
Position of Women in Modern Era: Vivekananda's Views on Emancipation of Women.

Prof. (Dr) Velpula Indira devi

Principal & Professor

School of Humanities & Social Sciences, NIMS University Rajasthan, Jaipur

ABSTRACT:

Women in ancient India were considered as equals; sahadharmini and have had equal rights in all spheres . But this equal status slowly degraded in middle ages and considered women as an obstacle to salvation.

Another feature which was prominently witnessed in Hindu philosophy is purity. Under all circumstances and situations through ages this concept of keeping oneself pure, whether it is in Ramayana or Maha Bharata period was emphasized. As Vivekananda has said this doctrine is slowly gaining ground and making both science and religion proclaim , "keep yourself holy and pure" and again every Hindu believes that "my mother was pure and holy and hence I owe her everything that I am. That is the secret of the race – chastity."

Social institutions like family and marriage are essential features of any social system for its healthy and harmonious existence. But the modern world under the pretext of equality and freedom destroying these institutions which induce moral values in human life without which man is equal to animal and society turns into a jungle raj. The question is that, it is not simply about the safety of women but of all humanity which would be in jungle raj.

There was a change in 19th century through renaissance and now many unidentified temptations, views, ideas, modernism and individualism forcing us to accept the change. This change is causing destruction of ancient social institutions like marriage and family which are the back bone of any social system with its moral and traditional values.

The reformers during 19th century are even now are relevant and swami Vivekananda was one among them.

KEY WORDS: RAMAYANA. MAHA BHARATA, TRADITIONS, ANCIENT, SAHADHARMINI, CHASTITY.

I

‘Nari tu Narayeni’, quoted by hon.ble finance minister in her budget speech referring women.

Women have reached the heights of achieving everything they want and deserve in modern era whether it is social, economic or even political, not only on earth but also in space. No national boundaries or periodical constraints could stop her from achieving from what she wanted.

Still she is sad, insecure, vulnerable running pillar to post for protection, justice and a life with dignity.

It is not simply the political power or government that can solve their problems but the socio cultural traditions will enable us to find out solution to her problems. Indian social system always happened to be a strong hold over political system and deciding factor. Even in the beginning of ancient political thought, it says God gave Manu, the first king along with Vashistha to people on their request for a king to look after them, thus controlling the political system through socio religious values. As such the solution is in our

cultural roots where women is worshiped as goddesses and treated as equals and said, ‘Yatra Nariyastu pujyante ramante tatra devata’.

Swami Vivekananda’s views in this regard are quite appealing and relevant.

With the renaissance in 19th century, there was a herculean effort to recover the spirit of ancients, to combine it with that of the medieval and to integrate both to suit the needs of modern. The renaissance leaders looked back at the past and identified what was living and dead in the Indian tradition.

Thus the social consciousness started in 19th century which was despite British policy rather than because of it. As there was an increasing contact of the Indian intellectual with the west and with technical advances led to new currents of thought, the slow development of industry and the rise of new movements for national freedom. The awakening of India had two facets: While she looked at the west as guide, she also looked at herself and her own past. This too was not without the inherent differences in approach. The entire liberal school in the country was steeped in the philosophy of freedom and justice and had great admiration for the British. The leaders like Rajaram Mohan Roy believed that the improvement in social institutions ultimately help to improve the quality of individual life. On the other hand, leaders like Bankim, Vivekananda, Dayananda and Aurobindo, influenced by ancient vedic traditions, pleaded that India had a unique mission and it could be the spiritual leader of mankind. They underlined that each civilization has its distinct manner of living, experiencing and symbolizing and change has to be brought about in the broad frame work of that civilization only and not subject to terms and conditions of any alien one.¹

Vivekananda’s speeches touched upon many things but there is one element that could be set apart as being repeatedly echoed in his speeches and writings a like is abhay. He felt, “if there is a sin in the world it is weakness, avoid all weakness, weakness is sin, weakness is death.”² He never discriminated in between men and women and treated them as equals suggesting same solutions to women of India.

To the women of India, Vivekananda said, “I would say exactly what I say to the men. Believe in India and in Indian faith. Be strong and hopeful and unashamed and remember that with something to take Hindus have immeasurably more to give than any other people in the world”.

The problems of India, he considered to be more complex and numerous than those of any other country where race, religion, language, culture altogether constituted a nation.

Vivekananda’s social philosophy basically revolves round religion and he tried to solve the problems of the country through religion, which he considered to be the backbone of a nation. “Some work through politics, some through social reforms and some through other lines. In India, religion is the only ground along which we can move, everything must come through religion. For that is the theme, the rest are variations in the national life music.”⁴

Vivekananda also believed that there could be no growth without liberty. Our ancestors had liberated religious thought resulting in our having a wonderful religion. To raise India from its present state he wanted the poor to be fed, education to be spread and the removal of the evil priest craft.⁵

Indian life was an ocean that assimilated diverse views and currents, and allowed them to retain their identity. It was a huge self contained entity that allowed free and full play to its numerous currents, and was not unduly concerned by the outside philosophies.

