

Swami Vivekananda and Modern Women

—MANJULA

Swami Vivekananda while interacting with children in America, before his address at the Parliament of Religions, used to tell stories about great people of India. During one such interaction with a boy named Austin, he narrated a story of Jhansi's Rani Lakshmi Bai. Mrs. Louise Burke, in her book *Swami Vivekananda in the West—New Discoveries*, writes that whenever Swamiji spoke about the great Rani of Jhansi, tears used to roll down his cheeks. One may wonder how Swamiji, who always said that the role models of Indian women were Sita or Savitri, could be so moved when thinking about Rani of Jhansi?

Complete Picture of Indian Woman

Vivekananda indeed presented a complete and comprehensive picture of Indian woman all through his life. Swamiji was the first person to do so at a time when there was acrimonious debate on empowerment of women in our country. He knew that women are the makers of any society. The standard of any society, civilization or nation can be judged by looking at the status of women. Our forefathers had constructed a healthy society in which women played a very constructive role. Indian women led a very active social, religious and domestic life. As mothers, teachers, scholars, soldiers, judges, etc., women stood shoulder to shoulder with men and built a robust society. The role of women was so

dominant and prominent that Swamiji believed that it is because of women that we have our civilizational, religious and spiritual values with us today. He further said that through service and renunciation our women have withstood and borne the brunt of various kinds of invasions—political, social, religious and economic—through the millennia. The contribution of Indian women was so great and widespread that she was worshipped as the representative of the Divine Mother. She was considered an embodiment of everything supreme in life and society—as Mother Earth, giver of life, as Ma Saraswati, embodiment of knowledge, as Ma Lakshmi, embodiment of wealth, as Ma Durga embodiment of power. We may ask today—what made Indian women so great? Swamiji says purity, courage, and intellect are the hallmarks of Indian women. According to him, three women who represented each of these characteristics, have shaped the ideal personality in the Indian psyche: Sita, Lakshmi Bai, and Gargi respectively. Sita, we can understand, Rani of Jhansi we can somehow comprehend but Gargi is a bit intriguing. That is because the narrative of the Indian womanhood that has come down to us today is more of a Sita-like-personality; pure, all forgiving, ever sacrificing Mother. The other two traits of courage and intellect have been completely sidelined which is a loss of epic proportions. Today what we are left with is only one side of one part, of what the social thinkers and the *rishis* of the Vedic period had formulated.

The Sadhyovadhu and Brahnavadini Ideals

It is very interesting to know that, historically speaking, Indian women led a life, which was comprehensive and fruitful. *Harita Smriti* written by sage Haritasa gives a complete picture of the way women lived. He says, after the formal education under the guidance of a Guru at the *Gurukula*, a young girl had a choice of either to become a *sadhyovadhu* or a *brahnavadini*. A *sadhyovadhu* is a woman who chooses to get married, raises a family and dedicates her life to the welfare of her family. *Brahnavadini* is a woman who chooses to continue her academic pursuits, dedicate her life to acquire knowledge and eventually contribute intellectually and spiritually to the welfare of the larger society. Girls, who were educated and well informed, were considered an asset to the society. Gargi was one such woman. After her formal education, she chose to become a *brahnavadini*.

But the key to all these is a strong, formal education which was available to all girls. Girls had the right to *upanayanam*, went and stayed in a *Gurukula* just like boys. At the end of their formal education, it was quite normal for women to choose to become teachers and scholars. Panini in his famous book *Ashthadhyayi* says women teachers and girl students were

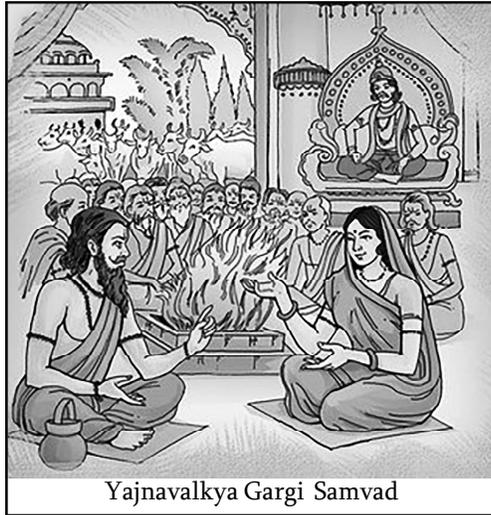
present in universities in large numbers. Women had the right to formulate *shastras* and there were several women *rishis*, who were called "*rishikas*". In the Rig Vedic period they were well respected by other *rishis* for their intellectual and spiritual accomplishments.

