

The Power Of Love

**Swami Vivekananda's Thoughts on Indian
Women and the Indian Ideal of Marriage**



RAMAKRISHNA MATH

Domalguda, Hyderabad.

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- *Sudha Emany*

* * *

Foreword

The Power of Love is a restatement of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on Indian women presented by Swami Ranganathananda in his classic booklet, *Our Women*. Some aspects of that work have been expanded, some redefined, and some have been refocused to address the concerns of modern day women.

While the earlier version of this book, titled *The Ideal Woman* discussed Swami Vivekananda's ideas on Indian womanhood, their spiritual advancement, and their social uplift, this iteration of it adds an elaborate discussion of our ancient institution of marriage, the roles and responsibilities of the spouses as delineated in our tradition, the erosion of some of those concepts in the present day and, once again, Swami Vivekananda's approach to those issues.

We will discuss in this booklet the need for education of our women, their role as mothers, and their responsibilities as members of the society at large. We will indicate at each stage how our ancient culture and ingrained spirituality can be of tremendous help in their quest for perfection.

Swami Vivekananda looked upon human life as an outward expression of our inner spirituality. Among other things, this booklet is based on the

idea that, if women's spiritual inner core is nurtured, their children would become ideal world citizens. To that end, we will discuss Swamiji's thoughts on how society needs to nurture its women, care for them, educate them, and honour them throughout their lives. The society that honours its women honours itself.

When discussing and elucidating concepts, historical examples go a long way in imprinting them on the readers' minds.

Through unparalleled stories of our ancient Indian women, Swamiji placed before the Indian consciousness a glorious image of the ideal woman. In his uniquely powerful and charismatic way, he held that shiny example for our women to follow.

There is a great need today to reemphasize Swamiji's ideas on Indian womanhood and its tremendous potential for the advancement of the country.

His instructions to women do take into account the active participation of the men in their lives. Says he, "Mere begetting of children does not make a father, a great many responsibilities have to be taken upon one's shoulders as well."

The detailed discussion in the chapter on marriage, which focuses on the enduring relationships between the spouses such that an ideal conjugal relationship is fostered, is totally relevant to this day and age.

Stories of ideal couples like Rama and Sita, Savitri and Satyavan, and Nala and Damayanti have been added, along with the ‘modern’ couple Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi.

It should be highlighted that, if the marriage in the first place is rooted in sound principles, the word ‘divorce’ will have no place in the lexicon of family life.

References to Swami Vivekananda take one of two variant forms: “Swami Vivekananda” where the name occurs initially or after a relatively long interval, and “Swamiji” when standing alone or when referring to an immediately preceding reference.

The methodology employed in the booklet is to devote a chapter to each of the main themes, with subheads within each chapter for ease of use. It is our hope that this book would generate sufficient interest in the readers to explore further the lives of Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and their relevance today. Such a study, along with an understanding of their messages, would benefit them immensely.

* * *

Introduction

Real Happiness

Happiness and contentment are hard to find in the world these days. Despite all the technological advances and comforts that are available to us, we seem to be under greater stress than ever before in the history of mankind.

Serious thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda have said that the reason for this unhealthy state of human affairs is the irrational pursuit of material happiness at the expense of basic human values. The more money we make and the more possessions we acquire, the more anxious we seem to become. We seem to be looking for happiness in the wrong places.

In order to discover the source of true and lasting happiness, all we have to do is to look back to our ancestors of the Vedic and Puranic times. They effectively unlocked the mysteries of existence and reached out directly to its source. That source is the highest power there is, the Self, the Godhead.

Unfortunately, young people today are not exposed to our traditional spiritual ideals. They are not taught these ideals in schools, and they remain ignorant of the scriptures. The current education system seems entirely different from the earlier

system where the emphasis was on the basic human values required to lead a meaningful life.

We have lost the ability to sift the age-old teachings from the superstitions and delusions of the Middle Ages. This has resulted in a loss of faith in the scriptures.

