

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: THE IDEAS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA IN RELEVANCE TO WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS AND CONTEMPORARY POLICY

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Abstract:

Women Empowerment is still a burning issue in India. A large number of women are still living in miserable condition due to their illiteracy. Dowry system, Rape and molestation, Killings of Girl-child, Wage discrimination – these age old dogmas still very much present in Indian society. Swamiji recognizes the way to come out of this situation is empowering women through education. So he says, “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary”. From this perspective the study attempts to highlight the philosophical ideas of Swami Vivekananda on women empowerment and aims to perceive its relevance to some western philosopher as well as to present National Policy for Women Empowerment of India (2001). From this angle of vision the objectives of this study have been stated. The method of the study is historical research following a qualitative approach. There have been taken so many different types of aspects through which the views on women empowerment have been established. The study has been covered by a vast documentary analysis and it has been based on the philosophical thoughts & ideas of Swamiji, views of some western philosophers and present Indian policy on women empowerment. The Works of Swami Vivekananda have been taken as Primary Source of data and the Works of several authors on Swamiji sets up the Secondary Source of data. In course of Comparison of the data from different sources it was seen that ideas of Swamiji are very much relevant to that of western philosophers & present Indian policy.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Vedanta Philosophy, Western Philosophers, National Policy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda, a great thinker and reformer of India, thought of Education as a man making process which was also the very mission of his life. In spite of being a monk Swamiji never ignored the education of women. This is a very important aspect of Vivekananda in his ideas of education. He was of the opinion that women who were the half of the total population could never be marginalised. Women were to be given education that would enable them to solve their own problems in their own way. There were many people who regarded women as a gate to hell and Swamiji condemned them. He thought that men and women were to work together for building the nation and both sections should intensify to seek spiritual awareness which would pour in them the spiritual oneness of humanity and equality of vision. As a result both would be powerful friend.

Vivekananda was the first monk who defended the women's education, rights and liberties. He said that God is the omnipresent force in the universe and it was he who saw in women the manifestation of that force. So, it was assure as anything that female education should have to spread and it could not be left as secondary thing in our society. Because, female education was as important as man's education to him. Swamiji remarked that women had many problems and these problems were grave in nature. These could not be solved by the magic wand of the world education. He advised our women to be fearless, educated, pious and emancipated which would raise their children to the height to glorify the name of the country. According to him education should to teach us how to serve the mankind as a whole – the hungry, the ignorant and the toiling masses. In this context he mentioned that western science and technology could never be set aside. These were also necessary for our national advancement.

Some differences are seen between man and women even now, such as in education rate, in wage-discrimination, in proportionate representation in the Parliament and Assembly, in miserable condition of widow. Apart from these, dowry system acts as a hindrance before the development of the nation. This system is not restricted in the lower classes of people. It is ridiculous to see that even educated persons do not hesitate to follow the path for some trifle material gain. To avoid this problem women should be given power economically, educationally so that women are not compelled to use the legal provisions to protect them from the onslaught of the husband and inmates of in-law's house. Once Nehru said that one could tell the condition

of the nation by looking at the status of women. He further proposed that to awaken the people it was the women who must be awakened. What Nehru said was already in the concept of education of Vivekananda. Because Swamiji wanted girls to be freed from chains to say their own problems by themselves and necessarily it was his answer that through women education, it could be done and a new era might usher in. Swamiji believed that without respecting women no nation could have been great. This was the lesson which Swamiji visualised could not be achieved without the propagation of education of women with their empowerment.

OBJECTIVES

Followings are the objectives of the present study –

- To explain the ideas of swami Vivekananda about women empowerment.
- To compare swamiji's ideas on women empowerment with western philosophers.
- To study the contemporary women empowerment policy of India.
- To draw a relevance of swamiji's ideas on women empowerment in present context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the ideas of swamiji on women empowerment ?
2. What are the western philosopher's views on women empowerment ?
3. What is the National Policy of India for Women Empowerment (2001) as given by NMEW ?
4. To what extent the contemporary strategies on women empowerment is influenced by swami vivekananda's ideas ?

