

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
Introduction	5
I The Ideal of Our Womanhood	11
II Indian Women and Western Women	22
III Education of Our Women	36
IV Thoughts on Marriage	52
V Position and Prospect of Our Women	61
References	71

## INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda burst upon the Indian horizon at the close of the last century as a leader and a teacher, an authoritative spokesman of India's culture, and the bearer of the message to the world as much as to his own people. His contribution to Indian national development has been deep as well as comprehensive. He was the first to lay bare our problems, social and educational, cultural and religious. He roused the thinking section to a sense of the urgency of these national problems and thus helped to stir the nation's conscience; he focussed our attention on our national defects and stimulated our energies in the direction of the forging of our national character. In all that he did he was fully conscious of the vital role that he was



playing—the role of being an architect of a nation's fate. The last fifty years have but seen the steady unfolding of that vision and that fate. And the Renaissant India of today with its radiant hopes and bubbling energies bears the unmistakable impress of Swami Vivekananda's personality and ministrations.

Swami Vivekananda sums up the national problems in India in two words: the women and the people. He traces the downfall of India to the continued neglect of our women and of our masses. 'In India there are two great evils,' says he, 'trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restrictions.' In one of his letters from America he speaks in agony 'of the ages of tyranny, mental, moral, and physical, that has reduced the image of God to a mere beast of burden; the emblem of the Divine Mother to a slave to bear children; and life itself, a curse'. The first condition of growth, according to him, is freedom. Social tyranny which denied liberty to these two vital elements of the nation should give place to social freedom. Emancipation of women and uplift of the masses formed the two most important items in Swami Vivekananda's programme of

national regeneration. And the least suggestion of dictation of the male to the female was abhorrent to him, as is evident from his answer to the question on widow re-marriage put to him by a social reformer: 'I am asked again and again, what I think of the widow problem and what I think of the woman question. Let me answer once for all—am I a widow that you ask me that nonsense? Am I a woman that you ask me that question again and again? Who are you to solve woman's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off! They will solve their own problems'.

Swami Vivekananda raised his powerful voice many decades ago on behalf of our women and our masses. To them he will ever remain a powerful guardian of their rights and interests. He exhorted our men as well as our women to rise above sex distinctions which are based on the body, to the perception of the Atman—the sexless Self—which is the Reality behind both man and woman as well as all other beings. True emancipation, he declared, for woman as well as for man, could come only through an intensification of



one's spiritual awareness. He recognized no sex in Truth. 'He would never tolerate', says the Sister Nivedita, his British disciple, in her *The Master as I saw Him* 'any scheme of life and polity that tended to bind tighter on mind and soul the fetters of the body. The greater the individual, the more would she transcend the limitations of femininity in mind and character; and the more was such transcendence to be expected and admired.' It was the realization of the spiritual oneness of humanity and the resulting equality of vision that made Swami Vivekananda the powerful friend and guardian-angel of the rights of the weak, the lowly, and the lost. He was the first monk in history to affirm and to defend without any reservation the rights and liberties of woman; he is extremely sensitive on this point. To quote the Sister Nivedita again, 'Our Master, at any rate, regarded the order to which he belonged as one whose lot was cast for all time with the cause of woman and the people. This was the cry that rose to his lips instinctively, when he dictated to the phonograph in America, the message that he would send to the Raja of Khetri. It was the one thought, too, with which he would turn

to the disciple at his side, whenever he felt himself nearer than usual to death, in a foreign country, alone. "Never forget!" he would then say, "the word is, Woman and the People"!"

— This book is an attempt to bring together in a single compass the thoughts of this great teacher on the subject of Indian women—their past, present, and future—thoughts that lie scattered in his voluminous speeches and writings. Every attempt has been made to make the collection as exhaustive as possible. Some difficulty was experienced in arranging the material under suitable chapter-headings; for some of the selections are conversations which contain more than one subject of discussion, and any attempt to put them under relevant chapter-headings would have meant the breaking up of the graceful continuity of the discussion. This has naturally been avoided by sacrificing to some extent the self-sufficiency of each chapter.

It is our desire and hope that this little book will help to acquaint an ever-widening circle of our people—both men and women—with the thoughts of one who has been rightly acclaimed the Patriot Saint of Modern India.

This brochure was originally compiled by Swami Ranganathananda and published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Karachi. As the book was very warmly received by the reading public, and the first edition was exhausted within a short time, the Advaita Ashrama brought out a fresh edition with some new matter added to the old.