Deterioration in the status of Women

Due to several reasons this system was done away with. Manu, in his much criticized book *Manu Smriti*, said that *upanayanam* to girls should be stopped. Thereby the *upanayanam* rituals were stopped and girls lost the right to formal education. The decline in the status of women, as a result of this was enormous. Women lost the right to become *Brahnavadins* and one facet of Indian womanhood was completely lost.

Ultimately girls had only one choice, that of becoming a *sadhyovadhu*. The concept of *sadhyovadhu* was glorified in every sphere of life and society and women completely forgot the concept of *brahnavadini*.

The all-renouncing and independent *brahnavadini* went out of the psyche of Indian women. Women, no longer considered equal to men, lost the capacity to think independently. The result was society as a whole declined. As mothers, they could not instil independence and



Yajnavalkya Gargi Samvad

fearlessness in their children because they themselves became superstitious and dependent on men, thereby reducing a robust and fearless society to a superstitious one. By the time Vivekananda came, the social status of women was so low that they had lost all the rights that they enjoyed in the Vedic period. Girls were not allowed to go to school because there was a belief that if a girl becomes literate she would become a widow! Holy Mother was also not spared; when she tried to learn to read and write on her own, with the help of a book, Hriday threw the book in the River Ganga.

Reviving the Lost Position of Indian Women

Vivekananda gave back that status and right to the Indian woman which the Vedic Rishis had given them. He gave back the choice of becoming a *brahmavadini*. This is Swamiji's gift to womankind. When Swamiji went to America, he was baffled to see independent and fearless American women working tirelessly in building the nation. He exclaimed in joy, "I see Lakshmis and Saraswatis here in America, not in India!" When he studied the American society deeply, he realized that education was the key to all this.

The Importance of Education

When Swamiji returned to India, he emphasized that formal education, which was denied to women, should be made available to women. He said "To make a beginning in women's education: our Hindu women easily understand what chastity means, because it is their heritage. Now, first of all, intensify that ideal within them

above everything else, so that they may develop a strong character by the force of which, in every stage of their life, whether married, or single, if they prefer to remain so, they will not be in the least afraid even to give up their lives rather than flinch an inch from their chastity. Is it little heroism to be able to sacrifice one's life for the sake of one's ideal, whatever that ideal may be?"

Education would be the first step. Next, educated women be given a choice either to become a *brahmavadini* or a *sadhyovadhu*, and the third step that, in either situation, women should conquer the world with purity, courage and intellect. Through Sister Nivedita, Swamiji made 'going to school' a reality for girls after hundreds of years.

But it was not an easy task. People could not understand the prophetic advice of Swamiji. When Sister Nivedita called a meeting of social leaders in Kolkata, to discuss the establishment of a school for girls, and to encourage girls to go to school, not a single person stood up and said he would send his daughter to school. Sister Nivedita struggled hard to convince people. Holy Mother supported her and she succeeded. Nivedita eventually inspired the great freedom fighter Subramanya Bharati, who in turn, started a new movement called "New Woman" in South India. This revolution spread across South India like wild fire. Today, the position of women in our society has improved remarkably. By the grace of Holy Mother we may reach the level of Vedic women one day, which Swamiji dreamt of.

