



Swami Vivekanand's Vision for Women

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“If you do not raise the women, who are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other way to rise...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... There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness”. -The Complete Works of Swami Vivekanand (CWSV)/Volume7/Conversations and Dialogues/XVIII.

Vivekananda, a follower of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, gained worldwide recognition following his historic address at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. There, he introduced Vedanta principles and India's spiritual legacy to a Western audience. Born NarendranathDatta in 1863, he swiftly became a prominent figure in India's spiritual and philosophical landscape, impacting millions globally with his profound teachings. Emerging as a dynamic leader and advocate for social change during a time of significant cultural and intellectual ferment in India, Vivekananda addressed a wide array of societal issues, including the empowerment of women. Central to his vision was the belief in the inherent divinity and potential of every individual, irrespective of gender. Vivekananda stressed the importance of women's status for the well-being of the world, suggesting that progress would be hindered without their active participation. Furthermore, he highlighted women's innate strength and ability for inner growth, encouraging them to embrace their spiritual potential as a universal path to freedom. He vehemently opposed the notion of female subservience, advocating for women's equal rights and opportunities and acknowledging their indispensable role in societal advancement and harmony.



In Indian tradition, womanhood is revered as a symbol of strength, courage, and resilience, embodying Shakti, the boundless energy of femininity. Motherhood is held as the purest expression of human emotion, and therefore, women are uniquely elevated to the status of deity within Indian civilization. “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”- CWSV/Volume 8/Lectures and Discourses/Women of India/Delivered at the Shakespeare Club House, in Pasadena, California/January 18, 1900. Swami Vivekananda sought to redefine and reinforce these ancient ideals by igniting social consciousness and championing women's rights. He urged women from all backgrounds to nurture moral and intellectual strength, leading lives of integrity. Vivekananda passionately upheld the Vedic belief in the inherent divine power of every woman, stressing the essential role of women's rights in India's progress and attributing the nation's decline in part to the neglect and disregard for Shakti. He advocated for women's access to education and spiritual development, rejecting the notion that religious texts or doctrines were solely responsible for their plight, but rather identifying a historical period of degradation where marginalized groups, including women, suffered. Drawing from the richness of Vedic and Upanishadic heritage, he asserted that women held a dominant place in our society and were not subjected to prejudice on the basis of their educational attainment or social engagement. He believed that empowering women through education and spiritual growth would lead to the revival of the nation's strength and prosperity. He envisioned a society where women were revered, respected, and afforded equal opportunities to contribute to the advancement of the country. He advocated for an education for women that focused on fostering their character, strengthening their willpower, enhancing their intelligence, and most importantly, enabling them to become self-reliant. This article explores Vivekananda's insights and aspirations for the women of India.

“...our right of interference is limited entirely to giving education. Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. No one can or ought to do this for them. And our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world...I have seen both sides of the world, and I know that the race that produced Sitâ—even if it only dreamt of her—has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on the earth...Why, to the women of this country, I would say exactly what I say to the men. Believe in India and in our 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." - CWSV/Volume 5/Interviews/On Indian Women –Their Past, Present, and Future/PrabuddhaBharata, December, 1898.

Vivekananda envisioned the advancement of women as integral to the progress of the nation, contending that their empowerment and equitable opportunities would not only benefit them individually but also significantly enrich societal development. He noted the myriad challenges and discrimination faced by women during his era, including limited access to education and relegation to subordinate roles within both familial and societal contexts. Vivekananda ardently advocated for the education and independence of women, recognizing their potential as potent catalysts for societal transformation. He asserted that true progress cannot be achieved solely through the efforts of men but necessitates the harnessing of female capabilities as well. Grounded in Vedantic principles, he revered women as embodiments of the divine mother and affirmed the inherent divinity within all individuals. Vivekananda decried the systemic oppression that had reduced women to mere instruments of reproduction, emphasizing the imperative of valuing women and affording them equal opportunities to contribute to the advancement of society. He underscored the importance of acknowledging women's innate capacity to shape a brighter future for both families and the nation at large.

Vivekanandemphasised that respect for women is ingrained in Indian culture, which values their active role on equal footing with men. He highlighted the historical context of the Vedic period, during which women enjoyed unrestricted access to education and opportunities for progress. Vivekananda advocated for a contextual examination of the importunate decline in women's status in medieval and contemporary India, urging a departure from Eurocentric perspectives and criticisms. He attributed the current plight of women to centuries of foreign domination, which compelled society to adopt protective customs. However, the misappropriation of these customs contributed to the erosion of the indigenous culture and the diminishing status of women. Vivekananda diverged from social reformers who laid blame on religion for women's inequality, asserting instead that the gradual distortion of religious principles led to the rise of orthodoxy and superstition, thereby perpetuating gender disparities.



