

# Essence of Womanhood in India

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THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES women enjoyed in ancient India were almost equal to that of men. The accounts, available in the earliest texts, show that women were not subject to awkward restrictions and that they were relatively free. Women, for instance, rose to become seers and intuited many Vedic mantras. This attainment fetched some of them the venerable appellations of *rishika*, female rishi, and *brahmavadinis*, female expounders of the knowledge of Brahman.

*Rishikas* were the products of the *gurukula*, studying at the guru's house, system of education, to which both girls and boys had access. Girls too pursued their studies and received training to attain the highest goal of life. The choice of being a householder or taking up a life of renunciation was open to men as well as women. A wife was *sahadharmini*, co-religionist, who would follow, with her husband, the stages of grihastha, householder; vanaprastha, dwelling in the forest; and sannyasa. The performance of certain religious rites was deemed invalid if the wife was absent. That women had an equal voice in contentious religious matters is evident from the public debates and discussions in which they participated along with men. Marriages were secure, sacred, and monogamous, except in some select cases like that of certain rulers.

## The Middle Ages

Even before the Middle Ages in India there was a gradual shift from many of these noble ideals. Swami Vivekananda says: 'In ancient India the centres of national life were always the

intellectual and spiritual and not [the] political.'<sup>1</sup> With the rise of the kshatriya power these centres gradually became focal points of political power. Power tussles between kings and the intermittent but devastating invasions from outside changed the very structure of society. The imposition of new regulations altered the old sociocultural milieu, isolating women from intellectual and social life.

As avenues for the general education of women were closed, their activities shrank to doing household chores and being taught at home by male members of the family. Men slowly gained the upper hand with the sole right to decide everything. Women were also excluded from the right to have property, compelling them to become entirely dependent on men. Especially in North India, societies required women of the higher classes to wear the purdah, which contributed to their isolation. There were of course cases where, due to enlightened family members, women asserted themselves. K M Panikkar says:

In the field of administration Indian women produced some notable figures during this period. There was Rudramba, the Kakateya queen of whom Marco Polo speaks; Rezia Begum (13th century) of whom it was said that her one weakness was that she was a woman; Chandbibi, who appeared on the ramparts of the fort of Ahmadnagar dressed in male attire and put heart in the defenders of that town against the prowess of Akbar himself; Tarabai, the Maharatta heroine who was the life and soul of Maharatta resistance during the last determined onslaught of Aurangzeb; Mangammal, whose benign rule is still a green memory in

the South, and Ahalyabai Holkar, to whose administrative genius Sir John Malcolm has paid a magnificent tribute. These are but a few outstanding names among the great women that India can boast of during this period.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Middle Ages in India was a mass of political confusion due to wars and other destabilizing forces. As a result, appropriate reforms to move towards an egalitarian society did not occur, and women, children, and the needy lost even the little of their remaining rights and privileges. This medieval mindset continued for centuries beyond the Middle Ages, creating a myopic vision whenever the question of emancipating women gained priority.

### **The Modern Period**

The trend of depriving women of their legitimate claims was prevalent not only in India but all over the world. Gradually, ideas about the role of women began to change and 'at the 1980 World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen, member states and participants saw women as agents of change at the national and international levels, and in political, social and economic areas. Women were also seen as key in building more just, rational societies and in the struggle for fundamental national rights and self-determination of peoples against wars of aggression.'<sup>3</sup> A programme of action was adopted to address situations that involved:

Lack of sufficient involvement of men in improving women's role in society; insufficient political will; lack of recognition for the value of women's contribution to society; lack of attention to the particular needs of women in planning; a shortage of women in decision-making positions; insufficient services to support the role of women in national life, such as co-operatives, day-care centres and credit facilities; overall lack of necessary financial

resources; and, lack of awareness among women about the opportunities available to them.<sup>4</sup>

Even with male chauvinism persisting by and large, women are slowly coming out of the shadows of male domination. For example, in many places of India one happily sees that the panchayat system has become the most successful democratic institution for women. There are about thirty-seven per cent of women elected in the panchayats, out of which the majority belongs to scheduled castes and tribes, and below-poverty-line families.<sup>5</sup> This is of course exceptional, considering the widespread poverty and illiteracy among Indian rural women.

The surge of political awareness among women at the panchayat level, in spite of a lack of formal education, is usually attributed to newly approved government legislation of fifty per cent reservation for women, up from the previous thirty-three per cent. But very few take note that men do not want to lose the upper hand in public life, thereby stunting the progress of women from backward sections to rise beyond the panchayat level. Thus the political participation of women, who are the agents of change, is being slowed down by the malady of the medieval male mindset. Under these circumstances, until men change their selfish attitudes, real regeneration of a vast majority of working women in India will remain a far cry.

