

Sri. Ananda
Ramakrishna Mission, Bombay

RELIGIO-CULTURAL APPROACH TO THE GENDER PROBLEM IN INDIA

1. A Historical Perspective of Women's Plight

Apart from the general progressive trends of modern political life and society – of scientific and rational thinking and high technological advancement, expanding into a kind of world civilization, beyond all caste, creed and gender – side by side, rather along with these, there are many growing parallel incidents also of narrow superstitions, religious beliefs and fanaticism. And these erupting primitive character of our own history have acquired a new name "Fundamentalism," that is to say, political terrorism and religious fundamentalism have acquired a new significance, it seems, in our so-called modern life also in some recent past. The sacrifice of Rup Kanwar as *sati* in Rajasthan, of late has acquired also some social, political and sacerdotal importance. The event has evoked immense interest in all quarters including some historical and cultural researchers. Dr. Romila Thapar writes: "There is no simple explanation for the origin of the custom of burning widows on the pyres of their dead husbands. It is said to be a symbol of aristocratic status associated with many early societies such as those of the Greeks and the Scythians." She also mentions that "In the *Rig Veda* the act was only a mimetic ceremony. The widow lay on her husband's funeral pyre before she was raised from it by a male relative of her dead husband. Attempts were made probably in the sixteenth century, to seek Vedic sanction for the act by changing the word *agre* to go forth, into *agneh* to the fire, in the specific verse. But since the widow is not meant to immolate herself this change is spurious. The Vedic act referring to families of high status encapsulate the termination of an earlier practice or the symbolic death of the wife."¹ For example it is believed that Ahalyabai Holkar decided to become a *sati* but Malhor Rao dissuaded her and she was just twenty years then. Thereafter she began to assume power and responsibilities

1-5. Romita Thaper, "Sati in History," Seminar 342 (February 1989).

in the Holkar family and proved herself to be one of the most able administrators in the Holkar tradition and a historic figure even now.

To quote more instances of *sati*, it seems "the *Mahabharata* has references to some widows becoming *satis* such as Madri, the wife of Pandu or the wives of Krishna. Curiously the custom is not generally observed among other Pandavas or by the wives of those Kauravas who died in the battle at Kurukshetra. It was obviously not required of all Kshatriyas. It has been argued that these references to the *sati* are late interpolations. Madri however was from the Punjab."² The other references of history that Romila Thapar has given are as follows:

(a) "Inscriptional and archaeological evidence suggests that the greater occurrence of immolation seems to date to the end of the first and early 2nd millenium.A.D. This was a time of new areas being opened up to settlement by caste-based society and encroachment on a larger scale into tribal areas. New castes emerged in this background of a changing economy, some with antecedents in the earlier pre-caste society. In the competition for status, various observances of upper caste society became current. . . . The immolation of widows may have been seen as a method of demarcating status."³

(b) Then also according to Thapar "An inscription of A.D. 510 at Eran in Central India refers to the wife of Goporaja who immolated herself when her husband died in the battle. The practice was by now well known in this area. Similar inscriptions from Rajasthan and Nepal date to the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. This evidence predates even the emergence of Islam, let alone its arrival in India."

Thapar has also referred to such inscriptions supporting *sati* rites among other Hindu rulers (Chalukyas, Yadavas, Hoysalas etc) from the 10th to the 14th centuries A.D. Based on these information the fact of stray cases of *sati* can be said to have taken place scattered through many centuries - no matter what the number or popularity of it amongst the general section of the people. But now it can be said with emphasis perhaps that it was a common trend amongst the upper and ruling class of India and never affected the life of the ordinary folk. How it can be said then as it is claimed now that "cultural ideas, values and forces have played an important role in creating women's images themselves and reinforcing gender dichotomy" and also that "examining the rituals and ceremonies which Hindu

girls are expected to participate in, throws much light on this process of socialisation." Thapar herself, however, concludes that; "sporadic references for or against the ritual do not tell us much. If *sati* is to be properly understood it would require tracking down of information on widow self-immolation involving a number of sources, pertaining to a range of social groups and with reference to various regions at different points in time. Only when we examine the juxtaposition of kinship, property relations, rights of inheritance, the approach to sexuality, the ethic of the hero attitudes to deity and adjustments to social change in the context of our history, will we begin perhaps to understand why and how women were encouraged or forced to become *satis*."⁴ Not otherwise.

Naturally, the question is when there is no such absolutistic certainty and no information about the uniformity of such a custom throughout the country at any periods of time and sometimes no authenticity of the sources-how can *sati* be evoked as a socio-religious system so deeply connected with all the Hindus as such? Sometimes it is found that a very local custom of meagre historic importance suddenly becomes a general issue in a milieu of a social and political trend only. This is specially true and so much applicable in a country like India where even today people are very prone to accept legend and mythology as true. And nobody can help the matter. Of course, in the heat and excitement of such feats as *sati* everybody forgets that such an issue or crisis may not be so powerful at all to be admitted as a very deep social and religious issue. No doubt *sati* is a kind of very novel and ghostly cracking out of social adventure and an occasional release of our psychopathological social situation and individual romance here and there, under the garb and cover of religion only. These cannot be shown as any universal bold adherence to this custom anywhere in the Indian scriptural literature. Thapar writes, "Medhalithi, the major commentator on Manu (Smriti) writing in about the 10th Century A.D., is strongly opposed to widows becoming *satis*. He argues that the practice is *adharmā* and *ashastriya*-against the laws of *Dharma* and not conceded by *Shastras*."⁵ And she also quotes from Puranas that "The notion of *sati* therefore is tied to the heroic ideal of the Kshatriyas and it is not surprising that up to this point in history it is not permitted to other castes and specifically not to Brahmin women as is stated in the Padma Purana." Of course, this was subsequently changed, as Mitakshara texts permitted *sati* system but prohibited *Niyoga*. It seems *Mahanirvana Tantra* also states; "A wife should not be burnt with her dead husband. Every woman is the embodi-

ment of the Goddess. That woman who in her delusion ascends the funeral pyre of her husband shall go to hell."

Like various other obsolete practices and sacrifices of different primitive religions everywhere in the world *sati* can never claim to have any credibility now. It has no future also. Many rituals of the Pueblo culture and sacrifices of the Mayan people and also some of the formidable primitivism of the African countries have been wiped out by the time itself. And the best way to help such process is to ignore even such stray instances as that of Rup Kanwar altogether and not to give any more media-importance. In fact *sati* is not an alive issue today, nor it is a crisis. Only law should take its own vigorous course. And as P.V. Kane has written it in his *History of Dharma Sastra*: "This subject is now of academic interest in India since for over a hundred years (i.e., from 1829) self-immolation of widows has been prohibited by law in British India and has been declared to be a crime."

Besides, *sati* is not a case for the women alone to be opposed. It is a total nuisance for the whole society. Unfortunately, this *sati* issue has not only been confused and mixed up with the whole of the Hindu religion as one of its very fundamental character, but it has been fully misunderstood by a group of female progressivists as another effect of male domination, chauvinism and age-old neglect of women in our society. It is true that some orthodox sections are also so confused that some of them think that the abolition of *sati* is an anti-Hindu affair altogether. What a nonsense it is now, "To argue that the abolition of *sati* is a deliberately anti-Hindu act, is to replay the debate of the 19th century where Ram Mohan Roy had maintained correctly that it does not carry the sanction of the Vedas and Mritunjaya Vidyalkar maintained that it was not enjoined by the *shastras*. If status has to be demonstrated today there are other ways of doing it than by burning wives"—thus remarked Thapar.