Realizing the Dream Today

Today women are occupying powerful positions. Vivekananda asserted

that with purity, courage and intellect Indian women can build a great society and can be role models for the entire world. With these three, modern woman can be successful both in looking after her family and also the welfare of society. She can be a loving mother, successful entrepreneur, or a popular leader. There is a view among professionals that women cannot look after a family, and at same time be successful in her profession. This is not true. Swamiji has outlined the criteria for success in any field. Besides we have a living example in Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Thus Vivekananda places huge responsibility on women as the mothers of civilization. He says:

“[Aryan] civilization has been of three types: the Roman, the Greek, and the Hindu. The Roman type is the type of organization, conquest, steadiness — but lacking in emotional nature, appreciation of beauty and the higher emotions. Its

defect is cruelty. The Greek is essentially enthusiastic for the beautiful, but frivolous and has a tendency to become immoral. The Hindu type is essentially metaphysical and religious, but lacking in all the elements of organization and work...The Roman type is now represented by the Anglo-Saxon; the Greek type more by the French than by any other nation; and the old Hindus do not die! Each type has its advantage in this new land of promise. They have the Roman’s organization, the power of the Greek’s wonderful love for the beautiful, and the Hindu’s backbone of religion and love of God. Mix these up together and bring in the new civilization. And let me tell you, this should be done by women.”

I hope women will fulfil the dream of Swamiji and become role models to upcoming generations for ‘the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world’. ❁

There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of woman is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. Hence in the Ramakrishna incarnation, the acceptance of a woman as the Guru, hence his practising in the woman’s garb and frame of mind, hence too his preaching the motherhood of women as representations of the Divine Mother.

Hence it is that my first endeavour is to start a Math for women. This Math shall be the origin of Gargis and Maitreyis, and women of even higher attainments than these.



Swami Vivekananda

Life Dynamics

A Study through Swami Vivekananda

PRAVRAJKA TYAGANISHTHAPRANA

The word 'life' evokes different feelings in different mindsets. For the majority, life is a mystery as all its secrets are far from known. For some others, it is a phenomenon conditioned by joy and sorrow, birth and death. But the word sparks quite a different emotion in an introspective mind. It kindles inquisitiveness. What is life? How did it come? What is its purpose? How to make it meaningful? These are the fundamental questions that strike a sensitive mind—more commonly of a mystic, a scientist, or a poet—who devotes most of his/her time to find answers for them.

Prelude

In the long history of humanity, these questions were asked and answered many times, but they sound fresh each time they are asked, because there are always fresh minds in which these questions arise. The present scientific era is a glorious period for exploring life, layer after layer, and to understand its underlying astounding phenomena. Methodical study and research have unravelled the secrets of the farthest galaxies as well as the depths of an atom, and from a single living cell to the complex human system.

When the Raja of Khetri asked Swami Vivekananda, "What is Truth?" his immediate answer was "Truth is One, the Absolute". It is as if to prove this fact that scientific advancement is converging on to 'singularity', which indeed is a most welcome development. The entire

manifold universe emerged from one single unit—all matter, all forces, life in each and every form, everything is but the manifestation of that single unit—endorsing the fact that everything in the universe is interlinked and interconnected. By arriving at this grand truth of the kinship of all life, modern science indeed blessed mankind. Swami Vivekananda repeatedly emphasized the central message of the Vedantic philosophy, as unity and solidarity of the whole universe, and that the realization of this fundamental truth is the goal of human life. In fact, this is also Swamiji's central message. He dreamt that the Vedantic principles would stand on a strong scientific basis as and when science revealed the secrets of the universe. Science has succeeded in probing the anatomy of life, but has yet to arrive at its purpose and meaningfulness; it has yet to unfold the unseen forces that govern this complex phenomenon.

Probing the Purpose

As to the uniqueness of the human species, science is in consensus with the mystic traditions, which recognized the human being as unique in creation, way back in time. Evolutionary biologists also accept that the human species is the highest. With its capacity for deliberate thinking, this species marks the culmination of organic evolution, the next phase being the psychological. As Julian Huxley pointed out in his book *Evolution and Modern Synthesis*, "Man, by now become the trustee of evolution, must work and plan

if he is to achieve further progress for himself and so for life.”

Erwin Schrodinger, the philosopher scientist, poetically wrote in his book, *What is Life*, “We ourselves (human beings) are chisel and statue at the same time.” But he laments at the inability of the scientific research to probe into the real purpose of evolution. He writes, “Most painful is the absolute silence of all our scientific investigations towards our questions concerning the meaning and the scope of the whole display.” Today, it is joyful to notice that the evolutionary concepts have already bent, perhaps unconsciously, towards probing the purpose of the evolution of life. Fritjof Capra, the author of the celebrated book, *Tao of Physics*, with a comprehensive approach in his research studies, threw new light on life.