Indian democracy is rendered vibrant because women, showing a better sense of responsibility, exercise their franchise. In this regard, India sets an example and draws admiration from the rest of the world. Thanks to the Indian administration that has made such a difficult thing happen by organizing peaceful polls and creating awareness regarding empowerment among women. But it is unfortunate that women are still being deprived of due representation at higher democratic forums. Unless men become

conscience-smitten, the fate of less fortunate Indian women may not change much, in spite of the present embellished economic and educational conditions of the nation.

Sixty-six years after the Indian Independence public offices everywhere are comparatively occupied by a good number of women. Some nations, where women were not expected to work in public offices till a few years ago, are seeing capable working women ignoring many socio-religious injunctions against them. This type of economic liberation has evoked a change in the lifestyle of women and families. Women are now also assertive, confident, and able to make a big contribution to every social field. Their involvement, by themselves or by the government, is pushing back social barriers based on gender. The notion that giving liberty to women would make them go astray and bring disrepute has been proved wrong. Most women, given the heavy responsibility of working in today's world, are also looking after their homes. Slowly men are also now pitching in to help at home by doing what was previously thought of as typical women's duties.

But the crucial question is: how many women of this type are from the lowest rungs of society, who constitute a vast majority? The answer is obvious: only a few rural women have opportunities as compared to their urban sisters. The poor have to be given educational and economic opportunities; only such women will empower themselves and make changes in the existing rigid rural mindset. Not that they are less hard-working or intelligent, but they need empowerment and opportunities.

Though the government of India understands the situation and is making efforts to raise the conditions of society by improving women's situation, one wonders whether the legislation reaches down to really help. Legislation does

help, but only as a support for women who want to themselves improve. There are daily examples of rural women exhibiting outstanding strength and resilience. It is known that women are the props of social life in rural India. Liberate women and rural society becomes dynamic. Surrounded by men, they also know how to become enterprising. It is encouraging to see that some village women have proved their worth in public life as well.

### ***Sri Sarada Devi's Serene Dynamism***

The role of womanhood in lifting India is necessary and inevitable. A woman has an inborn aptitude for raising children, taking care of the elders, feeding the household, and doing hundreds of other things. She is the protector and transmitter of culture. Nature has crafted women with more inner strength, along with a sense of responsibility. This has given them restraint and resilience. Nature has also given them the capacity to absorb shocks better and function in a subtle fashion to prevent or withstand pain. If enough opportunities are given to *all*, not only to a few, women to unfold their qualities in all affairs, the world will become a better, safer, and happier place to live.

Sri Sarada Devi, born more than a hundred and fifty years ago, revealed many of the sterling women's qualities to the highest degree, despite countless difficult situations. She encountered many social barriers and eventually became iconic, and all this due to her palpable spirituality. Holy Mother was born in a poor rural household and grew up without formal education. Notwithstanding such limitations, she suffered no sense of diffidence and instead emerged as a conscientious leader of both men and women. She was perpetually blissful, forward-looking, and full of innovative ideas. Her confined living, first at her village at Jayrambati and then in the



'Sarada Devi', by Jane Adams

Nahabat at Dakshineswar, could not stand in the way of her intrinsic growth. In fact, she showed a great sense of equanimity and rare wisdom that filled people with awe. The Holy Mother could silently assert herself whenever she thought it necessary, without hurting the sentiments of others in the least.

Most of all, she kept herself hidden from the public, yet remained constantly dear to all and sundry. This happened because a serene dynamism was her forte. Her innate motherhood made her incessantly pray for the good of those in distress. Her leadership, which was also the outcome of her motherhood, was unselfconscious

and impeccable. It was a splendid blending of common sense, originality, profundity, simplicity, propriety, wisdom, sweetness, love, and command. It comfortably integrated class, caste, community, and colour into a harmonious whole. Placed at the helm of the movement started by Swami Vivekananda, run by learned monks and lay devotees, the Holy Mother provided a firm ground for its future multiplication into many branches extending far and wide. Every judgement she made and every action she undertook for the sake of the Order's smooth running is a legacy of the discreet demeanour that deserves to be emulated. An overflowing spirituality, from the inmost depths of her feminine being, flooded saints and sinners alike in order to establish a new order of humanity, at the centre of which she would stay as 'the Mother of all'.