Hence Swami Vivekananda's roaring exhortation that we must have faith in our ancient ways and traditions. He said,

... to the women of this country I would say exactly what I say to the men. Believe in India and in our Indian faith. Be strong and hopeful and unashamed, and remember that... Hindus have immeasurably more to give than any other people in the world.

The Original Aryans

The people who deserve the lofty title of Aryans were created on Indian soil. The concept of nobility and aryaness started flowering in Aryavarta. It was not there before. Aryavarta was the fertile area of the Indo-Gangetic Plain protected by the mighty Himalayas in the north and the two oceans to the east and west. The Aryans raised cattle, and developed metallurgy, agriculture, and civil administration. On the soil of Aryavarta they explored their inner being, and developed lofty concepts pertaining to life, spirituality, and the path to lasting peace and happiness. This collective body

of experiential and intuitive knowledge was then crafted in sublime poetry as the Veda.

We should all be proud that this marvellous Self-discovering phenomenon happened on our soil millennia ago, when the rest of the world was “primitive” in some sense of the term. Women were a prominent part of this process, and freely participated in philosophical discussions in learned assemblies. They were placed on a high pedestal, both for their scholarship, and for the ideals of womanhood and motherhood that they represented.

But over the centuries, unhealthy superstitions and practices cropped up in the Indian society. This was abetted by foreign invasions, which totally suppressed women’s freedom and education. And a host of related problems followed quickly. The suppression of women in India needs to be viewed in its historical and sociocultural context. This is bound to happen in any ancient society when the original ideals start to fade.

When virtue subsides and problems surface, a great person or an avatar appears in the world to set things right, as explained by Lord Krishna in the Gita.¹ Swami Vivekananda took upon himself the mammoth task of trying to raise the Indian consciousness to the level of its heyday. He preached

1. *Bhagavad Gita, Jnana Karma Sannyasa Yoga. Verse 8.*

to the West eternal truths the likes of which they had never heard before, but we took for granted.

Swamiji recognized that no nation could progress without its women progressing first. Then he proceeded to analyse the various aspects of the issue, suggesting solutions at each stage. This booklet is thus a practical manual of self-improvement for the women themselves. It also includes the responsibilities of the community and society in furthering their goals and encouraging their efforts. Swamiji made it clear that, without our women advancing in every field based on the eternal principles of spirituality, the nation cannot be considered progressive.

The basis of this entire book is one of spirituality, and its content is best understood in those terms. Individual aspects of female re-empowerment in India such as freedom, education, marriage, and motherhood are all best explored against the backdrop of the necessity of leading a spiritual life.

The modern-day young reader would naturally want to know why we should be spiritual and what benefits accrue to us by practicing spirituality in our daily lives.

Spirituality in Practice

When we grow spiritually, we feel oneness with others and love everyone selflessly. We find peace

within ourselves and radiate it, too. This is accomplished through the repetition of God's name and mediation inwardly, and work done in a spirit of service outwardly.

Spirituality is the recognition of the Truth that all creation shares a common divinity, because the universe is pervaded by a single unified Power, an all-powerful Force, that we call God.

It is a state of the mind whereby one tunes into the universe and understands that one's DNA is derived from it and is therefore essentially the same as that Force. In everyday terms "we are all children of God,"¹ which means that we have an inherited Divinity in each of us.

In practice, any noble quality such as compassion, selflessness, helpfulness, and pure love for fellow creatures is an indication of spirituality in each of us. The degree of spirituality may differ among individuals, but everyone exhibits spiritual qualities to some extent. It is not confined to any geographic region, faith, religion, or dogma.

What happens when one becomes spiritual? One starts looking at the world in an entirely new fashion:

1. Cp. *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad*, II.5. *śṛṇvantu viśve amṛtasya putrā ā ye dhāmani divyāni tasthuh*. May all sons of the Immortal listen, even those who have reached their heavenly abodes. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2000. Seventh Impression). 719-720.

