

V

POSITION AND PROSPECTS OF
OUR WOMEN

reduce something
to small particles
& powder by
crushing it

In India there are two great evils. Trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restrictions. ²⁵

Head on
with
contempt
cause
all four water
makes
something
happen.

In Malabar ^{Minisial / in sand} the women lead in everything. Exceptional cleanliness is apparent everywhere, and there is the greatest impetus to learning. When I myself was in that country, I met many women who spoke good Sanskrit, while in the rest of India not one woman in million can speak it. Mastery elevates and servitude debases. ^{the state of being a} Malabar has never been conquered either by the Portuguese or by the Mussalmans. ^{slave}

The Dravidians were a non-Aryan race of Central Asia who preceded the Aryans, and those of Southern India were the most

civilized. Women with them stood higher than men.²⁶

Everyone has the power to judge of good and evil, but he is the hero who, undaunted by the waves of Samsara—which is full of errors, delusions, and miseries—with one hand wipes the tears, and with the other, unshaken, shows the path of deliverance. On the one hand, there is the conservative society like a mass of inert matter; on the other, the restless, impatient, fire-darting reformer; the way to good lies between the two. I heard in Japan that it was the belief of the girls of the country that their dolls would be animated if they were loved with all their heart. The Japanese girl never breaks her doll. O you of great fortune, I too believe that India will awake again if anyone could love with all his heart the people of the country—bereft of the grace of affluence, of blasted fortune, their discretion totally lost, downtrodden, ever-starved, quarrelsome, and envious. Then only will India awake, when hundreds of large-hearted men and women giving up all desires of enjoying the luxuries of life will long and exert themselves to their utmost for the well-being of the millions of their countrymen who are

not discouraged by difficult & anger

bliss life & energy to

the freedom to decide not should be done in a part person

healthy such

Use a force to make something happen

very poor & without a home & other things necessary, life

gradually sinking lower and lower in the vortex of destitution and ignorance. I have experienced even in my insignificant life that good motives, sincerity, and infinite love can conquer the world. One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the dark designs of millions of hypocrites and brutes.²⁷

[It was early one Sunday morning, (writes the representative of the Prabuddha Bharata), in a beautiful Himalayan valley, that I was at last able to carry out the order of the Editor, and call on the Swami Vivekananda, to ascertain something of his views on the position and prospects of Indian women.]

'Let us go for a walk,' said the Swami, when I had announced my errand, and we set out at once amongst some of the most lovely scenery in the world.

By sunny and shady ways we went, through quiet villages, amongst playing children and across the golden cornfields. Here the tall trees seemed to pierce the blue above, and there a group of peasant girls stooped, sickle in hand, to cut and carry off the plume-tipped stalks of maize-straw for the winter stores. Now the road led into an apple orchard, where great heaps of crimson

a short journey made to deliver & collect

fruit lay under the trees for sorting, and again we were out in the open, facing the snows that rose in august beauty above the white clouds against the sky.

At last my companion broke the silence. 'The Aryan and Semitic ideals of woman', he said, 'have always been diametrically opposed. Amongst the Semites the presence of woman is considered dangerous to devotion, and she may not perform any religious function, even such as the killing of a bird for food: according to the Aryan a man cannot perform a religious action without a wife.'

'But Swamiji,' said I—startled at an assertion so sweeping and so unexpected—'is Hinduism not an Aryan faith?'

'Modern Hinduism', said the Swami quietly, 'is largely Pauranika, that is post-Buddhistic in origin. Dayananda Saraswati pointed out that though a wife is absolutely necessary in the Sacrifice of the domestic fire, which is a Vedic rite, she may not touch the Śālagrāma Śilā, or the household idol, because that dates from the later period of the Puranas.'

'And so you consider the inequality of woman amongst us as entirely due to the

influence of Buddhism?'

'Where it exists, certainly,' said the Swami, 'but we should not allow the sudden influx of European criticism, and our consequent sense of contrast, to make us acquiesce too readily in this notion of the inequality of our women. Circumstances have forced upon us, for many centuries, the woman's need of protection. This, and not her inferiority, is the true reading of our customs.'