This recent confusion has gone so far as to question certain uncalled glorification of the status for women in ancient India which has been recorded by some earlier scholars. May be some of these records are very controversial. But how can we deny that the basic intention of such glorification were benevolent and they wanted to turn our attention towards some more positivistic utopian type of values and glorification. And in their meaning system there was some approach of creativity, imagination and synthesis and not merely bare analysis of naked and

negative truth. And idealistic interpretation of history may not be always very realistic. But there should not grow any misunderstanding as to their *bonafide* contention.

For example, Altekar in his work *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* argues : "The exigencies of the political situation in the Vedic period were responsible for the abolition of the prehistoric *sati* custom and the sanctioning of *niyoga* and re-marriage." But he has been dubbed as a racial propagandist because of his observation was that: "The introduction of non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household is the key to the general deterioration of the position of women that began imperceptibly about 1000 B.C. and became quite marked in about 500 years. The non-Aryan wife with her ignorance of Sanskrit language and Hindu (sic) religion could not obviously enjoy the same religious privileges as the Aryan consort. Association with her must have tended to affect the purity of the Aryan co-wife as well." No doubt, Altekar was not very coherent in his logical explanation of the historic background and human neglect and deterioration of women's status in ancient India. Rather he was superficial and very much expedient to follow up a conclusion of his own.

Naturally, it is questioned that why "Ultimately, and due to the non-Aryan wife," all women, Aryan and non-Aryan lost their privileges. One is left wondering, why, using the same logic Aryan men who associated with such non-Aryan women, were not deprived of their religious privileges." Thus attacking some of the so-called historic picture of the idyllic condition of the Aryans in the Vedic age Uma Chakraborty and Kumkum Ray rightly concludes that; "The challenge needs to be taken up in order to arrive at a fresh understanding of history of women in early India and in the long run, to evolve a more meaningful and comprehensive historical perspective in general."⁶

There might have been many such gaps left in our historiographical studies that very often fails to explain the actual situation in our society then. But how can we deny that there was always somebody or other in different periods of history to point out these gaps in the society also. Though it may be the fact at the same time that society too has not taken them all very seriously and their caveats. Time-wise, the period of history from

6. Uma Chakraborty and Kumkum Ray, "In Search of our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XXIII No. 18 (1986).

Buddha to Adi Sankara had undergone a different kind of situation and then from Sankara onwards may be some different attitude of conservatism and orthodoxy started spinning itself differently about the untouchability and the affairs of status of the women in our society. And then this period was followed by a period of confrontation both from within and without which brought many a change in the situation. For that there were several factors and not merely religious, political or social. Nothing was so straight as that!

Sankaracharya also inspite of his Advaitic preaching was circumscribed by his time and society and in many respects he was a typical representative of Brahminical civilization and culture. He was not a deflection of history and his contemporary period. And at that time, excepting Buddhist convent and some Jain nunneries most of the Hindu world and their views on women were centering round their immediate surrounding and narrow kinship (i.e., family and a closed group of clanish relations). Social views were not in progress in the Hindu Society. May be because of Hindu revolt, the Buddhists and Jainas were having some more freedom to grow into a kind of progressive view and social maturity. Whereas the Hindu views concerning the status of women were all limited and restricted to their domestic jurisdiction. It has been rightly noted that "... asceticism especially of the kind associated with the nunneries of the heterodox sects, offered women an alternative outside the restrictions of the kinship structure and an opportunity for self-expression." And really, "It is pertinent also that Altekar fails to explain why asceticism had no impact on the Hindu widower. However despite its inadequacies as an explanation, the ascetic ideal and its impact are frequently referred to in almost parallel terms in later literature as well."⁷

But from Horner's work *Women in Primitive Buddhism*, Chakraborty and Ray pointed out that "Whilst most work on women in early India deal with the categories of daughters, wives, mothers and widows, Horner introduces a new category, of women workers. This is possibly the first attempt to analyse the role of women outside the kinship network – shaking off the domestic aspect of women and attempting to see her as an independent entity in the context of wider society." However, the treatment on the role of women in the Sangha is very significantly pointed out, because it was the first great noble step beyond the narrow goal of kinship and the family by the women themselves. Later history of these convents was of

7. *Ibid.*

course full of occasional vandalism by the male anti-socials within the society and later by the muslim vanguard and invaders. The situation followed in such a manner for so many centuries that nothing could survive properly in its real shape. Romila Thapar also mentions that "It has been stated that these was an epidemic of *satis* in South India at the time when the Vijayanagara Kingdom was collapsing. In 1420 Nicolo dei Conti visited Vijayanagara well before its peak period in the early 16th century and left an account which survives only through a series of translations. He describes the ritual of self-immolation and adds that three thousand wives and concubines of the king of Vijayanagara had pledged to burn themselves on the death of the king." Though there was no evidence of such mass offering of *sati*-rites, the horrible condition of the society is of course very much reflected in it. The image is so bleak and barren no doubt for anybody to be pessimistic.

Thus a kind of fear and suppression of women followed for centuries. Women were under protection and *purdah*. This screening of women from being seen by men or strangers was another effect of it in society and history too. There was very little for the women to do beyond tending the family or being the objects of mans desires. No field was open for them for learning, or to earn a livelihood or free social movements. Really it was a very dark period for women in the Indian history and it was only during the renaissance that some progress and enlightenment appeared. Stalwarts of this period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gokhle, Ranade, Dayananda Saraswati, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Subramaniam Bharati, Rama Bai, Mahatma Gandhi and quite a few others came forward and voiced themselves on the social status of our women and their educational and cultural enlightenment. Each in their own way of course, and many of them were unique in their contribution during this period stretching about one hundred years.

2. Swami Vivekananda and his Contribution

But amongst them all Swami Vivekananda's role in the end was very distinct because right from Sankaracharya or may be even sometime earlier than that, there were practically none amongst the *sannyasins* to represent the cause of women so vehemently in our society and that too in such a bold and radical manner. No doubt, Indian women were at once a slave and goddess, a saint and a strumpet at the same time and there was not only a confusion but a constant vacillation between ideali-

sing and degrading women amongst us. Vivekananda not only joined other leaders of the country in glorifying the status of women, he started an open criticism against all such conservative aspect such as casteism and backwardness of the women as number one enemy and greatest weakness of the country that has already done some irreparable damage to us throughout the history. He began almost exactly where women were left in history.

He began, raising a voice for independent monasteries and ascetic movement for the Hindu women almost in parallel line with Buddhistic convent and Jaina nunneries and this was a thing almost hitherto unknown in the Hindu society. There were Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri etc., but they were all models and glories of individual female life that has become famous in history. None of them were shown as social-power. A social-power in collectivity was an absolute necessity and it could be gathered best as a spiritual power. Swami Vivekananda's idea of *Stri-Math* was not only historic and spectacular, it was dynamic and modern also as it could play a great role in removing the discrimination of women of the past many centuries. Surely the idea was better than having a separate political platform for women, specially at that time. Of course, Brahma Samaj had already come up with other small female movements and organisations. But none of them were clear about the role of the women as renunciator which Vivekananda has proclaimed. Compared to other areas or field of work this was rather akin to their religious nature and somewhat serene. To boost up a moral courage and character that was already down a spiritual and cultural drive was all in the imagination of Swami Vivekananda and he was also in favour of social service action within the parameter of such Math or Movement. What Swamiji wanted very specifically was that all these to be done independently by women themselves. Men should have nothing to do with such movements really and he never liked men's unnatural interest in these affairs of the movement. Also possibly because he was himself aware of some of the antecedent of such reform movements which were mostly reduced to some sort of hegemony of the menfolk, if not very dominant and exploitative at the same time.