PUBLISHER

## OUR WOMEN

I

### THE IDEAL OF OUR WOMANHOOD

Rama and Sita are the ideals of the Indian nation. All children, especially girls, worship Sita. The height of a woman's ambition is to be like Sita, the pure, the devoted, the all-suffering! When you study these characters you can at once find out how different is the ideal in India from that of the West. For the race, Sita stands as the ideal of suffering. The West says, 'Do. Show your power by doing.' India says, 'Show your power by suffering.' The West has solved the problem of how much a man can have: India has solved the problem of how little a man can have. The two extremes, you see. Sita is typical of India—the



idealized India. The question is not whether she ever lived, whether the story is history or not, we know that the ideal is there. There is no other Pauranika story that has so permeated the whole nation, so entered into its very life, and has so tinged in every drop of blood of the race, as this ideal of Sita. Sita is the name in India for everything that is good, pure, and holy; everything that in woman we call womanly. If a priest has to bless a woman he says, 'Be Sita!' If he blesses a child, he says, 'Be Sita!' They are all children of Sita, and are struggling to be Sita, the patient, the all-suffering, the ever-faithful, the ever-pure wife. Through all this suffering she experiences, there is not one harsh word against Rama. She takes it as her own duty, and performs her own part in it. Think of the terrible injustice of her being exiled to the forest! But Sita knows no bitterness. That is, again, the Indian ideal. Says the ancient Buddha: 'When a man hurts you and you turn back to hurt him, that would not cure the first injury; it would only create in the world one more wickedness.' Sita was a true Indian by nature; she never returned injury.<sup>1</sup>

You may exhaust the literature of the

world that is past, and I may assure you, that you will have to exhaust the literature of the world of the future, before finding another Sita. Sita is unique; that character was depicted once and for all. There may have been several Ramas, perhaps, but never more than one Sita! She is the very type of the true Indian woman, for all the Indian ideals of a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of Sita; and here she stands these thousands of years, commanding the worship of every man, woman, and child, throughout the length and breadth of the land of Aryavarta. There she will always be, this glorious Sita, purer than purity itself, all patience, and all suffering. She who lived that life of suffering without a murmur, she the ever-chaste and ever-pure wife, she the ideal of the people, the ideal of the gods, the great Sita, our national God she must always remain. And every one of us knows her too well to require much delineation. All our mythology may vanish, even our Vedas may depart, and our Sanskrit language may vanish for ever, but so long as there will be five Hindus living here, even if only speaking the most vulgar patois, there will be the story of

*the dialect of a region*



Sita present. Mark my words. Sita has gone into the very vitals of our race. She is there in the blood of every Hindu man and woman; we are all children of Sita. Any attempt to modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day. The women of India must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita, and that is the only way.<sup>2</sup>

Every girl in India must aspire to be like Savitri, whose love could not be conquered by death, and who through this tremendous love snatched back from even Yama, the soul of her husband.

There was a king called Ashvapati. The king had a daughter who was so good and beautiful that she was called Savitri, which is the name of a sacred prayer of the Hindus. When Savitri grew old enough, her father asked her to choose a husband for herself. These ancient Indian princesses were very independent, you see, and chose their own princely suitors.

Savitri consented and travelled in distant regions, mounted in a golden chariot, with her guards and aged courtiers to whom her

father entrusted her, stopping at different courts, and seeing different princes, but not one of them could win the heart of Savitri. They came at last to a holy hermitage.

Now it happened that there was a king, Dyumatsena, who was defeated by his enemies, and was deprived of his kingdom when he was struck with age and had lost his sight. This poor, old, blind king, with his queen and his son, took refuge in the forest and passed his life in rigid penance. His boy's name was Satyavan.

So Savitri came to this hermitage and saw there Satyavan, the hermit's son, and her heart was conquered. She had escaped all the princes of the palaces and the courts, but here in the forest-refuge of King Dyumatsena, his son, Satyavan, stole her heart.

When Savitri returned to her father's house, he asked her, 'Savitri, dear daughter, speak. Did you see anybody whom you would like to marry?' Then softly with blushes, said Savitri, 'Yes, father.' 'What is the name of the prince?' 'He is no prince but the son of the King Dyumatsena who has lost his kingdom—a prince without a patrimony, who lives a monastic life, the life of a Sannyasin in a forest,

prevent  
someone by  
having



collecting roots and herbs, helping and feeding his old father and mother, who live in a cottage.'