Three Strides

Capra identifies the evolutionary process as creatively dynamic through self-organization, with its two complementary aspects: *self-maintenance* and *self-transcendence*. *Self-maintenance* includes the processes of self-renewal, healing, homoeostasis, and adaptation, whereas *self-transcendence* expresses itself in the processes of development and evolution. It is through the second aspect, *self-transcendence*, that living organisms enter into new domains to make the evolution meaningful. Fritjof Capra, in his book *Turning Point* writes, “Living organisms have an inherent potential for reaching out beyond themselves to create new structures and new patterns of behavior. This creative reaching out into novelty, which in time leads to an ordered

unfolding of complexity, seems to be a fundamental property of life.” This reaching out, with the newly acquired cerebral system, is the challenge for a human being.

Another astounding fact to which the post-Darwinian concepts point out is that there is coordination, cooperation, and interdependence at all levels of life. Life is evolving; for that matter, the whole universe is evolving with fine chords of coordination tending towards intrinsic orderliness, which the Vedic tradition called ‘*rtam*’. To quote Capra again, “Evolution is an ongoing and open adventure, that continually creates its own purpose, in a process whose detailed outcome is inherently unpredictable.” However, the general pattern of evolution can be recognized and it is quite comprehensible. Its characteristics include the progressive increase of complexity, coordination, and interdependence; the integration of individuals into multilevelled systems; and the continual refinement of certain functions and patterns of behaviour. As Ervin Laszlo sums it up, “There is a progression from multiplicity and chaos to oneness and order.”

Thus experiencing the orderliness and oneness of the universe is the goal of human life. It is not through competition and struggle, as Darwin proposed, but through cooperation and coordination, that life on earth has evolved. Chaos is the gross truth, perceived by the limited vision confined to small ecosystems, whereas orderliness is the subtle truth that can only be perceived by the expanded and elevated vision extended to giant ecosystems. Multiplicity is the gross truth perceived by the senses, whereas oneness is the subtle truth that can only be perceived by a subtle and purified mind.

To perceive the oneness in multiplicity, and the orderliness in chaos, the mind should evolve. That's why Indian philosophy hailed perception of oneness as the real perception. "That by which the one indestructible Substance is seen in all beings, undivided in the divided, know that knowledge to be *Sattvika*" says the *Bhagavad Gita*. This perception gives the greatest joy in life, says the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.

Scientists have started recognizing the inter-connectedness in the universe. Fritjof Capra in *The Hidden Connections* asserts: "This sense of oneness with the natural world is fully borne out by the new scientific conception of life. As we understand how the roots of life reach deep into basic physics and chemistry, how the unfolding of complexity began long before the formation of the first living cells, and how life has evolved for billions of years by using again and again the same basic patterns and processes, we realize how tightly we are connected with the entire fabric of life. When we look at the world around us, we find that we are not thrown into chaos and randomness but are part of a great order, a grand symphony of life....We belong to the universe, we are at home in it, and this experience of belonging can make our lives profoundly meaningful."

Here we can pick up the scientist's answer to the question regarding the purpose of evolution. If the experience of

oneness and orderliness makes human life 'profoundly meaningful', can't it be understood as the final goal of evolution of life on earth, i.e., to experience the unity and solidarity of the universe as propounded by Swami Vivekananda, over a century ago, echoing the unnamed heroic sages of the *Upanishads*? This is the "golden handshake" of religion and science, the philosophy of life finding its scientific basis—the grand reconciliation!