Inspite of this spiritual thrust and the renunciation and the kind of a women movement that he wanted to start, he never neglected the married life and civil side of their society. He said "In my opinion, a race must first cultivate a great respect for motherhood, through the sanctification and inviolability of marriage, before it can attain to the ideal of

perfect chastity. The Roman Catholics and the Hindus holding marriage sacred and inviolate have produced great chaste men and women of immense power. To the Arabs, marriage is a contract or a forceful possession, to be dissolved at will and we do not find there the development of the idea of the virgin or the *Brahmacharin*. Modern Buddhism, having fallen among races who had not yet come up to the evolution of marriage has made travesty of monasticism And you have come to see that the glory of life is chastity. So my eyes also have been opened to the necessity of this great sanctification for the vast majority, in order that a few life long chaste powers may be produced." So he made a way of the Indian civilization and society through both, rather proportioned between the marriage and monasticism.

Perhaps the least that he expected from men was only some initial arrangement and opportunity for education. Through education only our women could be enlightened. He said: "Women have many and grave problems, but none that cannot be solved by that magic word - education."⁸ And "Daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons. As sons should be married after observing Brahmacharya upto the thirteenth year, so daughters also should observe Brahmacharya and be educated by their parents. But what are we actually doing?"⁹ "They have all the time been trained in helplessness and servile dependence on others; and so they are good only to weep their eyes out at the approach of the slightest mishap or danger."¹⁰ So "Women must be put in a position to solve their problems in their own way. Our Indian women are as capable as doing it as any in the world."¹¹

Then again not only he wanted strength giving independent type of education for the women, his idea was ultimately to steer clear an effective national education through them (women) specially at the Primary level. And like many other modern educationists he too believed that the bulk of our Primary education will not only be safe but be best adopted and moulded in national interest by the mothers and sisters of the nation, so that they can inspire them better into manhood and into a kind of nationhood, no doubt. The fact is in most of the Far-Eastern countries where Buddhist culture and civilization prevailed, the beginning of education and

8. *Complete Works of Swamy Vivekananda* (1962) p. 231.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 229-30.

schooling of a great portion of their children were mostly managed by the monasteries. Swamiji thought of taking this benefit atleast, in spreading education amongst the illiterate masses and children, from the monastics. But his plan was not taken up at all by the government, even though Basic-Education of Gandhiji was given a trial after independence.

Vivekananda himself has clearly explained his point: "Studying the present needs of the age, it seems imperative to train some of them in the ideals of renunciation, so that they will take up the vow of life-long virginity, fired with strength of that virtue of chastity which is innate in their blood from hoary antiquity. Our motherland requires for her well-being some of her children to become pure souled Brahmacharins."¹² It would have been much better than the party and cadre system of education that is functioning now through out the country. Character stamina and dedication is more important in education than politicalisation or sheer professionalization that has seen its hey-day now. Life begets life. If the teacher himself or herself is a down-grade person, how can they be examples. Unfortunately, Rup Kanwar the recent victim of the *sati* was also an educated girl it seems. But her education was not that strength giving and character-building type. Many in worst situation than her are still putting up fight and life must have the fire to fight. Otherwise fire will consume life and such engulfing flames should not be allowed to spread itself weakening the society further into a so-called superstitious pit of human sacrifice and defeat.

Naturally Vivekananda emphasised, "Brahmacharinis of education and character should take up the task of teaching."¹³ And according to him, "In villages and towns they must open centres and strive for the spread of female education. Through such devout preachers of character there will be the real spread of female education in the country."¹⁴ He went on to say "History and *Puranas*, housekeeping and arts, the duties of home life and the principles that make for the development of character have to be taught."¹⁵ And "other matters such as sewing, culinary art, rules of domestic work and upbringing of children will also be taught. Japa, worship and meditation shall form an indispensable part of the teaching."¹⁶

12. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

13. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 489.

14. *Ibid.*, VII, pp. 217-18.

15-20.. VI, p. 489 ; VIII, p. 217 ; p. 342 ; p. 231 ; VI, p. 489 ; VIII, p. 220.

Also, "Along with other things they should acquire the spirit of valour and heroism. In the present day it has become necessary for them also to learn self-defence - how grand was the Queen of Jhansi!"¹⁷ He expected, "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 fearless, strong with the strength that comes of touching the feet of God."¹⁸ Yet in spite of his religious and renunciatory outlook he insisted that "We must see to their growing up as ideal matrons of home in time. The children of such mothers will make further progress in the virtues that distinguish themselves. It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born."¹⁹ His expectations were thus that; "If the women are raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awaken in the country."²⁰

It is not that what Vivekananda wanted was exactly Sankritization and a sort of orthodox moralization for the country again. His idea was to spread the culture and to make it more dynamic to the society. So he said; "My idea is first of all to bring out the gems of spirituality that are stored up in our books and in the possession of a few only, hidden as it were in the monasteries and forests, to bring them out; to bring the knowledge out of them, not only from the hands where it is hidden, but from the still more inaccessible chest, the language in which it is preserved, the incrustation of centuries of Sanskrit words. In one word, I want to make them popular. I want to bring out these ideas and let them be the common property of all, of every man in India whether he knows the Sanskrit language or not. The great difficulty in the way is the Sanskrit language, this glorious language of ours and this difficulty cannot be removed until, it is possible, the whole of our nation are good Sanskrit scholars. You will understand the difficulty when I tell you that I have been studying this language all my life and yet every new book is new to me. How much more difficult would it then be for people who never had time to study it thoroughly! Therefore the ideas must be taught in the language of the people."²¹ Europe vernacularised the Bible and brought religion and culture to the people from the Greek, Latin and Hebrew, from the monopoly of the church to the Universities. In this fight Puritan church, Calvinists and Protestant Revolution were really the path-finder. Monopolis of the orthodox church

21-24. *Ibid.*, III, p. 290 ; p. 292 ; III, p. 255 ; III, p. 245.

and the priestcraft were otherwise menacing in the same manner as some of our religious groups. That is why Vivekananda was emphatic, "Teach the masses in the vernaculars. Give them ideas; they will get information but something more will be necessary. Give them culture. Until you can give them that, there can be no permanence in the raised condition of the masses."²²

The meaning system, the spirit of a country or a nation is the central care of it and if that is not evoked or inspired properly it cannot go ahead and Vivekananda rightly understood that, "Centuries and centuries, a thousand years of crushing tyranny of castes, kings and foreigners have taken out all their strength. And the first step in getting strength is to uphold the *Upanishads* and believe, 'I am the soul,' 'Me the sword cannot cut, nor weapons pierce; me the fire cannot burn; me the air cannot dry; I am the Omniscient, I am the Omnipotent'."²³ Really, "These conceptions of the Vedanta must come out from the forest and the cave, they must come out to work at the bar and bench, in the pulpit and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman and child, whatever their occupation wherever they may be. How can the fishermen and all these carry out the ideas of the *Upanishads*? The way has been shown. If the fisherman thinks that he is the spirit, he will be a better fisherman, if a student thinks he is the spirit, he will be a better student."²⁴