- First and foremost, one looks at every being with a sense of kinship, that is, that essentially all people are the “same.” No one denies the external differences, but they don’t matter at all to the spiritually enlightened person. We look at the common bond that makes us all human. That bond is the shared divinity of all. Suddenly, we are all brothers and sisters. Remember the thunderous applause that Swami Vivekananda received after he uttered his very first greeting of the audience at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, “Sisters and Brothers of America?” In that instant, he established a permanent bond with the world, a bond that served as the foundation for all his subsequent accomplishments.
- When we cease to perceive external differences among people, a number of miracles happen. Suddenly we have no enemies. We have feelings of affection towards one and all. We go out of the way to help the needy. Our charitable instincts are stimulated. We want to give rather than receive. We start showing compassion toward the suffering, the poor, and the downtrodden without realizing that we are now entirely spiritual and no longer selfish.
- Our motives become pure, that is, we have no intention of hurting people in any way. On the contrary, we are willing to forgive those that hurt us, just praying for their well-being.

- Constant living for the sake of others and never for oneself quickly makes one a better person. One realizes that helping fellow being is the best form of prayer. It is a form of self-purification.
- When one has no enemies, one is selfless, compassionate, and loving, one gains tremendous peace of mind. Routine annoyances do not bother one. Soon one transcends all obstacles in life and lives happily.
- As one's spiritual practices progress, one starts realizing that small miracles in the form of coincidences start happening. Things inexplicably fall into place. Solutions to tough problems seem simple all of a sudden.
- We realize the fleeting nature of life and the role and necessity of death. Life is relative on all levels except the spiritual. That is the only constant. Spirituality, that is, the realization that we are the representatives of divinity, gives us a great sense of relief from samsara, the human condition. All of this at the practical level, as we go about our normal duties and conduct our mundane affairs. The happiness we experience is unimaginable. Nothing fazes us in life. We are above elation and depression, no mood swings, no psychiatric disorders.

- The medical benefits of meditation and yoga have been well documented. Specific yoga poses confer specific physical benefits. Meditation regulates heartbeat. Deep breathing cleanses the system and helps cardiovascular functioning. Spiritual exercises help establish the perfect balance of the physical systems, while restoring the steadiness of the mind.
- Any form of spiritual practice leads to the enhancement of mental concentration. As a result we excel in whichever activity we are engaged in. For example, if we apply our spiritual power of concentration to higher studies, we are bound to succeed beyond our expectations. Then a good job and other benefits automatically follow, along with an enviable lifestyle. While these are not our spiritual goals, they are just nice by-products, if we care. The point is that we can never go wrong when applied spirituality is coupled with good intentions.

Key Thoughts Presented in this Book:

Given below are some of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on women, which are presented throughout this book.

- ❖ Men and women are spiritual equals.
- ❖ Women are perfectly capable of learning whatever is taught to them.

- ❖ Women's education is to be spread with spirituality at its core.
- ❖ Every woman in the country should be an ideal woman. Every girl in India must aspire to be like Sita and Savitri.
- ❖ The condition of the women must first be improved before any welfare of the world is attempted.
- ❖ No nation can progress without its women progressing first.
- ❖ A nation's character is judged by the way it treats its women.
- ❖ The mother is the highest ideal of womanhood in India.
- ❖ With the name of Mother comes the idea of *Śakti*, Divine Energy, and Omnipotence, just as the baby believes its mother to be all-powerful, able to do anything.
- ❖ Every manifestation of power in the universe certainly is Mother, *Śakti*.
- ❖ Even Brahma and Vishnu must first seek Her blessings if they desire to be disentangled from Her powerful Maya.
- ❖ A good, chaste wife will look upon every man other than her own husband as her child and will behave toward him as his mother.

