



Research Paper

Women Empowerment in Sri Aurobindo's Selected Poems

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I. Introduction

Women empowerment is one of the most discussed issues of our age and times. A large section of women, despite hyperbolic appreciation from them across nations and cultures, are still battling hard to breathe free. Their social, political, economic and educational condition still remains far worse than that of men in many societies and nations, including ours.

All talk of a 'Superpower India' seems idiotic as long as our women and children are roaming in the streets of hurt and humiliation with begging bowls in their hands. The magic system of democracy will not truly liberate women unless we as a society stand up and speak of their all-round betterment. The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram seemed prophetic when she revealed Indian society's duplicity in its treatment of women.

"Indeed, is it not in India that we find the most intense adoration, the most complete veneration of the Supreme Mother, creatrix of the universe, conqueror of all enemies, mother of all the gods and all the worlds, dispenser of all boons?"

"And is it not in India too that we find the most radical condemnation, the uttermost contempt for the feminine principle, Prakriti, Maya, corrupting illusion, cause of every fall and every misery, Nature that deceives and defiles and lures away from the Divine?"

How beautifully she pointed out the double speak in India society and psyche!

But when we read this passage till the end, we find that Light of Hope and Truth that we seek. The Mother tells us:

"And it may be that India, the land of contrasts, will also be the land of new realisations, even as she was the cradle of their conception."

Sri Aurobindo's epic poems, Savitri, remains one of the most profound and thought provoking creative academic and yogic adventures of our times. Savitri is a spiritual biography of the Mother. Daughter of Sun and goddess of Light, Life and Truth, Savitri Presents many magical formulae of true women empowerment. Sometimes the whole poem seems nothing but the poet's prophetic proclamation of the inexhaustible female powers.

Our eyes naturally grow moist when we read the following lines from the epic, spoken by the Madonna of Sorrow:

*I am woman, nurse and slave and beaten best;
I tend the hands that gave me cruel blows.
The heart that spurned my love and zeal I serve;
I am the courted queen, the pampered doll,
I am the giver of the bowl of rice,
I am the worshipped Angel of the House.
I am in all that suffers and that cries.....
I am the spirit in a world of pain
God gave me love, he gave me not his force.*

But the story does not end there. Savitri arouses the most infallible force in humanity: spiritual power. By her tapasya and yog siddhi, she becomes great, mighty and invincible, bold enough to take on yama, the god of Death!

When that god suggests that she should weep and forget Satyavan after his death in the forest, Savitri roars back at Death, placing a bold challenge before him:

*World-spirit, I was thy equal spirit born.
My will too is a law, my strength a god.
I am immortal in my mortality.
I tremble not before the immobile gaze*

*Of the unchanging marble hierarchies
That loo with the stone eyes of Law and Fate.
My soul can meet them with its living fire.*

This material world has been created by woman by her will, force and love, the forces of God. By the ardor and faith in these forces Savitri challenges Death to a direct fight.

*For I, the woman, am the force of God,
He the Eternal's delegate soul in man.
My will is greater than thy law, O Death;
My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate;
Our love is the heavenly seal of the Supreme.*

I guard the seal against thy rending hands.

As the unrelenting Death god keeps throwing daggers of argument, Savitri too becomes virulent and bitter and, in one of the most beautiful expressions of Independence ever, says:

*I trample on thy law with living feet;
For to arise in freedom I was born.*

The shallow discourses that we see in India about women empowerment are in serious need of radical reform. Woman cannot be understood unless we see her for what she fundamentally is a spiritual force of God at work. And this enrichment of understanding is not possible until the society as a whole becomes aware of its own innate spiritual existence, and, in broader moments of intuitive illuminations of the "Oneness of Existence." Women certainly need more space, not only on the dead pages of laws and regulations but in the humane hearts of men too.

The character of Savitri is conceived as a synthesis of Sri Aurobindo's Views of woman: She is the Shakti of satyavan and Bhawani, the Mother of Strength. She is also the incarnation of Mahashakti, the Divine Mother. As the Shakti of satyavan, his elan vital, savitri becomes the invigorating force of his soul and fills his life with love and bliss. In her struggle with ignorance, fear and weakness, she rises above her ordinary self and transforms herself into Bhawani, the blazing mother of strength. She reveals herself as Bhawani through her determined will, superhuman strength and steadfast courage. In the encounter with Death Savitri's divine self stands fully revealed. It is in her divine self as Mahashakti that Savitri vanquishes Death saving man from eternal imperfections of fear, pain, suffering and death and establishing the "life divine" on the earth.

Sri Aurobindo's conception of woman is certainly a product of his reading as well as his experiences of life. While stressing the importance of his experiences as a married man, revolutionary and mystic, one cannot neglect the fact of his voracious reading of the classics of philosophy and literature of the west and the East. Sri Aurobindo's experiences of book as well as the world must have gone into the formation of his characteristic vision of woman that distinguishes him from his contemporaries. Hence, one has to trace the sources of his vision in both the European and Indian traditions of thought about woman as embodied in the literary and philosophical classics.