There are many such inspiring calls given by Vivekananda and his idea of an awakening attempt to be attempted through education and all that other service that is possible under the guidance of the monastics, both men and women independently is also highly appreciated. But, "The main difficulty in dealing with Hindu asceticism is its absence of homogeneity. It is characterized by a variety of beliefs and practices for it has no central organisation and is constituted by a multitude of independent monastic communities attached to one or another of the numerous sects (*Sampradaya*). No statement made about one of its traditions can be valid for the rest. This holds good for the female ascetics as well since it is within the monastic orders affiliated to different sects that they are to be formed. They do not form a coherent group, but rather co-exist in quasi ignorance of each other. One may speak of 'Hindu feminine asceticism' but only in a very general sense."²⁵

25. Cfr. Catherine Clementire Ojha, "Outside the Norms: Women Ascetics in Hindu Society," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April, 1988).

Vivekananda was also aware of the situation. Once a disciple asked him: "Sir, history does not tell us of any Maths for women in India in ancient times. Only during the Buddhistic period one hears of Maths for women, but from it in course of time many corruptions arose. The whole country was overrun by great evil practices." He replied; "It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women. Whereas Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings. You always criticise the women but say, what have you done for their upliftment? Writing down Smritis etc., and binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into mere manufacturing machines! If you don't raise women who are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other to rise." According to him: "In the period of degradation, when the priests made the other castes incompetent to the study of the Vedas they deprived the women also of their rights." He knew and he has mentioned about the Vamachara (*Tantric*) corruption in Buddhistic monasticism. But he was hopeful that "Even now there are lady disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. With their help I shall start the Math. The Holy Mother will be their central figure and the wives and daughters of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna will be its first inmates. For they will easily appreciate the usefulness of such a Math. After that, following their example, many householders will help in this noble work." And he added "These celibate nuns will in time be the teachers and preachers of the Math. In villages and towns they will open centers and strive for the spread of female education. Through such devout preachers of character there will be the real spread of female education in the country." After listening to these ideas in some details, the disciple remarked "Sir, your teachings have opened my eyes today." Vivekananda replied immediately; "Not fully yet, when you will realise that all illumining truth of the Atman, then you will see that this idea of sex-distinction has vanished altogether, then only will you look upon all women as the veritable manifestation of the Brahman. We have seen in Sri Ramakrishna how he had this idea of divine motherhood in every women, of whatever caste she might be or whatever might be her worth. It is because I have seen this that I ask all of you so earnestly to do likewise and open girls schools in every village and try to uplift them. 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 country." When the question of smattering education and Western modes of living etc. were shown as the evil consequences of the spread of female education Vivekananda replied: "In the begin-

ning a few mistakes like that are unavoidable. When a new idea is preached in the country, some failing to grasp it properly, go wrong in that way. But what matters it to the well being of society at large ? Well, those who are pioneers of the little bit of female education that now obtains in the country, were undoubtedly very great hearted. But the truth is that some defect or other must creep into that learning or cultural which is not founded on a religious basis. But now female education is to be spread with religion at the centre. All other training should be secondary to religion. In the female education which has obtained up till now in India, it is religion that has been made a secondary concern, hence those defects you are speaking of have crept in. But no blame attaches therefore to the women.... Founders of all good undertakings, before they launch on their desired work must attain the knowledge of the Atman through rigorous self-discipline. Otherwise defects are bound to occur in their work. ...Ours is to do good works in our lives and hold an example before others. No work succeeds by condemnation. It only repels people.... Every fire has a chance of being attended with smoke. But will you on that account sit inactive? As far as you can, you must go on doing good work.'²⁶

It is not the fault of anybody that some of this expectations were not fulfilled. On the other hand it still proves where the thorn lies even today and how prophetic was he in blaring out the need of such a unique women organisation. Today there is no such voice also therefore, to represent the cause forcefully, excepting two extreme fighting camps of the males, one representing the Sankaracharya of Puri Govardhan Math and the other by the Arya Samaj leader Swami Agnivesh. Of course, there are many enjoying the fights. Had there been a powerful *Stri Math* the way Vivekananda projected they could better raise an effective movement against dowry, sati, matricide torture and child marriage etc. Besides there are many evils with which specially our women societies are still suffering from perhaps only to be handled as sensations only.

It is a fact, therefore, that, "This extremely loose structure allows a considerable freedom to spiritual masters and it explains to some extent how female ascetics have finally found their way into most monastic orders, even those traditionally closed to them. But to be admitted into a lineage one does not allow one to transmit its religious tradition, that is

26. Cfr. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, VIII, p. 212-219.

to initiate and become a Guru. It is only in some very rare cases that there is an evidence of self sustained societies of women ascetics. More often, female ascetics have to survive within the frame work of systems that are essentially male oriented and have been designed and refined by males for other males."²⁷

So, we will have to agree that Vivekananda had envisaged a fantastic truth but we have strayed away from his thinking and we have failed to consolidate Hindu society and culture altogether – what to speak of awakening the Hindu women alone! His sense of organisation and its deep emphasis to bring out a kind of disciplined structure out of all its narrow divisions and conflicting ideas, we have failed to realise. We have not attempted to put them into practice also and instead many of us are trying to go alone the way we like. We have failed to create any apparatus even to realise these basic principles of Hindu life and society. Obviously, with this frittering tendency Hinduism has gone more towards hereticism and chaotic thinking than towards some systematic organisation, throughout its past. Present also seems to be very bleak without any centric character and organisation to sustain itself specially at the time of some confusion and challenge that is due to us only from within the Hindu society. Standing at this cross-road of history, it can be very well said perhaps that we have very much missed Vivekananda's farsight and leadership and where is time now to follow him when a political hegemony has stepped into manipulate some power by Hindu-vote or caste-vote only. Otherwise it is class-vote only. Without some inner preparation and development: any attempt at such window-dressing will not solve the inner-crisis and split within ourselves, however much we try externally, Vivekananda wanted to move and organise the very core of Hinduism and not a political form to be used as a shield against any onslaughts, as if Hinduism was lacking it. The rich and progressive contents of Hinduism and spirit of its culture should be properly understood for a real unity that one seeks sometimes so haphazardly, in the externalities of the Indian culture. It is no wonder that without such understanding our actual life will reflect utter confusion and in that we will contradict ourselves most irresponsibly saying that: "He hates the woman because she reminds him that he is a creature of the flesh. In private he urges the woman to sexuality, contraception, abortion and wrong doing and yet he condemns these in public. He wants her healthy, vigorous, seductive and chaste all at once. He

27. C. Clementine Ojha, *op. cit.*

reproaches her for being mediocre, lazy, shabby and unattractive and keeps her shut in the kitchen. He clips her wings and then deplore the fact that she cannot fly."²⁸