Vivekananda’s views on social reforms are rather critical and pragmatic as he believed in equality of women and their self respect and honor. Progressive reforms require the backing of an authoritative power, and in the absence of kings in modern times, Vivekananda said the power is with people. Thus one had to wait till the people were educated and could comprehend their problems and come up with solutions to them. Instead of wasting energies on reforms that would never be realized in practice, he advised that one should attack the root of the problem and educate the people; until such time he felt that the ideal reforms would remain ideals only. Reforms had to be brought in a constructive manner.⁶

Vivekananda’s views on widow remarriages are revolutionary and his belief for the country.” I have yet to see a nation whose fate is determined by the number of husbands their widows get.”⁷

According to Vivekananda the judgment of a nation cannot be based on the basis of the number of slums it has. One might collect the worm eaten apples lying under the trees and write a book on each of them, but the beauty and use of apple trees would elude him. The judgment of a nation has to be on the basis of the highest and the best it can offer – the fallen would constitute a race themselves. He concluded: “It is not only proper but just right to judge a custom by its best, by its ideal.”⁸ It is not glorifying the rotten parts of culture and wrong practices of social system but picking up the best parts of culture and identifying them with countries’ glory enriches the country.

He said, “My watch word is construction, not destruction. Out of existing rituals, new ones will have to be evolved. There is infinite power of development in everything; that is my belief. All along in the history of the Hindu race there never was any attempt at destruction, only construction. We have had a host of reformers – Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Chaitanya. These were great reformers, who were always constructive and built according to the circumstances of their time. This is our peculiar method of work. All the modern reformers take to European destructive reformation, which will never do good to anyone and never did ... All history of Indian life is the struggle for the realization of the ideal of the Vedanta through good or bad fortune. Whenever there was any reforming sect or religion which rejected the Vedanta ideal, it was smashed into nothing.”⁹

Vivekananda strongly supported the traditional social system, after being made more perfect, for the betterment of the people. “I fully agree with the educated class in India that a through overhauling of society is necessary, but how to do it? The destructive plans of reformers have failed. My plan is this. We have not done badly in the past, certainly not. Our society is not bad but good, only I want it better still, not from error to truth, not from bad to good, but from truth to higher truth, from good to better, best.”¹⁰

Vivekananda was critical of the views of the liberals who sought to follow western ideas blindly. “We must move forward, not on the lines of destruction directed by missionaries but along our own line, our own road. Everything is hideous because the building is unfinished. We had to stop building during centuries of oppression. Now finish the building and everything look beautiful in its own place. This is my plan. I am thoroughly convinced of this. Each nation has a main current in life, in India it is religion; make it strong and waters on either side must move along with it.”¹¹ Further criticizing the reformers Vivekananda stressed the importance of faith in oneself which was to him greater than even faith in God. But to him it seemed that “we are losing faith in ourselves day by day. That is my objection against reformers.”¹² Vivekananda further observed that the orthodox in spite of their crudeness had more faith and strength in themselves; but unfortunately “the reformers simply play into the hands of Europeans and pander to their vanity.”¹³

II

The ideal womanhood in India was, according to Vivekananda, followed by Aryan race which was the most ancient in world’s history. This race considered men and women as priests, sahadharmini or co-religionists respectively, according to Vedas. But this equal status of women slowly got degraded with the emergence of separate priest class which caused the co-priesthood of the women to decline and the proclamation of the doctrine that women had no voice or right even marriage.

Another cause of this decline in the status of women was the change in the system of marriage. The earlier system, which revolved around the mother, resulted in the polyandrous system where sometimes five or six brothers married one woman. Even Vedas show traces of this when they mention that in case of death of a man without having had children, his widow was permitted to live with another man until she bore children, and the children belonged to her dead husband. And in later years, she was allowed to remarry but which came to be forbidden later.

Along with these changes another strange idea was taking root in an intense manner – the idea of personal purity. In the Vedas too one finds a recurrent emphasis on this personal purity. The laws on this area took an extremely strict form. Every boy and girl was sent to university to acquire education up to their twentieth and

thirtieth year and the least impurity was punished with severity amounting to almost cruelty. This insistence on personal purity took on almost the shape of a mania and imprinted itself deeply into the psyche of the race.