Means to Meaningfulness

Once the purpose is known, how to achieve it is the next question. When a



Inter-connected

committed sculptor has the clear imagery or blueprint of the end product, then every knock of the chisel will be consciously guided. The perfect image of an ideal human being is established in his or her experience of oneness. Because, in such a human being,

we find peace and harmony, love and compassion; he or she becomes a blessing to humanity. Such a human being transcends the limitations imposed by nature, and reaches that level of perfection through intense practice and by repeated conscious attempts. Swami Vivekananda asserted that a human being must not follow nature but must transcend it, to get freedom from the clutches of sense-bound nature. In the process, the aspirant's identification with the limited psychophysical system, slowly decreases. For example, the great mystics as also the

great scientists are conquerors of their lower nature. A person devoted to logical analysis or involved in higher emotions in the search of Truth easily transcends his or her lower nature attached to the body-mind complex. Detachment from the body-mind opens out a new world of perceptions and new heights of joy, where life finds its fulfilment.

Vivekananda's View of Life

The aim of this article is to ponder over the concise, brilliant definition of life given by Swami Vivekananda against the background of the above observations. It was the most spontaneous statement that came as an answer to the Raja of Khetri's question as to what was life. Vivekananda said, "Life is the unfoldment and fulfillment of a being under circumstances tending to press it down." Swamiji's definition reveals the goal of human life as well as the methods to reach it. It answers two questions—what the purpose of life is and how to achieve it. A broad spectrum of ideas that we find in Indian philosophical traditions, is embedded in this single definition. We can derive the following points from this definition:

1. *The goal of life is fulfilment or mukti*

According to Indian philosophy, life is the all-pervading principle in creation, which is called by different names such as, *prana*, *maya* and *shakti*. Swamiji says that the whole creation is the expression of this life principle in different levels of vibration. It has consciousness, the infinite dimension, as its substratum. A human being is the highest expression of this *prana*. Why? Because he or she has the unique capacity

to trace his energies back to the origin. The origin of life is in consciousness and a human being alone has the capacity to realize this blissful source.

"The One, which is the innermost reality of all beings, is untouched by the misery of the outside world" say the *Upanishads*. The purpose of the continuous life-stream is fulfilled once it discovers its blissful source, pure consciousness. One may call it God or by any name one likes. Life on earth, knowingly or unknowingly, runs after happiness. Happiness is the goal behind all pursuits of life. If we want continuous and permanent happiness, we should depend only on such a thing, which is imperishable. God alone is imperishable. Rely on Him. Don't rely on unreliable things. The goal of life is freedom from all misery and the attainment of the highest bliss. Once we realize our imperishable nature and attain total detachment from the body-mind, all the piled-up karma gets completely destroyed. The fire of knowledge destroys all accumulated fruits of actions.

2. *The method is unfoldment or Yoga*

If the goal is fulfilment then the method is unfoldment, which is called *yoga* in Indian scriptures. What is *yoga*? Focusing mind and the senses on the infinite dimension is called *yoga*. For this, first and foremost, one must approach an adept sculptor, who already has carved a beautiful statue out of himself, is efficient enough to know how to sharpen the chisel, how to handle it and the different techniques in the carving procedure. The chisel is the instrument, with which we carve the statue. What is the chisel here? It is the human being's

capacity for conscious thinking. The Indian scriptures call it *buddhi*. This is the only faculty that differentiates the human being from animals.

Food, sleep, fear and procreation are common in animals and human beings. *Buddhi* alone is the factor that differentiates human beings from animals. A human being is equal to an animal if the *buddhi* is non-functional.

The following equations reveal the role of *buddhi* in the evolution of man:

Human being – *buddhi* = animal

Human being + non-functioning *buddhi* = animal man (instinct level)

Human being + functioning *buddhi* = rational man (reason level)

Human being + enlightened *buddhi* = saint (intuition level)

The *buddhi* can be sharpened by constantly exercising it. With the *buddhi* thus sharpened, one can follow the path of *yoga*, the union with the Infinite.

In the long religious history of India, great people have introduced many techniques of *yoga*. There are different faculties in human personality—thinking, feeling and willing etc. Each *yoga* technique tried to cultivate one of these human faculties by constantly directing it towards God. *Jnana Yoga* focused on thinking faculty, *Bhakti Yoga* on emotional faculty and *Karma Yoga* on the faculty of will.