- ❖ To a man, every woman except his wife should be as his own mother.
- ❖ He indeed is a learned man who looks upon every woman as his mother.
- ❖ Marriage is not for sense enjoyment, but to perpetuate the race.
- ❖ The mother is the ideal of love; she rules over the family and owns it.
- ❖ Surrender to mother can give each of us great peace of mind.
- ❖ The one thing that fulfils womanhood is motherhood.
- ❖ Children must be born of prayer.
- ❖ It is the pre-natal influence that gives the impetus to the child for good or evil.

I

Women's Education

Swami Vivekananda's views on education were very progressive. He praised the educated women of the West and compared them to the Indian women of those days. He wondered aloud, "Every American woman has far better education than can be conceived of by the majority of Hindu women. Why cannot we have the same education? We must."¹

He paid tribute to the American women who had invited him into their households and took care of his food, lodging, and shopping. He noted, "Here men treat their women as well as can be desired, and hence they are so prosperous, so learned, so free, and so energetic,"² He wondered why we in India were so "slavish, miserable, and dead."³

At the same time, he pointed out to the American women:⁴

I should very much like our women to have your intellectuality, but not if it must be at the cost of purity. I admire you for all that you know, but I dislike the way

1. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 24.

2. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 26.

3. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 26.

4. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 412-413.

that you cover what is bad with roses and call it good. Morality and spirituality are the things for which we strive. Our women are not so learned, but they are more pure.

To all women every man save her husband should be as her son. To all men every woman save his own wife should be as his mother. ... Not until you learn to ignore the question of sex and to meet on a ground of common humanity will your women really develop. Until then they are playthings, nothing more. All this is the cause of divorce.

This is exactly what is happening in India today. Young Indian men and women are getting educated, but at the cost of purity and peace of mind, just as in the West.

In this chapter, we will look at Swamiji's views on gender equality leading up to the need for women's education. We will then see how and where we are going wrong, and why and in what ways our education is failing us. We will understand his views on real education and proceed to study the life of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi in order to find answers from her life and teachings.

Concept of equality

At the level of the Self, there is no distinction between men and women. One can see how Swami Vivekananda's entire thinking in terms of equality

between the sexes, their ability to study, and take part in the affairs of the society is based on this conviction of his: ⁵

It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings... If you do not raise the women who are the living embodiments of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other way to rise.

Swamiji was really pained by the fact that Indian women in the medieval and early modern ages were blatantly discriminated against when it came to the study of the Vedas and other scriptures. This in spite of the fact that the Vedas themselves contained significant contributions of more than a dozen highly regarded women seers. Swami Vivekananda pointedly asked:⁶

In what scriptures do you find statements that women are not competent for knowledge and devotions? In the period of degradation, when the priests made the other castes incompetent to study the Vedas, they deprived the women also of their rights. Otherwise you will find that in the Vedic or Upanishadic age, Maitreyi, Gargi and other ladies of revered memory have taken the places of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. In an assembly of a thousand Brahmanas who were all erudite in the Vedas,

5. *Complete Works*, 6th ed., Vol.7, 214.

6. *Complete Works*, 6th ed., Vol.7, 214-215.

Gargi boldly challenged Yajnavalkya in a discussion about Brahman. Since such ideal women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, why shall not the women have the same privilege now? What has happened once can certainly happen again.

Throughout the Vedic age, women were encouraged to pursue the life of the spirit, as opposed to one of material advancement. They were also exhorted to be benevolent and bring good fortune to the family by their exemplary conduct. The Vedic culture exhibited the greatest regard for women, unlike other cultures of the world. In the words of Swamiji, “I know that the race that produced Sita— even if it only dreamt of her— has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on the earth.”⁷

The sages made it a point to instruct the young men to take good care of their brides, for it is their good fortune to have won their hearts. The sage Kanva in Kaalidasa’s play *Sakuntala* issues a stern warning to Dushyanta that he should treat *Sakuntala* with all the affection and respect that she deserves, considering that she is the daughter of a highly enlightened sage.⁸

The law-givers of ancient times, notably Manu among them, codified the basic principles of

7. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 231.