DELIMITATIONS

1. The study has been confined to swamiji's philosophical ideas on women empowerment only.
2. Only social, economical and political aspects has been taken into consideration in the present study.
3. Only some western philosopher have been taken for the purpose of comparison.

4. The contemporary policy has been confined to The National Policy of India for Women Empowerment (2001) only.

METHODOLOGY

The method of the study is historical research following a qualitative approach. The study has been conducted as follows :

- Collection of data from primary and secondary sources.
- Review of the reliable and valid sources.
- Comparison of data from different sources.
- Making generalization through verification of authenticity and veracity of information and evidence from the sources.

SOURCES USED

1. Primary Sources :

- Works of Swami Vivekananda.
- Lectures of Swami Vivekananda.
- Letters of Swami Vivekananda.

2. Secondary Sources :

- Works on Swami Vivekananda & his philosophy by several authors.
- The articles and reports on swamiji's ideas of women empowerment by different writers published in news paper, books, journals and websites.
- The views of several western philosophers on women empowerment, given in books & websites.
- The contemporary National policies for Women Empowerment (2001), given in the website of NMEW (The National Mission for Empowerment of Women).

PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women – “Be Emboldened”; “Embodiment of Goddess of Mother”

Vivekananda declared that the western ideal of womanhood is wife, while the eastern ideal is mother. “The very peculiarity of Hindu women which they have developed and which is the ideal of their life, is that of the mother”. A nation that has educated itself to look upon God as Mother has learnt to invest its view of woman with the utmost tenderness and reverence. Swami Vivekananda is the first monk to uphold and do work for the freedom and equality of women and realizing her importance for the functioning of home and society.

Swami Vivekananda had a great respect for women. He said that trampling on women could not bring desired change and welfare of the mankind. So woman education occupied a large part of his educational philosophy which was vastly influenced by Vedanta Philosophy. That was why Swamiji’s idea of education was far from discrimination between men and women. Vedanta’s view of Atman had no sex and therefore Swamiji was against the distinction between male and female. He advised us to see women as the manifestation of Brahman. In his opinion female education system should not be different; rather women should be given education like men as both were equally important in building a proud nation. He made us think that chastity of women was above anything else because it might help to have strong character which would enable them to fight against the odds of life which might come in their way. He supported the ancient education system of India in which culture of the nation could be taught. He was against any foreign model of education because Indian culture and traditions were found absent there. So he suggested the old system for women also.

Swami Vivekananda stressed on pragmatic aspect in education. So he gave attention to the subjects like Science, literature, Sanskrit, grammar, English, cooking, sewing, house-keeping and domestic education along with physical education for women. To make female selfless education would play the role of an eye-opener. Making ideal characters should be the motto of our education. Swamiji proposed for ‘Naree Math’ where girls, widows and brahmacharinis might be taught and be given responsibility to them. So that they could inculcate virtues and values among the children, to prepare a new generation of people for the days to come. He never described women as ‘Abala’ because he wished to see our women to be bold enough to face any eventuality that might come in their way. Thus Swamiji wanted to empower women and he

wanted advancement of women like Maitreyi and Gargi. Thus empowering women Vivekananda wanted to see them privileged and self-dependent. To swamiji women is as good as men. Women is 'divinity' and 'shakti'. At the same breadth Swamiji spoke against polygamy and child marriage which according to him were the primary causes of the miserable condition of the Indian women. While speaking of child marriage he told us that it was often seen that motherhood in early age invited the death for the mother and motherless children were nothing but beggars. For this reason he wanted the banishment of child marriage. At the same time he encouraged the practice of widow marriage. All these things were done for the uplift of the women and giving empowerment to them.

VIEWS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS

Plato: Plato emphasised on women empowerment. Women should have the same physical and educational training. They should know the art of war. The main aim of education was that each member of the society should undertake his work and responsibilities. Plato believed that women are equal to men and that, although some women are physically smaller or weaker and some women are physically equal to men. Therefore those women who are physically strong should be allowed to learn the same skills that men do. In his book Republic Plato describes how male and female receive the same education and be given the same duties in society as given to the male member. These people are the ones who will be in charge his republic which would be an ideal society, where philosophers are the kings. In other words, who know what is good for the people and for the mankind and take their decisions based on that knowledge.

