

# Indian Women

## *The Custodians of India's Ageless Culture*

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

### Women In the Vedic Times

When Swami Vivekananda was travelling around in India *incognito*, prior to his going to America, he was deeply pained by the status of women in his motherland. He was already reading widely and deeply our scriptures and realised that women even in the Vedic times were very advanced. There were women poets and they could lead a life of high thinking and teaching. They were known as Brahmasiddhis. The eminent Vedic scholar Sri Agnihotram Ramanuja Thathachariar says:

As women are indispensable for the growth of the society, the Veda prays to God asking for women and that they should be immensely intelligent. At one stage the Veda prays for the needs of the human race and asks for intelligent, cultured women. Men and women are, of course, equal partners in helping the growth of the society. But since a wife looks after every one in a family including the husband, she needs to have a good deal of intelligence. Since a family is sustained by a woman's intelligence, the Veda prays for intelligence to women. Intelligence alone is not enough: culture is also a must, says the Veda:

*purandhiyoshaa jaayataam striyuvatipriyaa bhavukaa  
Priya bhavukaa yuvaa pumaanapriyo bhavukaa.'*

Coming from an area that set high the Mother Goddess with its chanting of *Chandi*, the status of women in his own time puzzled Vivekananda no end. Had he not himself charmed his guru Sri Ramakrishna and others by his music worshipping the Divine Mother?

And yet women were in this poor state in India. They were uneducated, given away in marriage early and locked up in domesticity, and they looked prematurely old, 'burdened by the sorrow and struggle in time'. Or, if they were on their own, they were 'fallen women'. The first thing that struck Swami Vivekananda when he went to America was the self-confidence of the women in that land and he at once knew the source: education.

### Womanhood, the Indian Ideal

Swami Vivekananda did not want a clone of the western woman for India. He knew that Indian womanhood was a carrier of the peerless culture of the land. Women here should not lose their cultural moorings which gave us the strong base of the family unit. In his address delivered at the Shakespeare Club House, in Pasadena, California, on January 18, 1900, Swami Vivekananda was subjected to questions on Indian women as at that time the Christian preachers used to



Dr. Prema Nandakumar is a devotee from Srirangam, Tamil Nadu. She has several publications to her credit, and regularly reviews books for The Vedanta Kesari and other journals. □

make a big hue and cry about the child widow phenomenon. Indeed that day some persons wanted him to speak on Indian women so that they could show him at a disadvantage. One questioner said in a challenging tone: 'Has your philosophy and religion lifted your women above our women?'

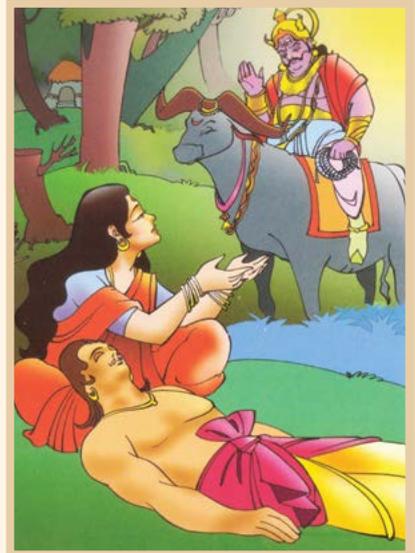
Unfazed, Swamiji proceeded to speak on Indian women that day, a speech of which we all are proud today [see Swamiji's *Complete Works*, 2:411-26]. After giving the audience an idea of the vastness of the nation, the various races who makes up a vast sea of humanity with eighteen languages (not mere dialects) and the divisions of caste, the Swami said that Indian women were indeed subject to certain social restrictions. But then this was not unique, for each nation has its own ways of tradition and life-style. Nations also have their own shaping ideals:

Now, the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first, and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother... In the West, the woman is 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 homes: the wife must be subordinate to her. See all the difference of ideas.

Having presented a sheet-anchor for the family down the generations in the mother, with the daughter-in-law taking over automatically when the mother-in-law passes away, Indian genius set about making woman responsible for domestic felicity. And where a family is run well, there is good for the society at large as well. Staying at home,

the Indian woman was put in charge of the home-treasures, the cultural heritage of India. So strong has been this sense of responsibility that the Indian woman does not easily let go of received customs.

Sri Aurobindo speaks of Kuladharmā as one of the factors that have sustained the Indian culture despite the internal and external attempts to derail it. He names four instruments of order which have held the Hindu society together: An 'ever enlarging number of authorized scriptures', kuladharmā, priesthood and guru param-paras. Of these, the guardian of kuladharmā has always been the woman. She has been in charge of the family and even if the husband or son has gone out on hunting, business or for



war, she has kept the home-fires burning and brought up the next generation in the ideals for which the Indian nation is famous. The continuity of traditions has been her gift to modern India.

