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“Women Empowerment: Revisiting Educational Thoughts and Actions of Swami Vivekananda”

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Abstract

“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 one wing.”

Swami Vivekananda is one of the greatest thinkers and pioneers in social reform. Indian Renaissance owes much to Swami Vivekananda and he was ardent champion of women empowerment. He remarked, “Women have many and grave problems but none that cannot be solved by that magic word: education?” What does our Manu enjoin, “Daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons.” To uplift the status of women in society, he chooses education as a powerful instrument for their life process. He rightly pointed out that unless Indian women secure a respectable place in this country, the nation can never march forward. In this viewpoint, the main objective of his scheme of women education is to make them strong, fearless and conscious of their chastity and dignity. It is a well known fact the position of women is changing with the passing of time, they are coming out their homes to rein over the entire world and getting victory in every field that can be political, technical, household, medical etc. Still it is found that there is gender discrimination or many crimes are faced by them. Thus at present it is important for us to revisit the educational thoughts of Vivekananda to make the women empower. Consequently, the authors have addressed all content in the following points: Introduction of Vivekananda, Educational thoughts of Vivekananda, Historical perspective of Indian women, Women education according to Vivekananda, Programs for women empowerment, Revisit the educational thoughts of Vivekananda and Conclusion.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Educational Thoughts and Actions.

Introduction

“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 one wing.”

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda the leading spokesman for modern Hinduism in the late 19th century is known globally for his enchanting vision, spiritual wisdom of universalisation of Hinduism, a comprehensive understanding of all significant aspects of human life, societal and gender concern and national life in India. Swami Vivekananda is one such name to reckon with, whose thoughts, teachings and preaching's having been able to change the windmills of time by regenerating new hopes and aspirations among mankind. He was a great Vedic-Hindu thinker-philosopher, reformer and revolutionary saint of contemporary-modern times, who dedicated his entire life to the spiritual and social upliftment of the common man. His socio-religious approach and ideas were quite clear and universal. Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on life and education have particularly been a potent instrument for carrying out his mission of social change. If we look our past, we find that Swami Vivekananda chooses education as a powerful instrument for their life process to uplift the status of women in society, He rightly pointed out that unless Indian women secure a respectable place in this country, the nation can never march forward. In the words of Swami Vivekananda,

“Where women are respected, there the Gods delight, and where they are not, there all work and efforts come to naught.” There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness.

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Among the modern Indian reformers and leaders, who stood for complete equality of men and women, the most outstanding was Swami Vivekananda. He was highly sympathetic towards the oppressed position of Indian women and insisted on their regeneration, and argued for gender equality. His theory towards that equality was of gender interdependence so that both genders can live peacefully in the society. This was based on the Vedic notion of spiritual sex equality, in the highest reality of Parabrahman. His attitude towards femininity was markedly condescending. Since post-independent India still has problems of women which are to be solved in a meaningful way, in the Indian feminist literature, his position has much scope for using to a feminist deconstruction towards a paradigm shift in the Indian society.

Ancient Indian Women

In Indian society, woman occupies a vital position and venerable place. The Vedas glorified women as the mother, the creator, one who gives life and worshipped her as a 'Devi' or Goddess. But their glorification was rather mythical for at the same time, in India women found her totally suppressed and subjugated in a patriarchal society. Indian women through the centuries remained subjugated and oppressed because society believed in clinging on to orthodox beliefs for the brunt of violence—domestic as well as public, Physical, emotional and mental. From the period of 17th to 19th century, Women were not allowed to move freely and this led to the deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils which are as follows:

1. Sati
2. Child Marriage
3. Restriction on Widow Remarriage
4. Purdah System
5. Formal education was not for Girls.

There are certain men who took the cause of women in India. There have been many social reformers and Swami Vivekananda was one of the great personality who has helped women to gain the equal status like men in society. Swamiji said, "It is very difficult to understand why in this country 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. Due to his efforts, women achieved a lot. As compared with past, women in modern times are improving their status but in reality they have to still travel a long way.

Modern Indian Women

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by society and

her own family members. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate. The main problems of **Indian women includes:**

1. Malnutrition

Generally in India, women are the one who eat last and least in the whole family. So they eat whatever is left after men folk are satiated. As a result most of the times their food intake does not contain the nutritional value required in maintaining the healthy body. In villages, sometimes women do not get to eat the whole meal due to poverty. The UNICEF report of 1996 clearly states that the women of South Asia are not given proper care, which results in higher level of malnutrition among the women of South Asia than anywhere else in the world. This nutritional deficiency has two major consequences for women first they become anemic and second they never achieve their full growth, which leads to an unending cycle of undergrowth as malnourished women cannot give birth to a healthy baby.

