

# **Vivekananda's Vision of Women**

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I GREW UP READING Swami Vivekananda's speeches and writings. For a child just beginning its teenage journey it was thrilling to read his works. It felt as if Swamiji was in the very room with me, talking, telling me to be impossibly good, generous, and kind. I was inspired to seek the divine light within and thought in my naivety that if I wished long and hard enough, with my eyes tightly shut and sitting in a meditation pose, I just might achieve it one day. Ever since I read that the 'Master appears when one is ready', I tried to ready myself by praying earnestly.

Swamiji had a proper understanding of India's great spiritual heritage, so he restored my sense of pride in being a woman and in being born in this hallowed country, where it is said that the gods come down to walk among the people. I was stirred as much by his oratory as by his vision of life, by his conviction in the innate goodness of all human beings, and most important of all, by the power in his words. Little did I know then that I was gently guided by Swamiji, beyond what mere mortal eyes can perceive, towards that very destiny that he charted for every woman, man, and child of the world.

## **Women Today**

Swamiji wanted women to be the 'living embodiment of the Divine Mother'.<sup>1</sup> In these few words lie Truth in its entirety. 'Living' presupposes that one is not dead, neither physically, mentally, intellectually, nor spiritually. It implies that we have the ability to think for ourselves, to discern the kernel of Truth by sifting it through the

sands of gross thoughts to finally accept it. And this 'living' is possible only when women are allowed to gain a comprehensive education. In the Upanishads one finds Gargi boldly challenging the sage Yajnavalkya in a discussion about the subtle doctrine of Brahman.

'I should very much like our women to have your intellectuality' (5.412), said Swamiji to Western women. The education of women was a priority for him because it would enable women to solve their own problems independently and therefore more appropriately. Swamiji believed that if such education was imparted to women, the world would be a better place: 'There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing' (6.328).

Women today face more challenges than ever before. Education, which was considered a rarity during Swamiji's time, is now mandatory. But along with education come great responsibilities. These days women occupy some of the top positions in society, be it in politics, the corporate world, law, arts, or business. With employment come economic freedom and the thrill of new money, which underlies the personal qualities of most women and the decisions they end up making. Clearly it gives a young woman a voice to speak with—the ring of a young woman's voice is impressive when she is sure of herself. Elite education, freshly learned skills, supportive parents, and her own earned money have given her a place to stand; and she does not plan to back down, now or in the future.

Indian women are seen as embodiments of everything that is good and pious. Men might have physical power, but women have the power of forbearance. Tremendous blessings are hidden in forbearing, every saint worth his salt knows this. ‘Give me the miseries of this world’, cries out the saint, knowing full well that it is through the experience of misery that God’s presence is felt and the goal is approached. The ideal of Indian women is austerity and purity. Any attempt to deviate them from this ideal, as the attempt to educate them without the basis of a spiritual culture, becomes an imminent failure. We are not embodied as men and women just to satisfy our baser needs, but we are human beings meant to cherish and love each other.

### ***From Victims to ‘in Control’***

With the secularization of education and a constant pressure at the workplace, with all the challenges and opportunities that the present world offers, Indian women are feeling increasingly stressed. Unfortunately, society has not kept pace with the social expectations at home. It is this contrast, this conflict that is causing stress. There is a lack of social support and proper infrastructure. Men have settled into familiar roles and women have to compete in the work environment, and that of course without neglecting their roles as wives, mothers, and citizens. So, while their sense of self-esteem and confidence has increased in several fields, it has also added a lot of extra work and stress. This has led to fractured relationships, which finally makes us question the prevailing value systems.

Cultural ambiguity resulting from changing gender roles is found at four different levels: (i) In the myth of ideal images of male and female, (ii) in the documented and scientific understanding of the social and physical world, (iii) in the institutional structures of

communication that express either equality or hierarchy, and (iv) in the psychology of the individual who selectively combines male and female traits. History and cross-cultural research reveals a gradual transformation of consciousness in society. Human beings now have a greater opportunity not to have their lives limited by cultural elements that no longer hold place in society. Societal structures have headed for a massive reconstruction due to rapid scientific and technological advances. Therefore, women are determined to move from being victims to being in control of their lives and their dreams.

The move from oppressive consciousness to self-realized consciousness is a very important journey for women; it frees them from patterns that cast them and their male counterparts in unproductive roles. Women have boldly redefined their boundaries with rare wit and sensitive acumen, refusing to be trapped within the two poles of a generalized attitude: the wicked negative—like a wanton woman—and the super positive—like the mother. They have found the courage of their convictions and have dared to dream dreams and visualize grander visions. Women recognize that they are closer to nature and therefore seek a more comprehensive and cooperative approach to life situations than violent and direct confrontations.

