crude essentialist approach. But according to Swami Vivekananda we cannot separate women from the rest of the society. Because she is the base of a society, moreover, a nucleus of a family. So her societal position is the core which naturally determines the family or society’s position which is the periphery of that core. By seeing the above argument, many scholars very often confused that Swami Vivekananda is against of the essentialist approach of feminism and he wanted to develop an ideal subordinate wife like Sita, Sabitri etc. (Sen, 2012). But it is not the case. Swami Vivekananda categorically believed that it is the women who solve their issues by their own. There is no need of external support to them. If they equal opportunity and basic facilities then they can show their efficiency more than man. There is no need of male patronization for the development of women. Woman is oppressed not because of her weakness or incapability but due to unavailability of basic atmosphere and individual freedom. If it is given to them then there is no need of any kind help from man. He rejects the manly eagerness for the upliftment of women where he wants to dominate and plays central role in that process. It is act belligerent hegemon who passively dominate the developmental process itself. Criticizing the above attitude he said,

It is wrong, a thousand times wrong, if anyone of you dares to you, ‘I will work out the salvation of this woman or child’. ... Who are you to solve women’s Problem? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off! They will solve their own problem.<sup>17</sup>

Swami Vivekananda argued this imperfection in the society occurred due to the thinking process of both groups. We did mistakes when we culturally identify our selves

as male and female. It provides a scope for the oppression and gender comes into an existence. So he provided a Vedantic solution to this problem. He advised to stop to think man and women as different and consider all as Atman, a part of Brahman- the supreme soul. Then only we can achieve a perfectly balanced society or state. According to him, before achieving the spiritual perfection it is very much necessary to attain the worldly moral perfection through liberal education. It formed the character and provides the strength of mind. The liberal education ends the materialistic dependence of women over a man. Women learn how to defend her in this world in any condition. He praised Queen of Jhansi and advised women should learn self-defense from her.<sup>18</sup> Further, he advocated that this is the real swarupa of the Shakti and without this Shakti, there is no regeneration for the world.<sup>19</sup> Adding to his above argument he told that, “the natural ambition of woman is through marriage to climb up leaning upon a man, but those days are gone. You shall be great without the help of any man...”<sup>20</sup>. It showed that Swami Vivekananda was in favor of complete freedom but he wants it should come with a responsibility.

Swami Vivekananda respected the intellect of women but he always put purity over the intelligence. He told to his western admirers that they had a more intelligent man but the Indian women were purer than them which worked for the sustenance of a civilization and it was the backbone of the traditional oldest Hindu culture. The Ideal of Chastity and Sacredness is primary virtue of women. True womanhood always revolves around the trueness of the women. He advised women to learn modern education but not in the cost of ancient spirituality. The real strength lies with spirituality, sacrifice, and self-control. By following the virtue one can achieve the state of fearlessness. Women

should follow the footprints of Sita who is representing the highest level of purity. If women succeed to follow this level of purity then surely women lead the civilization. In Swamiji's word, 'The past has been to the strong physical men- the future to the metaphysical women.'<sup>21</sup> If we analyze the above statement we can see that it is appropriate for the twenty-first century. Because this century is the century of science, logic and critical thinking where the barbaric physical force became irrelevant. Now everything is done through a key of the server-based laptop. Muscular power, the foundation of female suppression, is reducing its position and mental power is gaining importance. Therefore naturally women became one step ahead from a man in each area. Like Swamiji's notion of Shudra Revolution, it is also a kind of revolutionary idea. Swamiji wanted to establish a nunnery near the eastern bank of Ganga which was absolutely governed by women. At last, it came into existence in 1954 and till now working as an independent organization where girls learn both eastern values and western scientism. Vivekananda's view on women has occupied a different position out of the arena of traditional debate of feminist individualism and cultural juggernaut. Because Vivekananda believed that there is no paradox exist between women's freedom and the maintenance of cultural sanctity. There some pictures have shown in below about Swami Vivekananda and his women disciples and also the rituals of Ramakrishna Mission.



( Ramakrishna worshipping Sarada Devi as Kali, Source-www.Ramakrishna.org)



(Women Monks chanting Mantra in Sarada Math, Source- Sarada Math)



(Women Monks performing Pujas in Sarada Math, Source- Sarada Math)



(Kumari Puja at Belur Math, Source-www.belurmath.org)



(Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita in Kashmir, Source-Sachitre Vivekananda)



(Vivekananda in Regal Manor, 1899, Source- Sachitre Vivekananda pg. - 87)



( Swamiji at Green Acer, source-Advait Ashram)

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<sup>1</sup> Ray, HM (2012) *Symbols of India*, Delhi, Rupa publication

<sup>2</sup> Dhar. SN (2012), *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda (Vol-1)*, Ed (4<sup>th</sup>), Chennai, Vivekananda Prakashan Trust, pp-15

<sup>3</sup> Ibid- pp-14

<sup>4</sup> C.W.V Vol.8, pp-297-8

<sup>5</sup> *Life of Swami Vivekananda by His eastern and western disciples*, Vol -1, Mayavati Almora, Advaita Asharam publication, p.516

<sup>6</sup> C.W.V, Vol.9 pp202-03

<sup>7</sup> C.W.V, Vol.8 pp.60-1

<sup>8</sup> C.W.V, Vol.8 pp.198

<sup>9</sup> *Life of Swami Vivekananda by His eastern and western disciples*, Vol -1, Mayavati Almora, Advaita Asharam publication, p.516

<sup>10</sup> Sister Nivedita, (1928) "*Woman In Modern India*", Prabuddha Bharata, , pp-111

<sup>11</sup> C.W.V, Vol.9, pp.205

<sup>12</sup> C.W.V, Vol.8, pp.263

<sup>13</sup> C.W.V, Vol-7, pp.219-220

<sup>14</sup> C.W.V, Vol-7 pp-218

<sup>15</sup> Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, Calcutta: Udbodhan, 12<sup>th</sup> ed. P.237

<sup>16</sup> C.W.V, Vol-8, pp-57

<sup>17</sup> C.W.V, Vol -3, pp-246

<sup>18</sup> C.W.V, Vol. -5, pp-342

<sup>19</sup> C.W.V, Vol. -7, pp-484

<sup>20</sup> C.W.V, Vol. -5, pp-163

<sup>21</sup> Basu, Sankari Prasad (1982) *Letters of Sister Nivedita* Kolkata Vol.-1, Nababharat Publishers