2. Poor Health

The malnutrition results in poor health of women. The women of India are prejudiced from the birth itself. They are not breastfed for long. In the want of a son the women wants to get pregnant as soon as possible which decreases the caring period to the girl child whereas the male members get adequate care and nutrition. Women are not given the right to free movement that means that they cannot go anywhere on their own if they want and they have to take the permission of male member of family or have to take them along. This results in decrease in women's visit to doctor and she could not pay attention to her health as a result.

3. Maternal Mortality

The mortality rate in India is among highest in the world. As females are not given proper attention, which results in the malnutrition and then they are married at an early age which leads to pregnancies at younger age when the body is not ready to bear the burden of a child. All this results in complications, which may lead to gynecological problems, which may become serious with time and may ultimately, lead to death.

4. Lack of education

In India women education never got its due share of attention. From the medieval India women were debarred from the educational field. According to medieval perception women need just household education and this perception of medieval India still persists in villages of India even today. Girls are supposed to fulfill domestic duties and education becomes secondary for them whereas it is considered

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to be important for boys. Although scenario in urban areas has changed a lot and women are opting for higher education but majority of Indian population residing in villages still live in medieval times. The people of villages consider girls to be curse and they do not want to waste money and time on them as they think that women should be wedded off as soon as possible.

5. Mistreatment

In India violence against women is a common evil. Not just in remote parts but in cities also women bear the brunt. They are subjected to physical and mental violence. They are the one who work most but are not given their due. The woman is not safe anywhere neither at home nor at workplace. Every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death due to dowry problem. There are many laws such as The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, to protect women and punishment is severe but the conviction rate of crime against women is very low in India.

6. Female Foeticide

Today with the help of technology the sex of the unborn baby is determined and if it is a girl child then it is aborted down. Due to this, the ratio of male and female is not equal at present. As per the latest Census in the year 2011, the total female sex ratio in India is 940 per 1000 males.

These are the main problems faced by women at present. As ancient Indian women faced many problems and had no right to say anything in household affairs, the modern Indian women also facing different problems which affect their role in society. The lack of women education is the root cause of these problems. An uneducated mother cannot look after her children properly and she is not aware of the deadly diseases and their cure, which leads to the poor health of the children, she also cannot be aware for reformations needed for her empowerment.

According to the survey taken by Trust Law (a product of the Thomson Reuters Foundation), India has ranked 4th in the world in "most dangerous place for women", next to Afghanistan, Congo and Pakistan. Therefore questions arise, is really India unsafe place for women? Why they face discrimination? What is the condition of women's education? What is the Caritas approach to this problem? To resolve these serious questions, we have to turn any relevant philosophy which can be rejuvenate and restore the dignity of women. Accordingly at present Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy should be revisited for women empowerment. Vivekananda being a keen observer could distinguish the difference in perception about the status of women in the West and in India. "The ideal women 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."

Hindu Culture, Swami Vivekananda and Women

It is the Hindu culture and the Vedanta philosophy on which Vivekananda's position on women is based. The "Hindu ideal of woman" is the very ideal of woman he evolved for India. According to Vedanta philosophy, men and women and all beings are divine in their essential nature. Men and women have been endowed by nature with the organic capacity to enquire into and realize this great truth. Men and women have equal access to education. Hindu culture views all social evolutions as the process of truth into the texture of human relationships. This view of Hindu culture provides the values of freedom, equality and the dignity and the sacredness of the human personality. As per the Vedic philosophy, men and women are essentially the ever pure, ever free, ever illumined Atman, the sexless Self. Associated with body and mind, this Atman becomes conditioned as male and female. In the realization of manhood of man by man and the womanhood of woman by woman, in the context of the equality of the marriage relationship, Hindu culture recognizes a significant experience of spiritual education. It points out that there is no real interdependence in this sphere for either man or woman: here interdependence is the law; it alone leads to happiness and fulfillment for both. But true interdependence cannot come if man is free and woman unfree. To elaborate this in the words of Gandhi, "woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his and rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation" towards realizing true interdependence.

Educational Beliefs and Actions of Swami Vivekananda

"What was the way out to save and elevate Indian woman? Education was the answer."

Swamiji found education as the best and only device to solve all problems of women and thereby emancipate them. According to him, for women problems can be many "but none that cannot be solved by that magic word 'education'". He conceived of an "Education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet". According to him, "Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life building,... character making, assimilation of ideas. If education were identical with information, the libraries would be the greatest sages of the world and encyclopaedias the rishis."

"Daughters should be supported and educated with as much Care and attention as the sons." Vivekananda repeatedly told that India's downfall was largely due to her negligence of women. Swami Vivekananda was of the firm opinion that women should be put in positions of power to solve their own problems in their own way.

"Education of women is essential for all round development of the nation."

The welfare of the world is dependent on the improvement of the condition of the women. In his

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opinion women education is must for the overall development of nation.

“Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them.”

He was very much against men taking decision on behalf of women. He felt that they should be given proper education so as to make them competent enough to think for themselves. If the women want to be equal like men, want to achieve success then the efforts of others can not be enough to bring change. Consequently women should be aware themselves to change their status in society.