Synthesis of the Paths of Yoga

Swami Vivekananda developed a new scheme of *Yoga*—the synthesis of the four paths of *Yoga* viz., *Jnana Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga*, *Karma Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* for the harmonious development of all the

faculties in a human being.

Jnana Yoga: Everywhere in creation, there are two dimensions—finite and infinite. Always analyse and find out what is finite and what is infinite. Try to identify yourselves with the infinite dimension. Swami Vivekananda said, “The Self within is always shining forth resplendent. Turning away from that people say I, I, I—with the affection held up with the body, this cage of flesh and bones. This is the root cause of all weakness.”

Bhakti Yoga: Emotions usually drive our energies. Direct these emotions towards a personal god. Who should one select as a personal god? The one who is compatible with one’s own mental environment. Praise Him, worship Him, and pray to Him. Develop intense love towards Him. Thus give a higher direction to the lower emotions.

Karma Yoga: The *will* in us in its normal state always prompts us to satisfy selfish desires. Direct it to do good to others thinking that they are the manifestations of God. Then automatically the faculty of *will* also will be connected to God.

Raja Yoga: It is meant for disciplining the mind through meditation.

When the first three techniques of *Yoga* are done with meditative awareness gained through the practice of *Raja Yoga*, all the faculties in a human being are harmoniously developed. Constant and persistent effort to connect with the infinite dimension (*Yoga*) does not allow the formation of fresh fruits of action as the focus of attention is thus automatically shifted away from the individual’s unripe ego, which is the seat for the formation of fresh *karma*. Thus a synthesis can be naturally effected.

The Unfoldment of Yoga

The path of yoga is not easy. There are innumerable obstacles and hurdles. That's why in the second part of his definition, Swamiji says, "...under circumstances tending to press it down." These circumstances are attributed to the *prarabdha karma*, the unavoidable results of our past actions. We have to face them; there is no escape. These obstacles, in the form of suffering and misery, always obstruct our way. This suffering is of two kinds, caused by the nature outside and the inner nature. That's why Swamiji says—The goal is to manifest divinity by controlling nature external and internal.

Situations in life are not as we would like them to be. Our reaction to the situations is all that we have in our hands. Our reactions are indicators that measure the intensity of our clinging to the gross world. Once there was an interesting column in a newspaper with the heading, "I have no cancer". It was the story of a cancer patient, who passed away, and the article was written by his wife. From the day the disease was diagnosed till his death, he had repeated the sentence, "No, I have no cancer", to all his relatives and doctors. He had not only repeated this statement, he had behaved in that way as if he had no disease. At the same time, he had been continuously undergoing treatment and had continued to be as cheerful as always. Even the doctors wondered at his behaviour. His wife wrote, "Cancer could not win over him. He won over the disease by choosing not to be affected by it." This is the art of living.

If we mould our present life with this kind of positive attitude, no *karma* can affect us. The secret of this art lies in our

faith in the infinite dimension within us and in the universe. H. W. Longfellow wrote in his celebrated poem, *Psalm of Life*

*On the world's broad field of battle,
in the bivouac of Life,*

*Be not like dumb, driven cattle! Be
a hero in the strife!*

*Let us, then be up and doing, with a
heart for any fate;*

*Till achieving, still pursuing, learn
to labour and to wait.*

This positive attitude towards life helps us to fight our *prarabdha karma* with the maturity of understanding. This is called *shraddha* in Indian philosophy. Swami Vivekananda says, "Faith, Faith, Faith in ourselves, faith, faith in God—this is the secret of greatness."

Conclusion

Life evolves till it becomes aware of itself. Matter and energy both at the gross and subtle levels are the components of life. As life evolves, consciousness manifests itself in the form of awareness. The great sage, Patanjali, says the evolution of life on earth is carried out by the infilling of nature. By the process of infilling of nature—the macrocosm involves into the microcosm and the microcosm evolves by realizing its identity with the macrocosm. This grand revelation came upon Swami Vivekananda in Almora—the macrocosm and microcosm are built on the same plan. To discover the identity and inseparability of the microcosm and macrocosm is the purpose of the evolution of life. This purpose is enfolded in nature and it is for human beings to unfold it in order to remain blissful forever. ❀