

In The Quagmire of Violence: The Woman's Question and Swami Vivekananda: An Assessment

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Abstract: This paper emanates from the increasingly brazen violence against women in India in recent years. Woman who enjoyed a respectable position in the society in ancient time virtually lost her status with successive foreign invasions and changes in the economy. Gradually women who are the active agents of socialization became the passive victims of discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation etc. in the male dominated society. The philosophy enunciated by Swami Vivekananda is considered relevant from many quarters for structuring modern India and for gender justice. It is therefore, necessary to reassess his philosophy and to craft out a roadmap for gender equality, elimination of violence against women and their empowerment. It is pertinent to mention that at one end, Swami Vivekananda's philosophy on the upliftment of women is encouraging and thought provoking, the model he propounded in the form of 'Sita' is problematic. Herein lays the inconsistency between the question of amelioration of women and the model he identified for that. Given this perspective, this paper is an attempt to reassess Swami Vivekananda's philosophy in view to increasing crime against women and their emancipation.

Keywords: The Woman's Question and Swami Vivekananda.

Gender discrimination is prevalent in various parts of the world and the extent varies from society to society depending upon the cultural, social and geographical settings etc. The World Bank endorsed gender as an "issue of development; effectiveness, it is not just a matter of political correctness or kindness to women" (cited in Chatterjee 2010: 17). In fact, gender inequality has economic significance too. Gender discrimination and consequent violence on women actually emanates from deeply entrenched patriarchy and cultural practices that essentially rob woman of her security, dignity as human being and thereby inflicts innumerable physical distress and mental trauma. Such eruption of violence has psychological implications too because no rational and sensitive individual perpetrates violence on innocents. Therefore, criminal tendency is related to the abnormal psyche of man that led to brutal assaults and killings of women. In various parts of the country, women are tortured and killed apprehending them as witches due to religious superstitions. Hence it would not be wrong to say that gender violence has social, cultural, psychological, religious and economic dimensions.

The increasing gender violence in India like dowry death, female feticide, rape, murder, molestation etc. posits engulfing anxiety about women's security. Even the girl child and infants are not exception to this heinous crime. Trust Law, a news Service run by Thomson Reuters has ranked India as the worst G-20 country wherein women experience crimes like female feticide domestic violence, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, inadequate health care, inequality, dowry death, rape and gender based violence (Vivek 2013). The National Crime Report Bureau recorded that there were 309,546 crime against women reported to the police in 2013 against 244,923 in 2012, the highest being reported in Mizoram (10.1 percent) and least in Gujrat in 2013 (National Crime Bureau 2013). A notable recent incident is the gang rape of 23 year old medical student, Damini in a public bus on 16 December 2012. Increasing rape cases in India and the brutality attached to it has marked it a "National Problem". In recent times, more cases of violence on women are reported in Assam and other parts of the country due to religious superstitions. This provokes a couple of serious questions – why in

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India crime against women erupts so violently? Why the extent and the intensity of such violence continue unabated despite vehement protests? These are the fundamental questions to grapple with. In view to this, this paper is an attempt to explore and assess Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy in regard to the upliftment of women. The methodology that we have adopted to conduct the study is historical and sociological. We used secondary data to study the problem.

We could assess women's status in the society in ancient India from the religious texts and scriptures. These texts largely account the alleviated social position of Indian women. In Vedic period, women held a respectable position in the society and participated in the social and political life with freedom and equality. One such example is found in Rigveda wherein it is stated that women were free to choose their life partners. There were other instances wherein women performed as priests, sages and co-religionists etc. They also enjoyed ownership rights of ancestral property. The Vedic philosophy states that "men and women are essentially the ever pure, ever free ever illuminated Atman, the selfless self associated with body and mind the Atman becomes conditioned as male and female. True independence is essentially difficult if man is free and women unfree" (Rig Veda x:vii:xii). A good portion of Vedic literature proceeded from the mouth of the women. The Vedas while teaching morality articulates "Let the mother be your God" and that she is, "When we talk of woman in India, our idea of woman is mother. The value of women consists in their being mothers of the Hindu" (Vivekananda 2013:19). India produced fighter women like Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Chand Bibi of Goconda etc. "It is in the Aryan literature that we find women in ancient times taking the same share as men, and in no other literature of the world"(ibid). "The Gods are pleased where women are held in esteem"(Vivekananda1980:11). Vivekananda lamented "We are horrible sinners, and our degradation is due to our calling women "despicable worms" gateway to hell and so forth, Goodness gracious (ibid).