Way back in the days of the Mahabharata, the Pandavas and Draupadi were in exile. To them came Rishi Markandeya and recounted tales of spiritual heroism that had been acted out 'long, long ago'. Among the stories are that of Savitri-Satyavan and Nala-

Damayanti. From this we can gauge how far back in history goes Indian's woman-power. Yet, even today their names evoke the *utsaha* of the modern woman to walk in their way, empower herself with yoga as Savitri, or get a defeated husband back to his original station like Damayanti.

### In Modern Times

It was not very long ago that the Indian independence movement under Gandhi's leadership saw thousands of men court imprisonment. What happened to their families? Repeatedly the woman left behind in charge of the house went through all the indignities and uncertainties of being the wife of a jailed man but she fed the children by herself toiling at home and outside, and brought up the children in the shadow of the heroes and heroines of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This was possible because Indian women have been rooted in religion and have held on to a firm faith in the Supreme Being. Since in India the sacred and the secular are beautifully, irrevocably intertwined, one has helped sustain the other.

Take the lambent faith the Indian woman exhibits towards trees even today. With the same faith that Savitri had in the guidance of the Supreme and her own determination, women perform the Vat Savitri Vrata in Maharashtra. This occurs on the full moon day of the month of Jyeshtha (May-June). Hindu women worship the banyan tree and pray for their husband's long life. Considered holy, the banyan tree is never injured. There is the gooseberry tree which is worshipped too. Is there a tree which is not worshipped as holy in India?

Though times have changed and the western breeze has blown away such healthy beliefs, it is touching to see women cling

to them. Perhaps this holding on to the beliefs of our ancients gave us the famous Chipko Movement to stop de-forestation. The Movement was no recent phenomenon. It is traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when hundreds of persons belonging to the Bishnoi community led by Amrita Devi hugged the trees and prevented loggers from cutting them down with axes. This happened in the village of Khejrali in Rajasthan. In the 'seventies of the last century women came up again in the Himalayan region and successfully turned the tide till green cover returned to the hills. Women have considered the trees holy because they are also the providers of livelihood to the villagers. The religious spirit of women was able to help conservation of the environment. Recently (July 7, 2012) Sujoy Dhar wrote in *India Current Affairs* the heart-warming news about such a brave stand by women:

Under the green canopy of towering Sal trees, a small white shrine is home to a clutter of baked earth animal idols. Phoolmani, 45, a tribal woman in eastern India's state of Odisha, worships here every day. In the silence of this forest, which is a primary source of sustenance for Phoolmani, who lives in the Budhikhamari cluster of villages on the edge of Baripada town in Mayurbhanj district, faith meets livelihood options.

For women belonging to local tribes like Santhal, Kolha and Lodha, making Sal leaf plates is one of the key income generating activities. They also collect mahua flowers, mushrooms and other non-timber forest products. 'This forest belongs to us. It offers us our livelihood. Here, among these trees, we also pray to our gods. They protect us, just as we, in turn, protect the forest by guarding it all day in rotational groups,' states Phoolmani, emphatically.

Interestingly, Indian women, even when they are abroad, do their best to keep their

cultural moorings intact and thereby keep alive the message of our classical heroes and heroines. I have come across housewives in the United States celebrating the various Hindu festivals with joy, bringing people together and replicating the Indian ethos, whether it is Varalakshmi vrata, the Navratri, the Krishna Janmashtami or Vinayaka Chaturthi. One hundred years ago the Indian youth was becoming totally alienated from the treasury of love, heroism, faith and self-sacrifice conveyed through stories related in the two epics and many Puranas. Sister Nivedita watched the jettisoning of India's great past by the educated Indians, but she did not lose hope because she had full faith in the Indian woman. It was she who revealed to us how women—rich or poor, educated or illiterate—had been the custodians of Indian culture. In the preface to her *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, she said:

And in the life of every child amongst the Hindu higher castes, there comes a time when, evening after evening, hour after hour, his grandmother pours into his ears these memories of old.

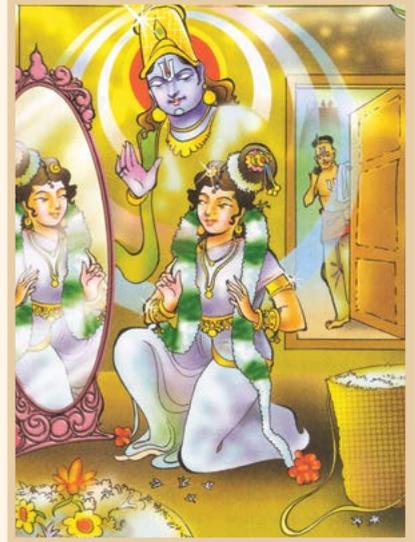
This is why she would never call Indian women as ever having been illiterate. They had imbibed the best in the Indian tradition and strove to bring up their children as a Rama or Krishna, Arjuna or Karna, Sita or Savitri.