Vivekananda cited the conspicuous example of the capture of Chittor. The men tried to defend the fort with tremendous effort but totally outnumbered by the enemy and when the women saw the inevitability of defeat 74500 of them jumped into the huge funeral fire lit in the market place and perished. This noble example has survived to the present day, in every letter are present the words 74500 denoting that anyone who illegally reads the letter would be guilty of a crime equal in magnitude to that which compelled those noble and brave women of Chittor to take their lives.

This idea of purity continued during the next period which was marked by monks where the advent of Buddhism had given rise to the idea that nirvana could be attained only by the monks. The entire nation took on the shape of one huge monastery; fighting it seemed only one battle and that was to remain pure. And the obstacle in this path was considered to be the women. The proverbs of those times give an idea of the state of affairs. One says “what is the gate to hell “with the answer being women; and another saying,” who is the blindest of the blind, He who is deceived by a woman.”¹⁴

But slowly another idea of womanhood took shape and that revolved round the mother, who in India is the centre of the family and the highest ideal. She is seen as representative of God, as well as the mother of the universe. The god is seen in both an absolute as well as personal form. The absolute is the male where as the personal is female. This is what has led to the present situation where it is said that “the first manifestation of god is the hand that rocks the cradle.”¹⁵

According to Vivekananda this doctrine of prenatal influence is slowly gaining ground and science as well as religion proclaims “Keep yourself holy and pure”. In India this has been recognized so deeply that “we even speak of adultery in marriage, except when marriage is consummated in prayer.” And again, “every Hindu believes that my mother was pure and holy, and hence I owe her everything that I am. That is the secret of the race – chastity.”¹⁶

III

The ancient vedic society had a highly developed moral consciousness which is clearly brought out by the hymns of the ‘Rigvedasamhita’. This moral consciousness was not delinked from the religious consciousness and was integrally bound with it. Such a link was based on the philosophy that man needs to act in a manner similar to that of the gods, who always act by a fixed eternal law called ‘rta’. Thus a concept of natural law that was both natural as well as cosmic was established quite early. Rta and satya were the virtues that were regarded supreme, as were law and truth. Besides rta was also motivating factor that guided each individual to maintain social order. To regulate such process, arose the position of the king, with his chief task as a consequence being the maintenance of dharma rather than personal enjoyment. Dharma as a concept thus encompassed both religion as well as social order; the latter being maintained simultaneously through a prescription of the established systems and through the instrument of varna vyavastha. In the line of observing one’s dharma, everyone, be he the king or a normal citizen, is expected to prefer even death, according to Gita, emphasizing that every individual has necessarily has his own dharma to fulfil.¹⁷ Thus one should always work in accordance with one’s prescribed dharma regardless of its nature and quality, for even thieves have their own dharma. Dharma is thus seen to be the instrument maintaining social systems and providing material prosperity in this world to each individual in accordance with his position in society. In addition it seeks the final upliftment or salvation of individual through asharama dharma, retaining the central position in India.

Social systems further extended through institutions family, marriage etc which plays a prominent role for healthy sustaining of social system. Vivekananda has said, “man marries because he renounces”. He puts control on his unlimited desires for the proper maintenance of social system and bounds himself in the institution of marriage. We are comfortably would like to forget the noble ideal existing behind these institutions prefers to have modern liberal society’s freedom without the institutions of marriage and family.

We also forget these are the institutions imposing moral code of conduct and values on people at social level for smooth functioning of society and safety and security of the people of that society.

We need a social system with its institutions where one side they impose moral values on the other help to have expansion of consciousness through sacrificing his pleasures and comforts for the sake of his own family. This also induces the concept of sarvajana sukhino bhavantu. At the later and higher stages of expansion of his consciousness which also helps him for his spiritual growth, identifies society as vasudeva kutumbakam. This is the highest ideal Indian cultural traditions gives human society and the people of society to treat all as their own and give honour and respect to each as the whole universe is one family whether it is male or female.

“ Go back to your Upanishads, the shining, the bright philosophy, and part from all these mysterious things, all these weakening things. Take up this philosophy, the greatest truths are the simplest things in the world, simple as your own existence.”¹⁸

REFERENCES:

1. Vivekananda, Complete works, Vol.2, Calcutta: Advaita Ashram,1984.
2. Jawahar Lal Nehru , The Discovery of India, New delhi: indraprastha press,p.337
3. Vivekananda, complete works, Vol.4, Calcutta: Advaita Ashram,1986, p.232.
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Ibid.Vol.6, p.115
8. Ibid.Vol.2,p. 503-504
9. Ibid.Vol.5, p..217
10. Ibid.Vol.4,p.371
11. Ibid.p.372-373
12. Ibid. Vol.5.p.5,p.223
13. Ibid
14. Ibid.Vol.2, p. 503-504
15. Ibid.p. 506
16. Ibid.p.507
17. Ibid
18. Ibid