The European tradition appropriate for such a study is that of courtly love which has been described as a set of convention widely observed in the amatory poetry and romances of Europe during the Middle Ages and continued in the literature of the Renaissance. During the earlier Middle Ages passionate love between man and woman was frowned upon by the theologians. Woman was considered the prototypical Eve who made man's life sinful and her status was far from equal to man in the society. However, in the early twelfth century there came a marked change in the view of man's relationship with woman as elaborated in the poetry of the troubadours of southern France. These poets were attached to various courts and made sexual love almost the exclusive theme of their poetry. The troubadours highlighted in their poetry an attitude of subservience and fidelity to a cold and cruel mistress. There was a strong tendency of quasi-religious adoration in the praise of the beauty of the lady. The lady occupied an exalted position over the poet (man). His feelings for her ennobled him and made him more worthy. Courtly love being the movement of the soul of man towards a desired object, the lover's growth and progress is charted in terms of achieving natural goodness, merit and worth. Though courtly love is essentially a product of the aristocratic and chivalric society, it owes much to the cult of the virgin in its stress on the exaltation of the beloved.

It is, however, the Indian scriptures and the philosophical treatises to which Sri Aurobindo is more indebted for his view of woman than to the European classics. Mainly two traditions of ancient India the Vedic and the Tantric- give high place to woman. In framing his view of woman Sri Aurobindo seems to have been influenced by these two prominent traditions of India. It cannot be ruled out that Sri Aurobindo subscribes to the traditional Hindu view of wife as ardhangini. But he felt that the concept was not sufficient; so he felt that the concept was not sufficient; so he modified it keeping in view the woman's power and consciousness. Woman in not only the better half of the man but she is his elanvital, the force that enlivens and invigorates his life. The

role played by woman in the life of man is so important that man is ineffectual without woman. It is the Tantric view of woman that helped Sri Aurobindo in modifying the traditional Hindu or Vedic conception into his vision of woman as the shakti of man.

The contents of his letters to Mrinalini reveal that Sri Aurobindo subscribes to the Hindu view of wife to some extent. The origin of the Hindu view of woman is found in the Vedas, the Puranas and the Manusmritee. In the Hindu society marriage is considered a sacred bond between man and woman. After marriage a wife is supposed to follow her husband not only in this world but even in the world beyond it. According to Hindu view, the wife is one-half of the husband, therefore, a man is incomplete without a wife. Further, according to the Hindu view of family life, a wife is necessary for man for proper discharge of material and spiritual functions. It is said that the wife is the source of dharma, artha and karma. The ideals of the Hindu wife are laid down in a passage in the Anushasan Parve” of the Mahabharata:

A woman who considers virtue as the foremost of all the objects of pursuit, who observes the same which are observed by her husband, who adorned with chastity looks upon her husband as her god, who surrenders her own will completely to that of her husband's who is cheerful who observes excellent vows, who is gifted with good features and whose heart is completely devoted to her husband so much so that she never thinks even of any other man, is considered truly righteous in conduct.

As has been pointed out earlier Sri Aurobindo's conception of woman is not confined to Hindu view of ardhangini which lays down that wife is just a helpmate and partner of man. His view of woman as the Shakti of man makes the position of woman better and not a subordinate one to her husband. A tradition much talked of and observed in India gives high status to woman and considers her the incarnate Shakti. This tradition in India developed as a philosophical belief and later on as the mother worship cult. The mother-worship cult idolizes woman as a compassionate mother and goddess and is an inseparable phenomenon in Indian history, religion, philosophy, literature and art. The dignified position women enjoyed in ancient Indian society strengthened the practice of mother-worship cult. With its rich heritage and the noble philosophies India was, however, subjugated in course of time by other nations, as a result of which Indian women lost their high position in society of course there are other factors which contribute to the low profile of Indian women. Sri Aurobindo explains that: “the increasing tendency to deny the highest benefits of the common life and culture to the shudra and the woman brought down Indian society to the level of its western congeners.

Hence it can be concluded that through Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol Sri Aurobindo tried to propose an alternative discourse of power. By expounding Savitri- a minor character of Mahabharata into the first female avatar, he creates hope for the empowerment of women in the contemporary India, whom the society treated with hypocrisy. They were worshipped as deities in temples and at the same time, were asked to show their fidelity by accepting patriarchal norms unquestioningly. Savitri proposes that women do not need to become aggressive in order to become powerful. All they need is a tremendous will-power which shall bring about their emancipation. Savitri's combat with Death through reason and speech could also be an inspiring symbol for the colonized nation so that they too could stop surrendering to the present situation of servitude and try to bring about the transformation within themselves by reasoning out a way to win back; not only their terrestrial freedom from the imperial power but also necessitate a liberation feminine, Sri Aurobindo indicates that perhaps it is time to redefine heroism by locating it within an alternative, gender- neutral frame of power dynamics.

References

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