Due to the invention of settled agriculture and the entry of feudalism, women's equality got a backseat and frankness that prevailed between men and women was lost subsequently. The decline and degradation of women's status evoked a divergent debate. "It was the Assyrian race, coming of Semitic blood, which proclaimed the doctrine that girls have no voice, and no right, even when married" (Vivekananda 2013 :65) Gradually, women were deprived of her right to education since upanayana was mandatory for formal education. Rather, they were trained in house works and particularly in music and dancing. The bulk of productive labour fell on men whereas women were further pushed within the confines of their role as mothers and housekeepers. This was further obfuscated by subsequent foreign invasions, wars and political disorders that took away women's freedom (ibid). The foreign powers who ruled India with conservative attitude towards their women had a negative impact in the status of Indian women. British colonialism produced a deeply masculine culture of modernity that did not promote women's equality even though the colonialists claim that they ameliorated the low social status of the Indian women. Many of the reformers blamed "Muslim rule" as the deteriorated social status of Indian women. The introduction of purdah system had disastrous impact on Hindu women. R.C Mazumdar says, Hindus adopted the purdah system as a protective measure to save the honour of their women and to maintain the purity of social order (Mazumdar cited in Chatterjee 216).

Subsequently, the import of consumerism and market economy has further eroded the moral foundation and ethos of the Indian society. The basic foundation of the society is shaken since globalization failed to address the needs of all the classes of people. The uneven development led to frustration and psychological crisis. Since women are the marginalized lot in the society, they became more vulnerable in the changing situation. The mad craze in materialistic life, blind imitation of western ways of life, and exclusion of moral studies from the syllabus etc. has added more jolt to it. Consequently, brazen violence regularly erupts in the length and breadth of the country.

Given the increasing crime against women, we need to reform our legal system to prevent impunity to the criminals. Since our judiciary is overburdened, rape cases and cases relating to the violence against women must percolate down to the family and fast track courts for speedy trial. It is pertinent to mention that the marginalization of women is deeply rooted in our socialization process and criminal activities emanates from socio-psychological and pathological factors hence need arise to uproot it through a vibrant thought process and action. The founder of Jagori, a Delhi based NGO informed the Times of India that though there are growing awareness and reporting of sexual violence, "men are not able to accept" woman's increasing assertiveness and "use heinous ways to punish them"(www.theguardian.com downloaded on 25th May,2015)). There must be civil society initiative in creating awareness about the efficacy of gender justice, equality of man and woman and evil effects of age-old superstition etc. Since family, school and religious institutions are active agents of socialization, they have a larger role to play. It is the high time to include moral studies in syllabus. Chapters on

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Swami Vivekananda and his philosophy on youths, women and nation building must find place in the aforesaid syllabus. The school and the College authorities should organize talks, seminars etc. to highlight Vivekananda's philosophy on character building and man making. Vivekananda intended to set up Maths in the villages for reawakening India and this is a laudable step at the hour.

Since the violence on women occurs from the social mindset of inequality, Swami Vivekananda argued that discrimination is not justified. Rather, he endorsed the equality between man and woman. He categorically stated that just as bird cannot fly with one wing, society cannot march forward without the development of its womenfolk. He was highly sympathetic to the oppressed Indian women and insisted on their regeneration. His concept of equality was of gender interdependence for peaceful social atmosphere. He highlighted that since the atman has neither sex nor caste, it is wrong to discriminate between sexes and there is no justification to think of people as men and women but as human beings. The biological difference between men and women as Vivekananda perceived is not the grounds of inequality. According to him, sex discrimination is unfair because Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious self is present in all beings (CW Vol.7:214). It is impossible to get back India's lost glory, pride and honour unless the condition of women is improved. He observed "the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood—that marvelous, unselfish, all suffering, ever forgiving mother".