Socrates: In Socrates opinion, in an ideal city men and women will be used for the same purposes. 'We educated the men both physically and intellectually; we shall have to do the same for women, and train them for war as well, and treat them in the same way.'

Friedrich Froebel: Women are to recognize that childhood and womanliness (the care of childhood and the life of women) are inseparably connected; that they form a unity, and that God and nature have placed the protection of the human plant in their hands. At the present stage of culture nothing is more pressingly required than the cultivation of every human power for the

arts of peace and the work of higher civilization. The culture of individuals, and therefore of the whole nation, depends in great part upon the earliest care of childhood. On that account women, as one-half of mankind, have to undertake the most important part of the problems of the time – problems that men are not able to solve. If but one-half of the work be accomplished, then our epoch, like all others, will fail to reach the appointed goal. As educators of mankind, the women of the present time have the highest duty to perform, while hitherto they have been scarcely more than the beloved mothers of human beings.

Russell: Russell states that everyone should have an equal opportunity at an education. "What I do mean is that the educational system we must aim at producing in the future is one which gives to every boy and girl an opportunity for the best that exists". Education should be available for everyone beginning with nursery schools. The system, however, should be democratic but not uniform. Russell states, "It would be disastrous to insist upon a dead level of uniformity. Some boys and girls are cleverer than others, and can derive more benefit from higher education". Those who have more of a chance of going farther in life should be given that opportunity. The uniformity also should not be demanded because the level of teachers varies. "It is impossible that everybody should be taught by the few best teachers". Therefore, according to Russell, education should be available for everyone; however opportunities should not be limited because it would be undemocratic to exclude someone.

Although Russell clearly states that an equal opportunity for education should be available for both males and females, he proceeds to state that the educational theories he will introduce are in regards to males only. Accordingly he states, "the whole educational problem, where women are concerned, has been distorted by the desire for sex equality; there has been an attempt to acquire the same education as that given to boys, even where it was by no means good". The ideal of educating a female to be a "fine lady" disrupts the more modern view of education and the conflicts of which are something that Bertrand Russell avoids addressing.

Roman Philosopher Musonius Rufus: Women have received from the gods the same ability to reason that men have. We men employ reasoning in our relations with others and so far as possible in everything we do, whether it is good or bad, or noble or shameful. Likewise women have the same senses as men, sight, hearing, smell, and all the rest. Likewise each has the same parts of the body, and neither sex has more than the other. In addition, it is not men alone who

possess eagerness and a natural inclination towards virtue, but women also. Women are pleased no less than men by noble and just deeds, and reject the opposite of such actions.

Engels and Marx: Engels and Marx felt that the suppression of women resulted from the new relations of production. But women made gains after capitalism became the dominant form of production, to the extent that they were equal workers. As this process continues, and as socialism replaces capitalism, women will be free again. Engels said, "Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands that the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society be abolished".

Herbert Spencer: Equity knows no difference of sex. In its vocabulary the word *man* must be understood in a generic, and not in a specific sense. The law of equal freedom manifestly applies to the whole race – female as well as male. The same *a priori* reasoning which establishes that law for men, may be used with equal cogency on behalf of women. The Moral Sense, by virtue of which the masculine mind responds to that law, exists in the feminine mind as well. Hence the several rights deducible from that law must appertain equally to both sexes.

THE NATIONAL MISSION FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN (NMEW) OF INDIA

To promote the all-round Development of women and to strengthen the process which promote holistic development and empowerment of women, gender equality and gender justice, the Government of India launched the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) in 2010.

INDIAN NATIONAL POLICY FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT (2001)

The National Policy for Women Empowerment (2001) of India aims to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The objectives of the Policy are as follows –

- To create an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.