The women-heroines that Vivekananda dreamt for his future India were not just womanhood of the past. Not dames shaped out of the stories and legends but practical enough to fight out the present situation of life in the society. Not the *sati* type escapism – but chaste and bold type, virile and sacrificing type yet with all the qualities of womanhood no doubt and not the timid selfish or the sensuous one. His picture of womanhood was more living and dynamic that came nearer to all the modern attractive female paradigm that we can think of. He sometimes combining an ideal motherhood mixed up with *virangana* nature or heroic qualities of modernism, wanted to create a new type, it seems, out of the same womanhood. Though, to be exact, Sita was of course there, deep in his mind, but his Sita was never that lamenting symbol of Indian womanhood. Sita was an enduring symbol of character, firmness, sacrifice, purity and love which our modern women needs most today to be emulated by themselves. She was not only a protest to Ravana but a mystery of Indian womanhood that can stand all the test of fire and the situation was almost similar to that of *sati* rites into which a woman is put into by the so-called men-heroes of the society. She is a typical dilemma and challenge to our womanhood from which our society has to steer itself away clearly. Even the stray case like that of Rup Kanwar should not be allowed to slip by from such challenge that she has thrown against for all the time to come. Vivekananda himself has described this Sita ethos for India in his own powerful language: "Sita is typical of India – the idealised 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 *pouranika* story that has so permeated the whole nation, so entered into its very life and has so tingled 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... Sita was a true Indian by nature; she never returned injury... She is there in the blood of every Hindu man and woman; we are all children of Sita. Any attempt to modernise 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 must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita and that is the only way."²⁹

28. R. P. Sharma, "Men Were Masters," *Times of India* (July 24, 1988).

29. Complete Works III (4th ed.) pp. 255-256.

Though Vivekananda began with Sita, he did not end up there, along with Sita, Savitri, Sarada, Damayanti etc., he also wanted some heroic types that we gather from the stories and legends from Rajasthan, some kind of admixture of Ahalya Bai, Jhansi Ki Rani, Rani Durgavati, Razia Sultana or Chand Bibi. Not their exact replica but their spirit with sufficient modernism no matter. Many others also had his vision. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay sought it in the character '*Durgesh Nandini*' or 'Ram Bhavani.' In his *Ananda Math* he has allowed even horse riding to his heroine character which he has composed out of his imagination. Thus a higher vision about women was emerging gradually in the literature, but not in actuality. Yet considering some aspect or other of Indian woman, some Western writers conclude: "The Hindu recognition of an underlying female principle has impressed some observers as a more positive formulation of women's place in the cosmos than that offered by the Judeo-Christian Tradition. And as Joana Liddle and Rama Joshi has observed, "The worship of the mother Goddess does not constitute a matriarchy but it does constitute a matriarchial culture, in the sense that it preserves the value of women as live-givers and sources of activating energy and it represents the acknowledgement of women's power by women and men in the culture."³⁰

Of course, there are some people who view the *sati*-worship more as hero-worship than any deep or serious spiritual matter and it is a fact that there are many "Sati-stones like hero-stones" that "occur more often, not in fertile agricultural mainlands but in ecologically marginal areas where local conflicts and skirmishes would be frequent." And according to Romila Thapar's observation; "Possibly in marginal areas, the process of transition from tribe to *Jati* may have required an underlining of the new norms which would have implications for the inheritance and status of women. Tribal chiefs are also memorialised in hero-stones and this was part of the process of Kshatriyaisation, assimilation into sanskritic tradition."³¹

Whatever the historians or academists might conjecture there is still nothing to be pessimistic by all these. Because inspite of these contradictions there is no denying the fact that in the Indian cultural traditions a tremendous potential is stored within still ready for combating the reactionary forces and anti-women religious conservatives, as Madhu

30. Quoted in: Kathryn Hansen, "The *Virangana* in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April, 1988).

31. Romila Thapar, 'Sati in History,' Seminar 342 (Feb. 1988).

Kishwar has pointed out rightly if, "We can identify their strength and use them creatively." And our medias have a great role in it. But simply by propaganda for or against, nothing great can be achieved. Apart from the media, culture as it is, has a tremendous capacity to tolerate and absorb a growing situation. In the immunity process thus built within itself it is very likely no living culture will tolerate unnecessary interference with its inherent system indeed. For example, "In the West, Feminists such as Andrea Dworkin have analysed the attitudes towards women contained in the common fairy tale heroines: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella etc., all of whom, she declares, ... are characterised by passivity, beauty, innocence and victimisation. These heroines figure largely in the reproduction of a culture which diminishes women from generation to generation."³²

Vivekananda has pointed out that such extreme female worshipping culture has fallen at times at the feet of passion and enjoyment. Where is that gallantry in such material culture and sensuous literature. Sometimes it is more flimsy and is nothing but a superficial mutual admiration of the society in general only. But on the other hand too much of a mother worshipping culture cannot but breed a life long infantile dependence and a 'psyche' of a different kind, not very healthy for growth at all. Therefore Swami Vivekananda sought a parallel line of growth and a complete development of both men and women independent of each other – though cohesive and complimentary in a universal sense and values only. He did not like the so-called bartering or interdependence. In this regard his theory of two wings of a society has to be properly understood. Even in interdependence there must be a proportion of collaboration and a ratio in the deal or exchange of life in the society not of course on profit or loss basis but all on mutuality and self-sacrifice. Surely no society can fly on one of its wings and any lopsided unhealthy growth or relationship in this regard may rather affect the progress of the society itself. It is here he wanted no discrimination between men and women in the march towards the ideal or goal of life and he believed that freedom is the *sine qua non* of all growth.

Surprisingly in the modern thinking there is a kind of feeling even amongst the progressivists and the most radicalists that: "The structuring of women as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices

32. Kathryn Hansen, *op. cit.*

is fundamentally implicated in the constitution and reproduction of a social system characterized by gender assignment and the overall subordination of women." And thus Leela Dube writes; "It should be kept in mind that gender differences that are culturally produced are almost invariably interpreted as being rooted in biology as part of the natural order of things."³³ Whereas Vedas had given her the position of an "Empress" in the family and as Vivekananda has aptly retorted; "I know it all, Brother; 'The Gods are pleased where the women are held in esteem' *Yatra Naryastu Pujyante ramante tatra Devatah' Manu Smirti.*" Our degradation is due to our calling women 'despicable worms,' 'gateways to hell' and so forth. Vivekananda continues: 'He adjudges gifts according to the merits of the case.' Is the Lord to be hood-winked by idle talk? The Lord has said '*Tvam Stri, Tvam Puman asi, Tvam Kumara uta va Kumari*' - 'Thou art the woman, Thou art the man, Thou art the boy and the girl as well.' And we on our part are crying '*Duram apasara, re Chandala*' - Be off thou outcast! '*Kena esha nirmitha natu Mohini etc.*' - 'Who has made the bewitching woman?'³⁴ And Manu also enjoins, "Daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons."

So there are enough ideas and mechanisms in the Indian scriptures through which women can acquire social values and equal dignity and visions for their future and need not blame the national culture as such. No doubt there is a lot of misunderstanding between the theory and practice. But more than that, there is a bias understanding amongst our educated section of women and that is why they fabulate sometime most unnecessarily about improper the apportionment of family resources and complain against gender-based division of work etc.