### Rekindling and Reaffirming the Ideal

As we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> Jayanti of Swami Vivekananda, it becomes imperative for the Indian woman to strive hard and retain her superior position as the custodian of the nation's culture. In no other land do we have role-models as in India: there is verily a roll call of good and great women who have faced life's problems boldly and sent a sterling message down the generations. They were thrown into the cauldron of terrifying problems, yet, none,

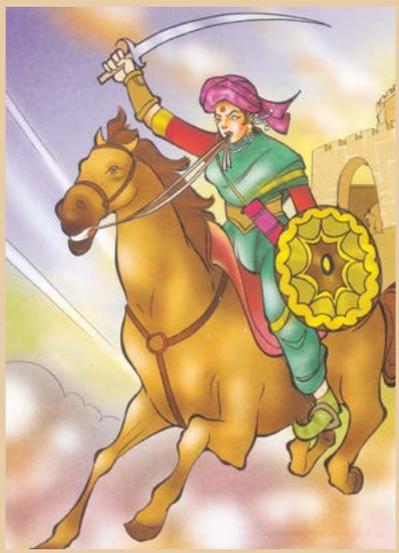
not one heroine did contemplate suicide. They never took the easy way out, whether it was Sita, Kunti, Devayani or Kannagi. No, not even Ahalya who had allowed herself to be violated in a moment of weakness. But by sheer tapasya and self-denial, she retrieved her prime position as a chaste woman and even today we remember their names daily to be rid of any sins performed knowingly or unknowingly: Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari.

It is an amazing phenomenon that meditating upon our great past, women have continued to preserve the best in our culture. It could be the rangoli patterns she makes daily in front of her house, at least a tiny one, bringing a sense of beauty and holiness to



an apparently mundane activity; the dressing up of her children as Krishnas and Ramas for this or that festival; the waving of auspicious arti lights when bringing a bride home; the singing of lullabies that speak of Krishna's pranks or Kausalya's love. Never, never will she sing of babies on the tree top cradle which falls down when a bough breaks or Jack and Jill injuring themselves when they went up the hill. It is religion that has ruled the Indian woman's world all these millennia; and they

give all the images she needs to bring up her children as healthy citizens, physically and mentally. In spite of some deluded feminists, she has retained her faith in being an affectionate daughter, a *saha-dharma-chari* as a wife, a love that has no tangle as a mother and a guardian of the needy and the underprivileged as a woman. Her culture has taught her to suffer for a good cause; and if we have to suffer, it is worthwhile to suffer for the sake of Indian culture. This suffering would be



due to physical and spiritual heroism and such suffering is always welcome. Haven't we thrilled to read Swami Vivekananda speak of the Rani of Jhansi? She suffered, she died, but what if?

This mild Hindu race produces fighting women from time to time. Some of you may have heard of the

woman (Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi) who, during the Mutiny of 1857, fought against the

English soldiers and held her own ground for two years—leading modern armies, managing batteries and always charging at the head of her army. This queen was a Brahmin girl.

Even today we sing of her and receive the needed strength of purpose from the powerful poem on the warrior-queen by Subhadrakumari Chauhan:

The throne got shook, and the tension erupted among the Raajvanshs, the royal heirs of the throne, In aged India, a new wave of youth was spreading, All the inhabitants of India had realized the worth of their lost freedom, All of them had decided to get rid of the British rule, The old swords started glittering again like new ones in the form of the freedom movement in 1857. From the mouths of the Bandelas and the Harbolas (Religious singers of Bandelkhand), we heard the tale of the courage of the Queen of Jhansi relating how gallantly she fought like a man against the British intruders: such was the Queen of Jhansi.<sup>1</sup>

We would do well to remember that the parampara continues for Subhadrakumar Chauhan (1904-1948) was herself a freedom fighter. She was in the Non-Cooperation Movement and was the first satyagrahi to be arrested in Nagpur. With a glorious track-record as the carrier of the best in Indian tradition and culture as was demonstrated to us by the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, the Indian woman has a tremendous responsibility in shaping the future. With the Mother's blessings, she will succeed. □



#### References

- 1 Translated by Qazi Muhammad Ahkam  
सिंहासन हिल उठे राजवंशों ने भृकुटी तानी थी,  
बूढ़े भारत में आई फिर से नयी जवानी थी,  
गुमी हुई अज़ादी की कीमत सबने पहचानी थी,

दूर फिरंगी को करने की सबने मन में ठीनी थी।  
चमक उठी सन सत्तावन में, वह तलवार पुरानी थी,  
बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी,  
खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी॥