8. *Abhijnāna śākuntalam*, 4.17.

conduct and ethics. The code stipulated that women must be honoured and protected by their male relatives to help them safeguard their own welfare. If the women of the family suffer misery, then the whole family will perish. He categorically stated that a society which honours its women is the favourite of the gods.⁹

*yatra nāryastu pūjyante
ramante tatra devatāh*

Bhishma warned Dharmaraja in the Mahabharata, "O ruler of the earth, the lineage in which daughters and daughters-in-law are saddened by ill-treatment, that lineage is destroyed. When out of their grief these women curse these households, such households lose their charm, prosperity and happiness."¹⁰

Swamiji says that "women have many and grave problems, but none that are not solved by the magic word 'Education'".¹¹ "Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them."¹²

9. *Manusmṛti*, 3.56.

10. *Mahābhārata*, Anuśāsanaparva, 12.14.

11. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 231.

12. *Complete Works*, 7th ed., Vol.6, 115.

Freedom

Swami Vivekananda firmly believed that “Liberty is the only condition of growth.”¹³ He said that “The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence.”¹⁴

What, then, is true freedom? Swamiji asked:¹⁵

... is it freedom to be a slave to the senses, to anger, to jealousies and a hundred other petty things that must occur every day in human life? In all these little roughnesses that we meet with in life, the highest expression of freedom is to forbear. Women, slaves to their own irritable, jealous tempers, are apt to blame their husbands, and assert their own “freedom”, as they think, not knowing that thereby they only prove that they are slaves. So it is with husbands who eternally find fault with their wives.

Real Education

Swamiji had decided that our women needed the kind of education “by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet.” When such education is extended to our women, “women will solve their own problems.” He had no doubt about the ability of the Indian

13. *Complete Works*, 9th ed., Vol. 4, 346.

14. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), Vol. 1, 98.

15. *Complete Works*, 12th ed., Vol.1, 67.

woman to handle any situation that life threw at her. When asked to define true education, Swamiji said,¹⁶

...it (education) may be described as a development of faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently. So shall we bring to the need of India great fearless women— women worthy to continue the traditions of Sanghamitra, Lila, Ahalya Bai, and Mira Bai— women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and selfless, strong with the strength that comes of touching the feet of God.

He reaffirmed, “I look upon religion as the innermost core of education. Mind, I do not mean my own, or anyone else’s opinion about religion. I think the teacher should take the pupil’s starting-point in this, as in other respects, and enable her to develop along her own line of least resistance.”¹⁷

In his opinion, “Modern science, women must learn, but not at the cost of the ancient spirituality.”¹⁸ For him, the ideal education “would be that which should best enable every woman, in time to come, to resume into herself the greatness of all the women of the Indian past.”¹⁹

16. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 231.

17. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 231.

18. Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, 4th ed. (Kolkata: Udbodhan Office, 1930), 347.

19. *The Master as I Saw Him*, 347.

The religious basis of education also entails the observance of chastity. Swamiji says, ²⁰

To make a beginning in women's education: our Hindu women easily understand what chastity means, because it is their heritage. Now, first of all, whether married, or single, if they prefer to remain so, they will not be in the least afraid even to give up their lives rather than flinch an inch from their chastity.

As a practical matter, he suggested that the education of women should consist of: ²¹

Religion, arts, science, housekeeping, cooking, sewing, hygiene—the simple essential points in these subjects ought to be taught to our women... Only teaching them rites of worship won't do; the education must be an eye-opener in all matters. Ideal characters must always be presented before the view of the girls to imbue them with a devotion to the lofty principles of selflessness. The noble examples of Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Lilavati, Khana and Mira should be brought home to their minds, and they should be inspired to mould their own lives in the light of these.