Vivekananda's reply to this is: "I should very much like our women to have their intellectuality, but not if it must be at the cost of purity." He was frank enough to tell them, "I admire you for all that you know, but I dislike that way that you cover what is bad with roses and call it good. Morality and spirituality are the things for which we strive." Then continuing in the same vein, he remarked "When I look about me and see what you call gallantry, my soul is filled with disgust. Not until you learn

33. Leela Dube, "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 30, 1988).

34. *Complete Works*, III, p. 224.

to ignore the question of sex and to meet on a ground of common humanity will your women really develop. Untill then they are playthings, nothing more. All this is the cause of divorce. Your men bow low and offer chair, but in another breath they offer compliments. They say, 'Oh madam, how beautiful are your eyes! 'What right have they to do this? How dare a man venture so far and how can you women permit it? Such things develop the noble side of humanity – They do not tend to nobler ideals." And he bawled out against such gender consciousness, thus; "We should not think that we are men and women but only that we are human beings, born to cherish and to help one another." Then he pointed, "The trouble with the nations of the West is that they are young, foolish, fickle and wealthy. What mischief can come of one of these qualities, but when all three, all four are combined, beware!"³⁵ In spite of education and all that, "In the West, the women did not very often seem to me to be women at all, they appeared to be quite the replicas of men! Driving vehicles, drudging in offices, attending schools, doing professional duties! "And according to him" In India alone the sight of feminine modesty and reserve soothes the eye! With such materials of great promise, you could not, alas, work out their uplift: You did not try to infuse the light of knowledge into them! For if they get the right sort of education, they may well turn out to be the ideal women in the world."³⁶

Finally, even if we agree for the time being that: "Between the polarities of self-effacing wife and the all powerful mother lies an overlooked and yet alternative paradigm of Indian womanhood: the *virangana*, who manifests the qualities of *virya* or heroism," and very correctly, "the *virangana* is dedicated to virtue, wisdom and defence of her people. Above all she is fighter and victor in the struggle with the forces of evil." But here the confusion is and we also know that for our correction that though Sita, Sarada etc., were not *virangana* in any form – they were all shining examples of Indian cultural and moral forces, of dignities and virtues in woman life and also examples of strength of a different kind altogether. There is something known as *genteel-power* that can also bring change in the course of history gradually and as Vivekananda has described it like gentle and mild dew, it always helps blooming human qualities and character. This power also can continually endure as a long term process of history itself, without attracting anybody's notice sometimes in all silence though

35. *Ibid.*, V. pp. 326-27.

36. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 446.

in a steady manner. Therefore we must not easily mix up the meaning of the term *virangana* with some outward glamour and valour in the most physical or material sense. Otherwise we may miss this inner meaning of the value and life that is hidden in the term *virangana* also as an alternative paradigm for our women. Swami Vivekananda was all in favour of striking a balance between these apparently antagonistic attitude and towards making a more complete sense between them both, physical and spiritual. A rare possible combination of course!

3. Mahatma Gandhi's Vision of Indian Women

After Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi's role is another very significant one in the contemporary history of India. He did some systematic thinking on the problems of women in keeping with his Indian outlook and other values of life. In the beginning it seems, Gandhi sought to utilise and foster an effective political role for the women of India. No doubt he helped joining them with the Freedom Movement of India in a typical manner that is known to him and he was unique in this regard. For, according to Gandhi, "A woman can achieve a higher moral and spiritual life if she rejects her sexuality, reproduction and family life and devotes herself to the welfare of the people."³⁷ Excepting some slight difference in purpose, in Gandhi also there is an echo of Vivekananda's emphasis on purity and dedication. Vivekananda called for thousands of Gouri Mas (Gouri Ma was a very dynamic person who came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna Dev and herself started some work amongst the women and founded the Stri Math long before the coming of the present Sharada Math) to do this work of moral regeneration which Gandhi also adopted for his immediate political purpose.

Really, how true it is that, "Existing Hindu social customs do not allow women to grow into her new role. Child marriage, *sati* and dowry exploit women and reduce her dignity. Women's organisations should be formed which will not only fight against these social evils but also build awareness in women of their new role in Free India. These their organisations should be run only by women as their distinctiveness are only understood by women."³⁸ Another significant point is that, in the very beginning of his leadership in the national movement Gandhi also felt that, 'it is important that separate and different programmes, that involve women in

37-40. Quoted from Sujata Patel, "Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 20, 1988.

participation be evolved.' The emphasis on the separate programme for women does not mean any kind of gender discrimination.

According to Gandhi only "During the non-cooperation movement spinning, and in the civil disobedience movement, picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops were introduced and became special womens' programmes." Therefore one can say like Vivekananda, who also wanted visibility of women through religious movement, Gandhi too wanted to do the same thing in a slightly cautious manner and we know how successful he was in bringing them out to a political surface during his life time. Perhaps in the beginning Gandhi himself was slightly more hesitant in exposing women beyond their domestic environment or immediate ken of life. His concern in this regard was very real for he himself has said; "... if she is forced to enter the public sphere where she is not 'honoured' or 'respected' and if her purity is violated she has to kill herself though sheer will force."³⁹

But we have to understand Gandhi in a manner as Sujata Patel has pointed out; "By affirming certain roles and negating others, Gandhiji is extracting and reformulating from the received ensemble of ideas on women in a given historical movement a construct of contemporary womanhood; the reformulation itself being mediated by his class, caste and religious ideologies. Gandhi is thus not only making an attempt on women but also on what she should be. For, interlaced with these assumptions are a set of legitimisers that define the concept of femininity and womanhood which act as prescriptive frames of reference in his construction of women."⁴⁰

It is a fact that, "The pre-colonial upper caste Hindu woman had always remained within the four walls of the house. Gandhi, on the other hand, was writing at a time when urban India had many visible women workers who did not remain at home. He was also extremely familiar with rural areas where women workers have been part of its visible reality and had toured the country before setting up Sabarmati Ashrama." Thus one can say, that Gandhi made a short cut rather attempting an easy synthesis between the Vivekananda's all renunciate ascetic type and the common household type with some amount of dedication. No doubt, his Sabarmati type of Ashrama-life which was later popular as Gandhi Ashrama, was for all practical purpose, just a via-media. It was a moderate design of the public life in general in India, having none of the extremities and nothing to risk. Such Ashrama life too when provided with

too much of scheduling and securities and maintained an atmosphere of law abiding life, loses its characteristic spirit of dedication and renunciation. It loses its spirit and becomes a compromise slowly between the ordinary household life and hermitage. Sabarmati Ashrama was a kind of half way house where Gandhi himself was struck down by a different kind of reality which Swami Vivekananda, as a sannyasin, did not have to bother at all. And definitely Vivekananda was aggressive and bold: But without some fire brand, energetic, self-sacrificing free-souls how can a movement take its proper shape? Because Vivekananda was very clear about his mission from the very beginning he wanted to set up an order of renunciate women first to work as an apparatus and then as a path finder, model institutions which will pave the way for the future development of women in general. He also wanted a Math exclusively for the women for that purpose. Gandhi could not go so much forward. Because, "Gandhi, when confronted with what appears to him a problem of 'honour,' 'purity' and 'chastity' which is mediated by his own middle class patriarchal attitudes, reasserts with more directness, the need for women to remain in the house and fight for Swadeshi from the house. The vow of Swadeshi is thus transformed from its political roots into religious and moral ones. To practice Swadeshi (struggle for the country's freedom) now means to protect Indian womanhood. The protection of this honour becomes in turn '*Ishwar Bhakti*.' The fight for the country's freedom, the protection of her wealth and of the honour of her women becomes in Gandhi the programme for the future."⁴¹