'Are you then entirely satisfied with the position of women amongst us, Swamiji?'

'By no means,' said the Swami, 'but our right of interference is limited entirely to giving education. Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. No one can or ought to do this for them. And our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world.'

'How do you account for the evil influence which you attribute to Buddhism?'

'It came only with the decay of the faith', said the Swami. 'Every movement triumphs by dint of some of unusual characteristic, and when it falls, that point of pride becomes its chief element of weakness. The Lord Buddha—greatest among men—was a

marvellous organizer and carried the world by this means. But his religion was the religion of a monastic order. It had therefore, the evil effect of making the very robe of the monk honoured. He also introduced for the first time the community life of religious houses and thereby necessarily made women inferior to men since the great abbesses could take no important step without the advice of certain abbots. It ensured its immediate object, the solidarity of the faith, you see; only its far-reaching effects are to be deplored. *pleas of disapproval*

'But Sannyasa is recognized in the Vedas!'

'Of course it is, but without making any distinction between men and women. Do you remember how Yajnavalkya was questioned at the Court of King Janaka? His principal examiner was Vachaknavi, the maiden orator—Brahmavadini, as the word of the day was. "Like two shining arrows in the hand of the skilled archer," she says, "are my questions." Her sex is not even commented upon. Again, could anything be more complete than the equality of boys and girls in old forest universities? Read our Sanskrit dramas—read the story of Shakuntala, and see if Tennyson's "Princess" has anything to teach us!'

'You have a wonderful way of revealing the glories of our past, Swamiji!'

'Perhaps, because I have seen both sides of the world,' said the Swami gently, 'and I know that the race that produced Sita—even if it only dreamt of her—has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on the earth. There is many a burden bound with legal tightness on the shoulders of Western women that is utterly unknown to ours. We have our wrongs and our exceptions certainly, but so have they. We must never forget that all over the globe the general effort is to express love and tenderness and uprightness, and that national customs are only the nearest vehicles of this expression. With regard to the domestic virtues I have no hesitation in saying that our Indian methods have in many ways the advantage over all others.'

'Then have our women any problems at all, Swamiji?'

— 'Of course, they have many and grave problems, but none that are not to be solved by that magic word "Education". The true education, however, is not yet conceived of amongst us.'

'And how would you define that?'

→ a woman who is the head of an abbey nuns

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'I never define anything', said the Swami, smiling. 'Still, it may be described as a development of faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently. So shall we bring to the need of India great fearless women—women worthy to continue the traditions of Sanghamitta, Lila, Ahalya Bai, and Mira Bai—women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and selfless, strong with the strength that comes of touching the feet of God.'

'So you consider that there should be a religious element in education, Swamiji?'

'I look upon religion as the innermost core of education', said the Swami solemnly. 'Mind, I do not mean my own, or anyone else's opinion about religion. I think the teacher should take the pupil's starting-point in this, as in other respects, and enable her to develop along her own line of least resistance.'

'But surely the religious exaltation of Brahmacharya, by taking the highest place from the mother and wife and giving it to those who evade those relations, is a direct blow dealt at woman?'

'You should remember,' said the Swami,

'that if religion ^{holer} exalts Brahmacharya for woman, it does exactly the same for man. Moreover, your question shows a certain confusion in your own mind. Hinduism indicates one duty, only one, for the human soul. It is to seek to realize the permanent amidst the evanescent. No one presumes to point out any one way in which this may be done. Marriage or non-marriage, good or evil, learning or ignorance, any of these is justified, if it leads to the goal. In this respect lies the great contrast between it and Buddhism, for the latter's outstanding direction is to realize the impermanence of the external, which, broadly speaking, can only be done in one way. Do you recall the story of the young Yogi in the Mahabharata, who prided himself on his psychic powers by burning the bodies of a crow and a crane by his intense will, produced by anger? Do you remember that the young saint went into the town and found first a wife nursing her sick husband and then the butcher Dharmavyadha, both of whom had obtained enlightenment in the path of common faithfulness and duty?'

'And so what would you say, Swamiji, to the women of this country?'