Vivekananda contended that women deserve equal opportunities for spiritual growth and enlightenment, condemning societal constraints on women's education as unjust. Drawing from Vedanta philosophy, he asserted the unity of consciousness among all living beings, irrespective of outward appearances, thereby negating any inherent differences between genders in the ultimate truth of Parabrahman. He posited that true empowerment arises from recognizing this shared consciousness and dismantling societal barriers rooted in gender. Vivekananda underscored the significance of contemporary women pursuing spiritual education, drawing parallels with revered female figures from the Vedic and Upanishadic periods such as Maitreyi and Gargi, who engaged in philosophical discourse on Parabrahman. He refuted the notion of women's intellectual and spiritual inferiority, arguing that such assertions emerged during periods of moral decline rather than being intrinsic to sacred scriptures. His teachings emphasized the imperative of gender equality in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and self-realization.

Vivekananda stressed the essential role of liberty in fostering growth and progress, asserting that women, when afforded opportunities, possess the capacity to shape their own destinies. He proclaimed that ideal womanhood is synonymous with complete independence, contending that undue influence from men often results in mistreatment of women. Vivekananda advocated for education as a means to empower women, granting them the freedom to define their roles within society. He believed that the active involvement of women across all spheres of life would greatly enhance societal well-being.

According to Vivekananda, the epitome of womanhood in India is the mother figure. He contended that esteemed individuals are typically born into households led by learned and devout mothers, as the term "Mother" embodies the concept of divine and potent Shakti. Vivekananda advocated for women's education to encompass not only academic knowledge but also moral virtues and character development. He underscored the significance of nurturing the ideal of chastity, deeply rooted in Indian cultural ethos, to cultivate resilience and fortitude in women. Vivekananda also highlighted the enduring legacy of Sita, symbolizing virtuous, pure, and divine attributes in women. He argued that modernizing women without upholding Sita's ideals would result in a deficiency, evident in everyday experiences.



Vivekananda advocated for women to pursue modern scientific knowledge alongside spirituality, striving for an educational model that mirrors the virtues of Vedic women. He suggested incorporating the principles of renunciation into girls' education from an early age, alongside secular learning, and advocated for a shift away from cultural norms that promote teenage pregnancy and early marriage for daughters. He supported the revival of Shraddha (faith or self-confidence) in young girls while emphasizing the importance of embracing renunciation. “ ...if religion exalts Brahmacharya for woman, it does exactly the same for man.” – Interview, PrabuddhaBharata, December, 1898.

Vivekananda sought to establish a women's math (monastery) in conjunction with a girls' school, intending to provide spiritual education incorporating practices such as Japa, worship, and meditation, alongside instruction in various subjects including literature, Sanskrit, English, sewing, cooking, and household management. The envisioned plan involved appointing educated widows and Brahmacharinis as instructors and establishing centers in towns and villages to promote female education. Students would be guided by the principle of Brahmacharya as the fundamental ideal, with spirituality, sacrifice, and self-control as guiding principles. Service, or seva dharma, would be their pledge. He emphasized that by structuring women's lives in this manner, ideal figures akin to Sita, Savitri, and Gargi would emerge. While Vivekananda admired the independence and vitality of Western women, he also observed a dearth of spiritual depth compared to their Indian counterparts. “There is many a burden bound with legal tightness on the shoulders of Western women that is utterly unknown to ours. We have our wrongs and our exceptions certainly, but so have they. With regard to the domestic virtues I have no hesitation in saying that our Indian methods have in many ways the advantage over all others.” - Interview, PrabuddhaBharata, December, 1898. He critiqued Western concepts of masculinity and femininity, asserting that in Vedic tradition, the completeness of humanity is contingent upon the harmonious union of both genders. Vivekananda rejected any notion of inherent spiritual disparity between men and women, advocating instead for unity and cooperation. He contended that genuine harmony arises from embracing diversity and collaborating synergistically. Recognizing and valuing each other's distinct strengths fosters a more cohesive and prosperous society. Vivekananda posited that true self-realization necessitates the cultivation of freedom, self-reliance, and responsibility in equal measure.



Swami Vivekananda's vision for women's empowerment, reflecting a profound societal maturity, remains as pertinent today as it was in his era. His teachings serve as a continual source of inspiration for countless women globally, urging them to strive for excellence, overcome obstacles, and assert their rightful place in society. He firmly believed that empowering women through education and spirituality could foster a more balanced and prosperous society, where women would actively shape the world with their distinctive perspectives and capabilities. Presently, women in India are making significant strides across diverse domains, contributing substantially to the nation's progress. Vivekananda's advocacy for women's empowerment continues to motivate both individuals and policymakers to pursue gender equality and inclusivity. Notably, there has been a marked improvement in literary and educational standards, accompanied by a narrowing of gender disparities in the male-to-female ratio, owing to increased literacy rates and evolving societal attitudes. Women are now actively engaged in social and political spheres, while incidents of gender discrimination and violence have declined amidst this shift towards equality. Overall, the empowerment of Indian women has not only enhanced their quality of life but also yielded positive impacts on the nation as a whole. By recognizing the inherent divinity and potential within every woman, Vivekananda laid the groundwork for a more just and harmonious world, where gender equality is not merely an aspiration but a tangible reality. With more women breaking barriers and excelling across various fields, the future holds promise for Indian women.



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