Swami Vivekananda, the leader of an activist order of Hindu monasticism, was argued that women could become a powerful regenerative force.

“The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women.”

It is the strong belief of Swami Vivekananda that if the women are raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awake in the country.

With five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women not more than a few weeks.

The rise of outstanding women administrators, statesmen, scientists, writers and spiritual teachers, is gradually proving the truth of these prophetic words. Today Swami Vivekananda's words have been proved true that “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.”

Uniqueness of Vivekananda's Educational Philosophy

Vivekananda, in his scheme of education, meticulously includes all those studies, which are necessary for the all-around development of the body, mind and soul of the individual. These studies can be brought under the broad heads of physical culture, aesthetics, classics, language, religion, science and technology. According to Swamiji, the culture values of the country should form an integral part of the curriculum of education. The culture of India has its roots in her spiritual values. The time-tested values are to be imbibed in the thoughts and lives of the students through the study of the classics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita, Vedas and Upanishads. This will keep the perennial flow of our spiritual values into the world culture. He was not only in favor of cultural and physical education but also said that science and technological education is important for all round development. He understood the need of present time and according to that he gives his educational philosophy.

With a brilliant flight metaphor Vivekananda explains the point about how female illiteracy retards the progress of a society: ‘It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing’. He realizes that if the women of our country get the right type of education, then

they will be able to solve their own problems in their own way. The main objectives of his scheme of female education are to make them strong, fear-less and conscious of their chastity and dignity. He insists that men and women are equally competent not only in the academic matters, but also must have equal companion in the home and family. Vivekananda being a keen observer could distinguish the difference in perception about the status of women in the West and in India. “The ideal women 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.” He emphasized women studying religion, science, art, housekeeping, cooking, sewing, hygiene, etc. Along with these, japa, worship and meditation formed an indispensable part of teaching. He said, “Their education must be an eye-opener in all matters. Ideal characters must always be presented before the view of the girls to imbue them with a devotion to lofty principles of selflessness.

He prescribed the secular education for the masses, that is, an education which brings all the ideals slowly down among the masses and raises them to equality. He prefer to impart this secular knowledge through religion, that is Vedas. The 81 Report of the Committee on Value Based Education of 1999, did highlight the need to inculcate the principles of truth, righteous conduct, peace, love and non violence, which are the religious values propagated by Swamiji.

The development agenda of the 21 century also acknowledged education as the key to women's empowerment for the same reasons as Swamiji foresaw in the 19 century. The millennium development goals envisage that education of women “increases their productivity, raising output and reducing poverty. It promotes gender equality within households and removes constraints on women's decision making – thus reducing fertility rates and improving maternal health. It increases children's chances of surviving to become healthier and better educated because educated women do a better job caring for children.

Women in India were far behind men in the field of education when Swamiji lived. Now the situation has somewhat improved but much remains to be done. Observing the state of women's education in India, Swamiji lamented that he could not understand why so much difference was made between men and women, especially when Vedanta declared that one and the same Self was present in all beings. He quoted Manu to assert that daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons. This discrimination is made in every part of our society even now. It is not only in India. This malady is present all over the world. But the nations have understood the value of women education and make policies for their empowerment. However, the fact is that all nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. Swamiji therefore demanded forcefully that women must be put in a position so that they could solve their

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problems in their own way. Why not? Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any other women in the world. These were Swamiji's bold words uttered in the 19th century. Swamiji therefore urged his followers to spread female education the absence of which caused to a great extent India's degeneration. Vivekananda's thinking on women's education is more significant today when, the women in remote areas and also urban areas are deprived not only of education but also of health care and other basic human rights.

Conclusion

The exposition and analysis of Vivekananda's scheme of education brings to light its constructive, practical and comprehensive character. He realizes that it is only through education that the uplift of masses is possible. He states it emphatically that if society is to be reformed, education has to reach everyone-high and low, because individuals are the very constituents of society. The sense of dignity rises in man when he becomes conscious of his inner spirit, and that is the very purpose of education. He strives to harmonize the traditional values of India with the new values brought through the progress of science and technology. It is in the transformation of man through moral and spiritual education that he finds the solution for all social evils. Founding education on the firm ground of our own philosophy and culture, he shows the best of remedies for today's social and global illness. Through his scheme of education, he tries to materialize the moral and spiritual welfare and upliftment of humanity, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, nationality or time. However, Swami Vivekananda's scheme of education, through which he wanted to build up a strong nation that will lead the world towards peace and harmony, is still a far cry. In this viewpoint though women of India are not at par with her counterpart in Western world but she is struggling hard to make her mark in men's world. Indian women have mastered anything and everything which a woman can dream of. But she still has to go a long way to achieve equal status in the minds of Indian men. Therefore, it is high time that we give serious thought to his philosophy of education and remembers his call to every-body- 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.'

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