That is the reason why Swamiji sought to make Sita the highest ideal for Indian women to emulate. Sita sacrificed her affluence when she walked with Rama into the forests, her pride when she walked into the fire, her ego when she walked out of the palace. And at every step of the way she reminded Rama of his duty and kept him firmly on the path of dharma. She taught him how to make a home out of nothing in the forests; she reminded him of the freshness and joy of living when she sent him chasing a deer; she even sent him a reminder that she would

not sneak like a thief out of Lanka, but that Rama must come to take her home—it was his duty. It was also she who reminded him, when Mother Earth opened for her departure, that his time to leave had arrived as well.

Sita belongs to Mother Earth; her patience, understanding, forgiveness, and benevolence spring from that eternal source. We too belong to the same source. We are the ones who make reparations, who hold things together—knit one, purl two. We are constantly reminded of this in dreams and in stories. We are surrounded by images and urges, where nature wants us to see who we truly are and if we are ready to join her yet. We are meant to be permanent residents and not just tourists in her territory, for this is our motherland and our inheritance at the same time. There is an ancient saying that if you follow a powerful person long enough, someday you too will become powerful in your right.

We women are not afraid and we crave our reunion, because this is our birthright. Why else would you see so many women sitting humbly and patiently at every possible *satsang*, religious congregation, and bhajans in urban or rural areas of India? We are searching for that Mother that we once knew, seeking reunion with her once more, praying to a miraculous and loving force that exists beyond the boundaries of ego.

We women are building a motherland, each one with our plot of soil and family, our working, our spreading love in larger and larger circles—gradually, devotedly. Until one day it will be a resurrected land, a spiritual land that will coexist



'Sita's Agni Pravesh', by Sarada Ukil (1932)

with other worlds. It is a world that is made out of a mother's love, her tears, and her laughter. It is a world worth making, a world worth living in, a world we have to strive to achieve.

### ***The Spiritual Journey***

Swamiji said: 'It is very difficult to understand why in this country [India] so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious self is present in all beings' (7.214). Swamiji viewed women exactly as he viewed men, as individuals with a spiritual destiny. The

Atman has neither gender nor caste nor imperfection. This is the right of every individual, this is a promise given to every individual born on earth: Self-realization. Every other pursuit pales into insignificance. No amount of material success or wealth can be compared to a single moment of spiritual bliss. God has hidden himself inside our hearts and exposed us; let us hide ourselves and expose God!

This pursuit of the Divine within is the whole idea of spirituality. We have to realize that our journey on earth is but a short journey, a transit between dimensions, and the quicker we realize it, the faster we would proceed. And making every individual turn towards Divinity is also right, eternally right: ‘Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter,’ (1.11) said Swamiji.

In India women are considered mothers. Who then is our highest ideal? She, the Mother of the universe, is both our inspiration and our destiny. The ideal in India is the mother, and to become a mother women generally fast and pray for days, perhaps years. Every child born through prayer is legitimate, and every child that is not born through prayer is illegitimate. Mothers go through penances and keep themselves pure through prayers and vows to bring forth a child—another soul fraught with tremendous powers for good or evil. All women are mothers first; wife, sister, aunt, daughter, and every other form of relationship stands second to her primary role of mother. It was a female sage who first found the unity of existence and laid down that doctrine in the ‘Devi Suktam’ of the Rig Veda. Thus it comes that we now say: ‘The first manifestation of God is the hand that rocks the cradle.’

In closing, I would like to leave the readers with my rendering of a story from the *Vishnu Purana*, a story that Swamiji so beautifully paraphrased in his lecture ‘Maya and Freedom’, published in *Jnana Yoga*. The sage Narada arrived at Vaikuntha and requested Vishnu to help him understand the whole concept of maya and how to remain without being trapped in its coils. Vishnu smiled and asked Narada to bring him a glass of water. Narada stepped out to bring a glass of water and found himself shipwrecked on earth. A local merchant’s daughter fell in love with him and married him. She gave him children and they lived prosperously, until one day she too left her mortal coil. Narada found himself living his twilight years in a hut when one evening he heard a knock on his door. He opened it and found Vishnu standing at the threshold smiling and asking: ‘Why Narada, what are you doing here? I asked you to bring me a glass of water. I have been waiting for you for over an hour.’ Narada had the instant realization of who and what he was, of what he was doing on earth, and also of the whole concept of maya, which he wanted to understand.

We are not human beings going through a temporary spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings going through a temporary human experience! We all carry the spark of Divinity within us, but we cover our divine nature with negative thoughts and acts. God is waiting for us to join her. One day we too will be asked the same question: ‘What took you so long? I have been waiting for you. What kept you? Will we have our answers ready? How many of us realize this and try to live a divine life?’



## Reference

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 7.214.