At one stage Gandhi himself was bewildered to think about the protectionlessness and the abuse of the working women and children going out for daily wage earning in the village itself. And he spoke at a meeting of the workers in Ahmedabad: "If the workers find it necessary today to send their wives and children to work in factories it is our duty to see that they do not have to. There ought to be no need for women, children to go to work at the cost of their education for the sake of an extra income of three or four rupees. Work is not for children, nor is it for women to work in factories... If we send them to the factories who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline. I feel convinced that for

41. For reasons of space we can not discuss here the Ashrama Life in detail and the distinction of Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math* with Vivekananda's and that of Gandhi-Ashrama with Rabindra Nath Tagore's '*Santi Niketan/Visvabharati*,' Aurobindo Ashrama and Ramana Maharishi's Ashrama etc.

men and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. Do not therefore, send your women out to work, protect their honour, if you have any manliness in you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them."⁴²

Gandhi's sharp reactions on the problems of working women and children and his concern for their chastity can very well be compared with what Marx has said about it in the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx has noted this abuse in greater manner but he did never bother about it. The problem with Gandhi was his severe attachment to Indian values and culture and sometimes he was also misunderstood for this. Vivekananda, however, did not mix up religion and politics, neither that was his purpose. According to Vivekananda, for the sake of ethics and lack of political morality, the on going process of any society can not be jeopardized. History cannot be pushed back into the well of an ancient village or family system. Going back and holding whole or part of a society into an old system is no remedy or protection either. Economic necessity vs. value crisis as shown here is rather very confusing in the modern social context. Society should have and do have the power to confront such a situation or adopt some defense in various other manners than to suggest women to stop simply their wage earning and remain well protected within the four walls of the household!

The difficulty with Gandhi during this period has been very well explained by Sujata Patel and she is very nearly correct when she observed: "What we see in this period is not a resolution of these ambiguities. In this period (1923-32) Gandhi is actively involved in confronting and re-defining the contours of Hinduism." But how can this question of re-defining the contours of Hinduism can come up all on a sudden, at a time in a political and economic struggle of the country? Sujata Patel comments on it in her own way: "His campaign for Harijan entry into temples makes him seriously challenge contemporary orthodox Hindu interpretations and redefine for himself both Hindu religion and its conscience keeper, the Hindu women. As a result, he attacks the conservative and orthodox elements that constrict Hindu women in society as well as inhibit them in their political work. By commenting on child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry, *sati*, he exposes and challenges the Hindu Orthodoxy while simultaneously reformulating

42. *Complete works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol. 17 (1920), pp. 47-51.

and thus emphasising marriage as the only regulator of man-woman relationships in society. In this process of reformation Gandhi comments on romantic love and its role in marriage, on legislation relating to women's rights and on division of labour in the household. Gandhi is preparing a construct for modern women, for the new nation. His writings in this period indicate the radical departures he is making in unraveling and questioning the existing modes of exploitation of women (no doubt of only one group of women yet the dominant mode of understanding of women in contemporary Indian society) and the constraints of his own framework from which he cannot break out.⁴³ But the question that still stands here is that how can Gandhi is said to have preparing a construct for modern women, when he himself did not like women to come out of their household even for wage-earning and that too on the grounds of purity etc.? Like fighting out the untouchability he could as well fight out this issue on the same manner.

So it can be very well said then that Gandhi himself had some kind of confusion in bringing out the women from their households. Yet he wanted to politicize our women and wanted their national participation. In his attitude he was somewhere peculiarly hung between old orthodox idea of domestication and politicalisation of Indian women. Vivekananda, however, did not suffer from this kind of split, though he too believed that under the care of a household life only, not only a nation grows, but its purity and spiritual life is protected. To him also marriage is the Corinthian Pillar of civilization. According to one of his typical sayings, even our mothers and sisters can and do contribute a lot towards the upbringing of a powerful nation by dressing vegetables and cooking properly for their children, if they like. Because a nation depends on food and care too. But inspite of all these, Vivekananda never sought the great idea of this nationhood to be fulfilled within the parlour of a household. Domestication and politicalisation are different things. If they are to be taken as one and the same thing then, India would never become a state. Gandhi mixed up the issue here.

Sujata Patel also pointed out; "Purity, the attribute of Sita, is now transformed into a fight for freedom. Sita's purity made possible Ramarajya, the fight for Swadeshi will give purity to India."⁴⁴ The one question most appropriate now is, has Swadeshi really given that

43-44. Sujata Patel, *op. cit.*

expected purity to India? Gandhi declared; "The spinning wheel is the symbol of chastity of womanhood in India. In the absence of the spinning wheel, I give you my testimony, that thousands of our poor sisters are giving themselves to a life of shame and degradation." May be Gandhi wished the spinning wheel to be the economic weapon for the women, Utopian as it is. Khadi industry needs the prop of several thousand crores of rupees and yet is not self-sufficient and the country has paid sufficiently for such Utopianism. The spinning wheel is rather too much now to be accepted by Indian women. They are all aware, how Sita herself was neglected and are still being neglected in the Indian society. Sitas are still under going the horrible test of fire everywhere as it was once upon a time in the Ramrajya itself. The recent T.V. programme of *Ramayana* also somehow focussed this event of Sita's *agni pariksha* which nobody could relish, it seems and there was comments galore against this version of Tulsidas' Chaya or Maya-Sita as a weak and evasive devise of our typical psyche towards Indian womanhood.

Excepting that Gandhi was not so very clear about the freedom of women and their great role as a spiritual leader and renunciator, Gandhi had many views in common with Vivekananda. For example, on the question of widow remarriage Gandhi also did not have much interest and his idea of purity, chastity and self restraint were almost of the same type of Vivekananda. His stress, however, was more on spirituality as such and Gandhi's stress was rather ethical. And about satihood, Gandhi had an unique approach it seems, for according to Sujata Patel; "Satihood for Gandhi means the realisation of purity through renunciation, sacrifice, self-discipline and dedication to the service of her husband." And, further "If Gandhi does not want the women 'to mount the funeral pyre on her husband's death,' he wants her husband's ideals and virtues live again in her actions in this world." Really, "What Gandhi is attempting to make is a critique of those aspects of Hindu culture, 'which has erred on the side of excessive subordination of the wife and has resulted in the husband exercising authority that reduces him to the level of brute.' He highlights some practices that restrict the freedom of women to operate within this definition of marriage and this within the household. Child marriage, purdah, dowry and *sati*, he feels, need to be discarded. Also those legal codes that do not treat women and men as equal within the family need to be changed. Women, Gandhi insists, are co-sharers in their husband's

power and privileges."⁴⁵ To share this life equally Gandhi even wanted that "since cooking has to be done, both (husband and wife) should take a hand in it," and also that "food requirements should be kept simple and it should be cooked only once so that kitchen should not occupy all of women's time."