He had outlined the construction of a Math for Women, based on highly exalted principles: ²²

Just as centers must be started for men, so also centers have to be started for teaching women. Brahmacharinis of education and character should take

20. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.5, 342.

21. *Complete Works*, 7th ed., Vol.6, 493-494.

22. *Complete Works*, 7th ed., Vol.6, 489.

up the task of teaching at different centres. History and the puranas, housekeeping and the arts, the duties of home-life and principles that make for the development of an ideal character, have to be taught with the help of modern science, and the female students must be trained in ethical and spiritual life. 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 the mothers. It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born.

On another occasion, he said: ²³

... There shall be a girls' school attached to this female *Math*, in which religious scriptures, literature, Sanskrit, grammar and even some amount of English should be taught. Other matters such as sewing, culinary art, rules of domestic work, and upbringing of children will also be taught, while *japa*, worship and meditation etc. shall form an indispensable part of the teaching... So long as the students will remain in association with this Math, they must observe Brahmacharya as the basic idea of this Math.

Spirituality, sacrifice, and self-control will be the motto of the pupils of this Math, and service or Seva-Dharma the vow of their life. In view of such ideal lives, who will not respect and have faith in them? If the life of the women in this country be moulded in such fashion, then only will there be the re-appearance of such ideal characters as Sita, Savitri and Gārgī.

23. *Complete Works*, 6th ed., Vol.7, 217-18.

He was sure that his women disciples would “lay down their lives” for the Math and that its lustre would spread “over the whole country in time.”

Swamiji explained why the so-called “modern” education produced negative results: ²⁴

...as with just a smattering of education, they take to the Western modes of living, without advancing in the spirit of renunciation, self-control, austerity, Brahmacharya, and other qualities conducive to Brahmajñana.

... some defect or other must creep into that learning or culture which is not founded on a religious basis. Female education is to be spread with religion as its centre. All other training should be secondary to religion. Religious training, the formation of character, and observance of the vow of celibacy—these should be attended to. In the female education which has obtained up till now in India, it is religion that has been made a secondary concern; hence... defects... have crept in.

He noted: “Any attempt to modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see everyday. The women of India must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita, and that is the only way.” ²⁵

24. *Complete Works*, 6th ed., Vol.7, 220.

25. *Complete Works*, 9th ed., Vol.3, 256.

Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was the wife of Sri Ramakrishna, a woman who lived an ideal life in modern times.

The greatest tribute to her, aside from Sri Ramakrishna himself, comes from Swami Vivekananda. In a letter to a brother monk, he said:²⁶

You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life— none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. Why is it that our country is the weakest and the most backward of all countries?

— Because Shakti is held in dishonour there. Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world. Dear brother, you understand little now, but by degrees you will come to know it all. Hence it is her Math that I want first... Without the grace of Shakti nothing is to be accomplished. What do I find in America and Europe?— the worship of Shakti, the worship of Power. Yet they worship Her ignorantly through sense-gratification. Imagine, then, what a lot of good they will achieve who will worship Her with all purity, in a Sattvika spirit, looking upon Her as their mother! I am coming to understand things clearer every day, my insight is opening out more and more...Brother, before

26. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.7, 484-86.

proceeding to America I wrote to Mother to bless me. Her blessings came, and at one bound I cleared the ocean. There, you see. In this terrible winter I am lecturing from place to place and fighting against odds, so that funds may be collected for Mother's Math. Baburam's mother must have lost her sense owing to old age and that is why she is about to worship Durga in the earthen image, ignoring the living one— namely Holy Mother Shri Sarada Devi. Brother, faith is very difficult to achieve. Brother, I shall show how to worship the living Durga and then only shall I be worthy of my name. I shall be relieved when you will have purchased a plot of land and established there the living Durga, the Mother. ... Do you accomplish this festival of Durga of mine by making all the necessary arrangements. ... fie on him who has no devotion for the Mother.