### ***The Ideal for Women***

The Holy Mother once said: 'The Master regarded all creatures as manifestations of the Divine Mother. He left me behind to manifest the motherhood of God.'<sup>6</sup> Truly, 'the Mother's life of motherliness and spiritual ministrations may be considered from one view as only emanations from the basic fact of her divinity.'<sup>7</sup> Swami Shivananda said: 'Holy Mother assumed a human body to awaken womanhood of the entire world. Don't you see, since her advent, what an amazing awakening has set in among the women of the world? They are now resolved to build up their lives gracefully and advance in all directions. A very surprising renaissance is swaying women in


the fields of spirituality, politics, science, literature, etc. And more will come.<sup>8</sup>

The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna understood that a marvellous mother-power was manifest in the Holy Mother. Sri Ramakrishna was the first to discover that she was the repository of a bottomless power. He once warned Hriday, his nephew, to stop being rude to the Holy Mother: 'If the one that is in her raises its hood even Brahma, Vishnu, or Maheshwara cannot save you.'<sup>9</sup> Sri Ramakrishna harnessed and channelled that power for the cultivation of the essential human value—divinity—from the loss of which the world is suffering badly. The fact that she could assist and carry forwards his mission to a logical end was absolutely clear to Sri Ramakrishna. Hence he supported her endeavours without any reservations.

The way Sri Sarada Devi exhibited her superb abilities was an eye-opener to Swamiji. He said: 'Our Mother is a vast reservoir of spiritual energy, though outwardly calm like the deep ocean. Her advent marks the beginning of a new era in the history of India. The ideals lived and taught by her would not only spiritualize the efforts for the emancipation of women in India but also influence and penetrate into the minds and hearts of women all the [*sic*] world over.'<sup>10</sup> This has now become practically true. The Holy Mother is being universally considered by many women, from diverse backgrounds and cultures, as their guide and pathfinder. Taking her as their ideal, innumerable women's organizations are coming up in order to implement her teachings. A monastic Order bearing her name and run exclusively by women, has been devotedly working under her ideals for more than sixty years.

Swamiji radically condemned the gratuitous male intervention in female affairs: 'Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are

necessary for them.'<sup>11</sup> He, as it were, saw the uplift of women as a precondition for social progress. His idea was: 'Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way' (5.229). As men rose and enjoyed freedom, so women should rise and enjoy the same. Both should be on an equal footing for a healthy social progress. Yet, it appears that Swamiji's concern for women was bigger, as he thought there was no regeneration of the world without the application of the woman-power in its fullest measure. And he was convinced too that Sri Sarada Devi was born for this revival. He initiated the work for women by placing her at the centre for inspiration and progress.

Swamiji's crusade against the neglect of women and Swami Shivananda's insight into the Holy Mother's life and teachings has proved correct. During the last century the whole world has indubitably seen huge developments in the lives of urban and rural women. India has offered many new openings for weaker sections of society to rise up. The panchayat system, which is bringing women to the forefront, is a good example of social change. Many sensible men are now crusading for women's empowerment. These men, together with many organizations, have been able to bring large numbers of rural women into the fold of literacy and also make them conscious of their equal rights and privileges guaranteed by the Constitution of India. Many women organizations have also been formed in villages with the aim of developing welfare activities for women. These organizations are now becoming increasingly vocal against the crimes and injustices perpetrated against women. In the light of such a positive mood of transition, women should be able to once again win their ancient legitimate claims and pick up the pace in humanity's march towards divinity. 

(References on page 639)

including the pariah, and embraced them all. A brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. Through bhakti an untouchable becomes pure and elevated.<sup>17</sup> We know, of course, that Sri Ramakrishna had the same feeling of oneness with Nimai when he went into samadhi upon 'the seat of Sri Chaitanya' at the Hari-sabha of Kolutola, Calcutta. Those present there commented that Sri Chaitanya himself had reappeared on the seat. Bhagavan Das Babaji was terribly outraged at this incident, but later, when the Master met him at Kalna, the saint came to realize how worthy a personage the Master was and sincerely begged pardon for his angry outburst. He had no doubt in his mind that Sri Chaitanya had again come as the Master for their protection.

Sri Ramakrishna's outward appearance belied his inner state. In him the external Nitai and the internal Nimai dovetailed with each other. A rind protects the kernel inside, but if there is no kernel within, the rind fails to serve its purpose. Sri Ramakrishna was the combination and sum total of the two. 'So the Master announced in a loud voice, that one who came as Krishna and

again as Rama, has now appeared in the world as Ramakrishna to liberate living beings. This incarnation is the total advent of God: Advaita, Chaitanya and Nityananda all three are in one.<sup>18</sup> And that is what prompted Bhairavi Brahmani to assert: 'Chaitanya is manifesting this time in the "sheath" of Nityananda.'



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6. *Gospel*, 672.
7. *Great Master*, 395.
8. *Gospel*, 275.
9. *Great Master*, 318.
10. *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*, 806.
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13. Swami Chetanananda, *They Lived with God* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 163.
14. *Gospel*, 99.
15. See *Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*, 623-9.
16. *Great Master*, 1174.
17. *Gospel*, 155.
18. *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*, 583.

(Continued from page 613)

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9. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 66.
10. *Reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi*, comp. and ed. Swami Purnatmananda, trans. Maloti Sen Gupta (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 317.
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