The violence on women has strong orientation to religious superstitions. He upholds that the great Vedantic ideal endorsed "wherever there is evil and whenever there is ignorance and want of knowledge, I have found out by experience that all evil comes as our scriptures say, relying upon differences, and that all good comes from faith in equality in the underlying same end and oneness of things." (CW Vol.3:194). The downfall of India according to him was due to the degraded position of women and advocated that the uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country (CW Vol.9 :10-18). If the women are raised, then their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country—then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awaken in the land (CW 7:220).

The essence of Vivekananda's religion is that "to be good and to do good unto others." He justified religion on the ground that it raises the brute to man and man into God. He preached that truth is the basis of all religions and hence we must always practice tolerance. It is pertinent to cultivate and nurture what Vivekananda preached-- the ability to 'feel'. He dwelt on Purity, patience and perseverance as the most influential qualities that could overcome all obstacles. The Hindus practiced many different customs and traditions and as a loose confederation of many different sects but he preached overall unification of the differences.

According to his philosophy, every man is potentially divine. Though science and technology could enable man to achieve great prosperity and power, it is necessary to balance it by love and respect for all fellow human beings. Since every Atman is intrinsically pure and also one with the supreme spirit (Brahman) one should always be pure in all his actions and be good to other Atmas (fellow beings). India had great spiritual heritage, which could be revived and harnessed to put India on the path of progress. It is the high time to rethink and restore India's spiritual in view of the galloping crisis of crime and human follies.

Vivekananda's views on youth are also relevant in the present context due to the concomitant relation between criminal activities and youth behavior. Youth according to him, is the best period of life. They could use their positive energy and defeats cannot easily degenerate into dejection due to their optimism. If used negatively, "their strength can degenerate into rashness and can be used to inflict cruelty and suffering. Power of the senses can get the better of the power of the mind, resulting in lack of poise and self-control, Courage can give way to impatience, restlessness and anger" (cited in Harshananda 2007:5). The best way to solve the problem is education that equips a person with necessary skills and professional competence to earn one's livelihood. It also gives one the training needed to live a decent social life. He also identified education, a vital instrument to rejuvenate India's national life and also a road map to women's emancipation (ibid).

It is found that in many cases educated men also perpetrate violence on women. This is perhaps due to the lacuna in the syllabus to deal with the problems in practical life and is a strong impediment in personality development. He remained critical of the existing system of education and raised that "The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring at strength of character, a spirit of philosophy,

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and the courage of a lion—is this worth the name (CW7:147). He rightly identified how the opportunities for an average youth belonging the middle and the lower income groups of society, rather bleak. Even admission into an educational institution is a serious problem since it requires donations, capitation fees and nepotism. The students is faced with the dilemma of choosing between the government run institutions that lack quality, discipline and dedication and privately managed institutions “which sell their seats to the highest bidders”(cited in Harshananda 2007:7). He identified unemployment problem as one of the evils and blamed the political parties for disruption and disintegration in the educational institutions. Vivekananda visualised education as man-making, life giving and character building (CW 3:302). The main objective of his scheme of woman’s education is to make strong, fearless women who would be conscious of their chastity and dignity. He lauded the effort of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in getting the Hindu Remarriage Act passed in 1856. Development of the true ideal of womanhood was the primary goal of education. Women as a class has different functions to fulfill in the social economy from those of men –both social and national economy require that women should occupy a station of their own.

Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in bringing Sister Nibedita and Sister Chistine to India who contributed enormously to the education of the Indian women. Sister Nibedita’s magnitude of contribution to the Indian society and awakening India’s national consciousness and especially to the education of the Indian women is yet to be recognised. Nibedita came to India in 1898 and worked for the education of girls of India. She had to work relentlessly in a relatively conservative society and had to work from door to door to enlist the girl students (Swami Prabhananda 2012:13).She believed that once the women in India awakes, the country would be great again (Atmaprana 2012:51).

Sister Chistine wrote, “Some of us believe that if Swami Vivekananda’s ideas regarding the education of women are carried out in true spirit, a being will be evolved who will be rising in the history of the world. As the women of the ancient Greece was almost perfect physically, this one will be her complement intellectually and spiritually—a woman, gracious, loving, tender, long suffering, great in heart and intellect but greatest of all in spirituality (Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western followers, p 210).

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Perna Nandakumar wrote in The Hindu (January14, 2013) “It was Swami Vivekananda who gave us back our dignity as women, our education, our strength of purpose and reminded us again that no woman is zero. Inspired by him, a host of social reformers all over India opened a new glorious page for Indian women. They educated themselves, took part in the Gandhian Movement in vast numbers, and became equal partners in work everywhere.”

Vivekananda’s philosophy is relevant to curb the evil tendency of female feticide in India. He advocated that daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons. He desired that schools for girls be opened in every village. For imparting education, he found it necessary to train Brahmacharis who would go to the villages and other places and would work hard without any hesitation. He said “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves, then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them.” that ancient India had produced women philosophers and scholars like Maitry and Gargi and was capable of providing similar characters again, with proper education for women He rejects a religion that cannot wipe the widow’s tears. He admired Western women and was impressed by the social dignity and status they enjoyed.

Vivekananda’s advocacy of women’s upliftment is praiseworthy but the model he identified for the progress of the Indian women explores his split personality. He categorically wrote that “the woman of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita, and that is the only way”(CW 3.256).S He thus eulogized Sita as an ideal female character. This perception is problematic since Sita had to consign herself in flames to prove her purity that was assigned by her husband Ram. Sita’s agnipariksha was an incident that was cruel in its totality and runs contrary to Vivekananda’s own proposition that perfect womanhood is perfect independence” (C.W Vol.4.176). He reminded his countrymen “O! Indian Forget not that the ideal of thy womanhood is Sita ,Savitri , Damayanti; forget not that the God thou worshipping is the great Ascetic of ascetics, the all renouncing Shankara, the Lord of Uma ;forget not that thy marriage thy wealth, thy life are not for self-pleasure-are not for thy individual personal happiness; forget not that though art born as a sacrifice to the Mother’s

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altar ;forget not that thy social order is but the reflex of the Infinite Universal Motherhood.....' (CW Vol.4: 479-80).In order to meet the modern day challenges and to retain her self-respect and dignity, the footprint of Indian woman ("Be Sita" CW 6:106) is invariably not Sita. Though Vivekananda was devout advocate of women's upliftment, he could not come out of the shackles of patriarchy that articulated sacrificial qualities as essentially feminine. Thus he assigns chastity only to the women and remained spectacularly silent about the chastity of man. Such construction categorized women as the passive agents wherein her rights and claims relegates to patriarchal prejudices.

CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda was a visionary and an icon for building modern India. Though the philosophy enunciated by him is relevant in all time and space, his popularity has reached to a magnitude in recent times due to colossal moral decay and increasing crime against women in the present society. The remedies he suggested for moral amelioration of the Indian society and his views on gender equality through women's education is relevant but the roadmap through which he intended to assail the deteriorated condition of women is problematic and questions the rationality through which he articulated the women's cause. Herein lays the root of oppression against women. This truly reflects the social reality of his time and his socialization within the framework of male dominated prejudices that did not even spare women burning alive by her husband's consent who took the oath of her safety and security. Hence, we must appreciate and uphold the philosophy enunciated by Vivekananda in championing women's cause but the model he enunciated through Sita should be carefully ignored given the impact of patriarchy in his socialization process.

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