Sri Sarada Devi was simple, pure of heart, self-effacing and self-sacrificing. She assumed the role of mother to all the monks, disciples, and visitors to the Math. She took every devotee under her wing, and protected everyone as if they were her own children.

Swami Gambhirananda, in his biography of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, says about her: ²⁷

Though the Master (Sri Ramakrishna) set an incomparable ideal for both monks and householders, yet the most valuable part of his life was spent outside family surroundings; and hence, we lack here an

27. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math), 192-93.

abundance of examples of how a person living in the midst of hundreds of daily worries can yet rise higher through sheer force of will, character, and faith in God. The life of the Mother is woven with the warp and woof of various complicated domestic problems; and the events there are full of tears, troubles, and vexations, even from the worldly point of view. And yet she is not only always entirely above their degrading influence but her every movement is resplendent with divine grace. This interfusion of divine and human elements makes the Mother's life instructive and its appeal irresistible to men who tread the wonted paths of the work-a-day world, and inspiring and illuminating to others who are in search of a higher ideal. And in particular, her life is of special significance to women who spend their lives with their families in a more real sense than men do.

All women can learn from Sri Sarada Devi's example and her teachings. They can make her life itself a part of their education, and use it to guide them through the various stages of their lives.

She often taught by example. A number of incidents in her life show how lovingly she worked and spread her grace and message:

Once, a lady went to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. She expressed her desire to have some spiritual guidance from her. But the Mother went on doing her household duties. She had her bath, performed worship, cooked food, distributed it and so on. All the while the lady was following the

Mother. While taking leave of her, she expressed her disappointment, "Mother, I thought of getting some instruction from you." Mother answered, "Yes, my child! I have been instructing you all the while."

Pravrajika Atmadevaprana explains the secret of her method of instruction: ²⁸

Her own life demonstrates the glorious fact that right from the humblest household duties to that of guiding the affairs of a spiritual organization, any responsibility could be performed without losing the cosmic sweep of divine vision. She made no distinction between the sacred and the secular; or compartmentalised life in any other way... Her central message is that one can remain unaffected by the worldly cares only by keeping God, and God alone, as the light, solace and goal of life. It was in the role of a household woman that she provides a shining example of practical spirituality, capable of inspiring all men and women. The nun shone through the householder, through the heart of an all-loving mother. Far from shunning a distracting world, she embraced it and enfolded it in her love.

Sarada Devi was adept at adjusting to life's circumstances, dire or easy: ²⁹

The Mother once said, 'He (Sri Ramakrishna, also referred to as the Master) bought me some raw jute

28. Pravrajika Atmadevaprana, "*Sri Sarada Devi in the Light of the Upanishads*," *Vedanta Kesari*, December 2007.

29. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 82.

and said, “twist this and make slings for me; I shall keep (in them) sweets, etc. for the boys.” I twisted it into strings and made slings; and with the waste fibers and piece of thick cloth I made a pillow. I used to spread a coarse mat over a piece of hessian and put that pillow under my head. I slept as soundly on those things as I do now on these (cots, etc.)— I don’t find any difference, my child!’

There were specific instances in her daily life that demonstrate her extraordinary and noble characteristics. A few of them are outlined below:

Sarada Devi was a model of humility. As she was unable to cook in her old age, a brahmin lady was hired to help her. She called her ‘aunt’ affectionately. As she was about to salute her on the evening of Durga immersion day, the brahmin woman protested and said, “That’s unthinkable, Mother! You’re the mother of the universe; all salute you. I am an ordinary woman; I can’t possibly pocket such high honour.” The Mother wouldn’t hear of it, and saluted her ‘aunt’ anyway saying, “That can never be; you are my aunt, to be sure.”³⁰