- To avail de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
- To provide equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
- To give women equal access to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- To strengthen legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- To change societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- To use a gender perspective in the mainstream developmental process.
- To abolish discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- To build and strengthen partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The exposition and analysis of the present study brings to light its constructive, practical and comprehensive character. While discussing the several aspects of Swamiji's ideas on women empowerment, we can make out a comparison between the ideas of Swamiji with those of the western thinkers and the contemporary national policies of India on women empowerment to draw a relevance of his views in the present context. We can generalize that as follows –

- Swami Vivekananda is of the opinion that women of our country should have mental and physical training through Japa and Meditation. These will help the women to increase concentration and attention to the things to be done. Likewise, Plato considered physical and educational training are first and foremost part of this dissertation. On the National Policy it is clearly stated that health care programme should be taken up with the serious note.
- Swamiji who was staunch follower of Vedanta philosophy, was against the distinction between male and female. To him, 'Atman' has no sex and as such the distinction

between men and women is significant. On the other hand Socrates, another Greek philosopher, holds that equal right for both men and women should be initiated from the very beginning of their childhood. In the same context, as stated by our National Policy it may be said that human right and fundamental freedom should be given priority.

- Swamiji thinks that Eastern ideal of women is mother. He proposes for 'Naree Math' where girls, widows and brahmacharinis may be taught and it is needless to point out that they should be given responsibilities for running the society and for maintaining the social order. This will help them to inculcate virtues and values and women should teach these to the children to prepare them for a new generation for the days to come. Froebel also opines that in the field of society and education the role of women are important as a mother because the early childhood is formed in the hands of the mother. On the National Policy it is said that it will help to create an environment through positive, economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realise their full potentials.
- Vivekananda treads on pragmatic aspect in education. So he give attention to the subject like science, literature, Sanskrit, English, cooking, sewing, house-keeping and domestic education along with physical education. On the other hand Russell believes the education should be democratic and flexible. Women should be given equal opportunity. On the National Policy it is stated that quality of education at all level should be imparted and women should be given career and vocational guidance and it is stressed on the point that women should be given employment and equal remuneration.
- Vivekananda says women have 'Divinity' and 'Shakti'. Women are as good as men, but by empowering women Swamiji believes freedom for them and privileged and self dependent. Similarly Musonius Rufus believes that women have received from the God the same ability that men have. Women possessed eagerness and more natural inclination towards virtue as men. In our National Policy it is stated that ability of women should be developed so that they can have quality education, career guidance and active participation in community practices.
- Swamiji says that women are not 'Abala' because he wishes to see our women to be bold enough to face any eventuality that may come in their way. He cites 'Maitreyi' and 'Gargi'. He also tells us about the liberty of women. Similarly Engels and Marx are of

the opinion that women are to be given liberty against suppression which is meted out to them. In this context our National Policy projects that fundamental freedom should be given to the women on the equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.

- Swamiji thinks that legal right and liberty should be afforded to the multitude of ‘Matri-shakti’. On the other hand according to Herbert Spencer laws of equal freedom and legal right are accepted with a view to empowering women. In our National Policy it is also stated that legal system is to be strengthen with a view to aiming at elimination of all sorts of discrimination against to women.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it may be asserted that from character-building to chastity of women we find Swamiji to speak. In ‘our women’ Swamiji said, “There is no chance of development of the world unless the condition of women is improved”. It is only education that can only dispel the miserable condition of women and only they can be empowered. This constructive, practical and comprehensive character which may come through education to enlighten general masses and women in particular. After visiting many countries of Europe and America he realised that it was the education that could help women to stand on their feet. Because education can make female economically sound and therefore hazards on their way will rarely appear and if appear, they will have the power to handle it. Vivekananda’s thought about women are still relevant in the context of present. Some of the western philosophers whose thought are discussed here see eye to eye with the view which is held by Swamiji. Even our present National Policy has no difference with the thought of Vivekananda and as such what is stated in our National Policy are almost similar to that of Vivekananda. If his suggestions are followed in education, a firm ground can be made where woman can stand straight and erect lifting their head high. This kind of education will surely bring peace and harmony. So it is no denying the fact that Vivekananda has crossed the limit of space and time and propounds a theory about the empowering of women and thus he becomes a world class leader and a wise guide. On this backdrop he suggested people to arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached.

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