Thus Gandhi was more practical and he would enter into the details of household life. In Vivekananda this sort of systematic detail is not available and his main idea was to leave these details to them. Excepting some outline of the general educational pattern, perhaps Vivekananda never thought it that necessary to go into the details. That is why he said; "Religion, arts, science, house-keeping, cooking, sewing, hygiene – the simple essential point in these subjects-ought to be taught to our women." He said; "But know for certain that absolutely nothing can be done to improve the state of things unless there is spread of education first among the women and the masses," particularly with reference to the tragedy that took place in the Rup Kanwar's case, who was herself educated to a certain extent. Vivekananda's observation in this connection is very appropriate: "They have all the time trained them in helplessness, servile dependence on others, and so they are good only to weep their eyes out at the slightest approach of a mishap or danger. Along with other things they should acquire the spirit of valour and heroism. In the present day it has become necessary for them also to learn self-defence. See how grand was the Queen of Jhansi!" Referring to the child marriage and other nuisances he remarked: "And about your religious hypocrites, the less said the better. In these days no one hears them but still they will take up the role of leaders themselves (how true). The rulers passed the Age of Consent Bill prohibiting a man, under the threat of penalty to live with a girl of twelve years, and at once all these so-called leaders of your religion raised a tremendous hue and cry against it, sounding the alarm, 'Alas our religion is lost!' As if religion consists in making a girl a mother at the age of twelve or thirteen! So the rulers also naturally think, 'Goodness Gracious! What a religion is theirs! And these people lead political agitations and demand political rights'. " According to Vivekananda education is a must; "Otherwise irregularity and corruption will ensue. By education I do not mean the present system, but something in the line of positive teaching. Mere book learning won't do. We want that edu-

45. Vivekananda, *Our Women*, p. 32.

cation by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's feet."

Gandhi had a feeling on the other hand that : "way to women's freedom is not through education but through the change of attitude on the part of men and corresponding action" and he also mentioned that: "We dare not wait for literary education to restore our womanhood to its proper state. Even without literary education our women are cultured as any."⁴⁶ Commenting on this passage Sujatha Patel contended: "No longer is education considered a means for the development for women. Women already have their strengths and according to Gandhi, they can intervene and act in contemporary view. How far this is a true situation, one has to think and one can contend this view of Gandhi very easily."

But some of the evils pointed out by Gandhi are still menacing not only our country but others as well. A recent report from Daka (July 31, 1988) speaks of a number of divorces (nearly 5000) in last 15 months in the District of Pabana in Bangladesh alone amongst the Muslim women. The main reason is, it seems, narcotics and hereoin drug addiction amongst the entire male population in some areas and utter state of poverty and exploitation of the women. Thousands of cases are still pending in the courts and the Muslim Law has allowed some legal concessions and favour to the women in this connection initiated by the President Ershad himself. So the situation is worst than the affair of one Rup Kanwar or some stray cases of burning daughters-in-law in Hindu society. Sometimes religion, sometimes patriarchy alone are held in general as major factors responsible for perpetuating such a situation. But it is useless to talk now that: 'in a highly sex-segregated society like India, women might have a measure of autonomy.' At the lower level there is very little of this sex-segregation. Even in the village men and women work together. But it will be like a mere simplification of a very crucial and complicated problem. Very often in our study and analysis, we are more bias or affected. As Deepa Gahlot has pointed out rightly: "The result of the women's movement in the West has been the production of new stimulating feminist literature. Our scholars still look to the West for insights on feminist thought, philosophy and ideology, when the specifications, requirements and yardsticks of women studies in the Third World and particularly in India, are quite different." Further she has commented correctly that: "Inspite of some progressive legislation

46. *Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 14, p. 127.

and developmental activities, the position of women in India is 'startling in its grimness.' Surprisingly, despite indications to the contrary in urban areas, women's conditions have "worsened considerably in every sphere with the exception of some gains for middle-class women in terms of education and society." Very true it is that "Government policies and laws for the benefit of women are spelt out in the book but they only drive home the sad fact that a majority of women are denied justice and legal rights. That is all the more reason for the feminist movements in India to shed its elitist nature and work at the grass-roots level."⁴⁷

It is commendable to fight out inequality between the genders economically. But any plan to become operative, there should be an implementation strategy, infrastructural support and resource allocation. Commenting on the draft on National Perspective Plan for Women, Kumud Sharma writes: "The basic approach seems to be towards strengthening and more vigorous implementation of existing legislation, re-orientation of existing policies and programmes, special intervention where benefits do not reach women and the need for 'empowerment' of women so that they are able to absorb the benefits meant for them." And it has been criticised that this "Empowerment of women has become a catch phrase in many policy documents. The empowerment of poor assetless and unorganised women cannot be done through top heavy structure. Such structures which are removed from the people do not empower woman" etc. Really, empowerment as a concept itself do not seem to fulfil any purpose and even if the women are empowered, how are they going to retain it, when they themselves are neglected and not even properly provided with minimum education sometimes. So it is very likely that any such credit facilities and loan consideration or even reservation of seats in Panchayat Raj, is not going to raise their economic or political or legal status. These are likely to be abused by others in the name of service to the suffering women and various type of corruptions are likely to be encouraged again. Also such administrative measure as "the creation of a special division with the department of women and child development for the enforcement of laws for women with an officer in charge being designated commissioner for women rights," is also not going to be very helpful either. The situation will be similar to that of the office

47. Deepa Gahlot, "The Second Sex," a review article on, *Women and Society in India*, by Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishna Roy in *Indian Express Magazine* (July 31, 1988).

of the Tribal Commissioner and such bodies as Minority Commission etc. in India, as none of these were found effective in any oppressive social and political situation.

Depicting the reverse side of the reservation issue of 30% women in the Panchayat Raj and other bodies, Kalpana Sharma points out that: "In Karnataka and some other states there is reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj bodies and on Municipal bodies. But who are the women who fill the quota? Political parties apparently cannot find enough women Candidates to fill the reserved quotas. Most of the women who do stand are proxies of male politicians who openly manipulate them. Although some of these women may develop their own clout as a consequence of being in politics over some period of time their motivation and orientation is not any different from their male colleagues. So if any purpose was to be served by reserving seats for women, it has been defeated."⁴⁸

'American business-women' complain that they have problems obtaining institutional credit and also bidding on Government contract. Many banks insist that women get a man to co-sign their application for credit leading to absurd situation such as the woman with a 2 to 5 million dollars company who had to take her bankrupt and unemployed brother to co-sign so that she could avail of credit! According to Kalpana Sharma, "In India, of course, the women who have made a name for themselves in business are mostly wives or daughters of successful businessmen. Like their American counterparts, they too are venturing in the non-traditional areas . . . Even if they have experienced some difficulties in obtaining finance, or in being taken seriously even by the men in their own families, they have flourished because they had the backing of their families. Only very few exceptions can be found to this rule." Therefore things are not so different in India.

The instance of unequal and unfair wage for women has turned out to be a common factor in our country and usually the women have no other go than to accept it, as the situation stands now. The wage-rate is so arbitrarily low or manipulated that no legal protection can help them. Any benefit that is given to the women as a disadvantaged group is not that effective actually anywhere. For that there has to be a general awakening first, and in this regard education has to go a long way yet.

48. Kalpana Sharma, "Women in Perspective," *Indian Express Magazine* (July 31, 1988).

Like a nation or country, our women society as such has to prepare for itself a general condition of development through education and without such general preparation any measure, economic or social, is likely to trickle down as failures and go fruitless. Mere props and aids is not that helpful. Feminists mostly ask for separate outlooks and demand rights and privileges and sometimes these feminists are themselves impediments to a general outlook of growth and preparation. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, and prophetic Vivekananda were trying to create this general condition of growth, which alone can make gender-equality a reality in our country.