On hearing this the father consulted the Sage Narada, who happened to be then present there, and he declared it was the most ill-omened choice that was ever made. The king then asked him to explain why it was so. And Narada said, 'Within twelve months from this time the young man will die.' Then the king started with terror, and spoke, 'Savitri, this young man is going to die in twelve months, and you will become a widow; think of that! Desist from your choice, my child, you shall never be married to a short-lived and fated bridegroom.' 'Never mind, father; do not ask me to marry another person and sacrifice the chastity of mind, for I love and have accepted in my mind that good and brave Satyavan only as my husband. A maiden chooses only once, and she never departs from her troth.' When the king found that Savitri was resolute in mind and heart, he complied. Then Savitri married prince Satyavan, and she quietly went from the palace of her father into the forest, to live with her chosen husband and help her husband's

→ determined

parents. Now though Savitri knew the exact date when Satyavan was to die, she kept it hidden from him. Daily he went into the depths of the forest, collected fruits and flowers, gathered faggots, and then came back to the cottage, and she cooked the meals and helped the old people. Thus their lives went on until the fatal day came near, and three short days remained only. She took a severe vow of three nights' penance and holy fasts, and kept her hard vigils. Savitri spent sorrowful and sleepless nights with fervent prayers and unseen tears till the dreaded morning dawned. That day Savitri could not bear him out of her sight even for a moment. She begged permission from his parents to accompany her husband when he went to gather the usual herbs and fuel, and gaining their consent she went. Suddenly, in faltering accents, he complained to his wife of feeling faint, 'My head is dizzy, and my senses reel, dear Savitri, I feel sleep stealing over me; let me rest beside thee for a while.' In fear and trembling she replied, 'Come, lay your head upon my lap, my dearest lord.' And he laid his burning head in the lap of his wife and ere long sighed and expired. Claspings him to her, her eyes flowing with



tears, there she sat in the lonesome forest until the emissaries of Death approached to take away the soul of Satyavan. But they could not come near to the place where Savitri sat with the dead body of her husband, his head resting in her lap. There was a zone of fire surrounding her, and not one of the emissaries of Death could come within it. They all fled back from it, returned to the King Yama, the God of Death, and told him why they could not obtain the soul of this man.

Then came Yama, the God of Death, the Judge of the dead. He was the first man that died—the first man that died on earth—and he had become the presiding deity over all those that die. He judges whether, after a man has died, he is to be punished or rewarded. So he came himself. Of course he could go inside that charmed circle, as he was a god. When he came to Savitri, he said, 'Daughter, give up this dead body, for know death is the fate of mortals, and I am the first of mortals who died. Since then, every one has had to die. Death is the fate of man.' Thus told, Savitri walked off and Yama drew the soul out. Yama having possessed himself of the soul of the young man proceeded on his way. Before

he had gone far he heard footfalls upon the dry leaves. He turned back. 'Savitri, daughter, why are you following me? This is the fate of all mortals.' 'I am not following thee, Father,' replied Savitri, 'but this is also the fate of woman, she follows where her love takes her, and the Eternal Law separates not loving man and faithful wife.' Then said the God of Death: 'Ask for any boon, except the life of your husband.' 'If thou art pleased to grant a boon, O Lord of Death, I ask that my father-in-law may be cured of his blindness and made happy.' 'Let thy pious wish be granted, duteous daughter.' And then the King of Death travelled on with the soul of Satyavan. Again the same footfall was heard from behind. He looked round. 'Savitri, my daughter, you are still following me? Yes, my father; I cannot help doing so; I am trying all the time to go back, but the mind goes after my husband, and the body follows. The soul has already gone, for in that soul is also mine; and when you take the soul, the body follows, does it not?' 'Pleased am I with your words, fair Savitri, ask yet another boon of me, but it must not be the life of your husband.' 'Let my father-in-law regain his lost wealth and

kingdom. Father, if thou art pleased to grant another supplication.' 'Loving daughter, Yama answered, this boon I now bestow; but return home, for living mortal cannot go with King Yama. And then Yama pursued his way. But Savitri, meek and faithful, still followed her departed husband. Yama again turned back, 'Noble Savitri, follow not in hopeless woe.' 'I cannot choose but follow where thou takest my loved one.' 'Then suppose, Savitri, that your husband was a sinner and has to go to hell. In that case goes Savitri with the one she loves?' 'Glad am I to follow where he goes, be it life or death, heaven or hell,' said the loving wife. 'Blessed are your words, my child, pleased am I with you, ask yet another boon, but the dead come not to life again.' 'Since you so permit me, then, let the imperial line of my father-in-law be not destroyed; let his kingdom descend to Satyavan's son.' And then the God of Death smiled. 'My daughter, thou shalt have thy desire now: here is the soul of thy husband, he shall live again. He shall live to be a father, and thy children also shall reign in due course. Return home. Love has conquered Death! Woman never loved like thee, and

thou art the proof that even I, the God of Death, am powerless against the power of the true love that abideth!