Her views regarding society and any archaic customs and injustices were very advanced. She felt sorry for widows who were forced to follow a variety of obnoxious customs. She was very vocal about her criticism of child marriage. She praised two young women of twenty-one or twenty-two

30. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 469.

years from Chennai who attended the Nivedita school, unlike the local girls who quit school once they were eight years old and were forced to marry.³¹

She was entirely in favour of women's education:³²

Radhu (her niece) was at a Christian school. As she was a grown-up girl according to contemporary opinion, Golap-Ma said that her attendance at school should be terminated. At this remark, Radhu began to weep. But the Mother said, "She's not quite grown up. Let her go to school. She can do immense good to others if she gets education and learns some useful arts from the school. She has been married in a backward village. Through education she will not only improve herself, but will be able to help others."

Speaking of the education of women she said one day at Koalpara that she had the greatest desire to see the girls of the village educated; but that the difficulty was about securing the right type of women as teachers. The few that were available were fashionable; and it is a human weakness to imbibe more easily the outward spruceness than the prudence of a teacher. Such a contingency would be more harmful than beneficial to a village.

She shunned extravagance and avoided waste. She lived a simple traditional life totally informed by spirituality.³³

31. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 475.

32. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 476-77.

33. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 478.

In all her talks and deeds a godliness based on perfect self-discipline was what caught the eye of the most casual observer. Her life expressed itself through the rites and customs of her environment; but the touch of spirituality was unmistakable all through.

For instance, she did not even want the fruits of charity for herself. She would offer the priest on the steps of the Ganga some fruit, saying that she was also relinquishing the good that that act would bring her. The priest could have it. ³⁴

Here is an interesting incident where her remarks became politically prophetic:

One of her disciples who was noted for his quiet life and religious temperament, was unnecessarily harassed by the police of the British *Raj*. He was arrested and hauled away without giving him a chance to eat. The Mother felt such pain in her heart that she wondered aloud, "Can the rule of the English last?" ³⁵

She was all for social service, even at the cost of her own inconvenience. ³⁶

One day in 1916, she was resting at the house of Sri Sureshwar Sen, at Vishnupur, on her way to Calcutta, when on that very day, Brahmachari Varada arrived there to purchase rice for distribution among the famine-stricken people near about Jayrambati. His

34. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 478.

35. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 480-81.

36. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 482.

plan was to carry the rice in bullock-carts which had brought the Mother and her party to Vishnupur. Now, finding the Brahmachari there, Radhu (her niece) wanted him to accompany the party to Calcutta; but the Mother silenced her saying, "So many people will have food only after he carries the rice from here; so many lives depend on him— have you any idea of that?" So Radhu was overruled and Varada returned to Jayrambati.

The Mother was always busy, and liked to see the others constructively occupied, too. She never idled her time away and she expected others to be diligent as well.

One evening, Brahmachari Gopesh saw the Mother kneading some wheat flour on the verandah of Nalini Devi's house. At that time, there was no lack of assistants to give her relief from such jobs in her old age. And so the Brahmachari found no need for her to toil this way. Accordingly, he asked her for the reason, whereupon she said, "My son, it is good to be diligent." And then she added solemnly after a little pause, "Bless me so that I may work as long as I live." ³⁷

She paid attention to what others might consider trifling matters and would not tolerate disorderliness. One day at Jayrambati, a woman happened to cast away carelessly a broom after cleaning the courtyard. Noticing this the Mother

37. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 482.

told her that even such an insignificant thing as a sweeping mop should have the consideration due to it, that the smallest work should be done with proper attention and that nothing should be neglected as of no consequence.³⁸

She taught that we must love everyone equally without expecting anything in return. One day, as the Holy Mother was about to leave for Jayrambati, she asked a naughty girl:³⁹

“Darling, you have been visiting me a long time. Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you very much.”

“How much?”

The girl stretched her arms as wide as she could and said: “That much.”

Holy Mother asked: “Will you still love me when I am at Jayrambati?”

“Yes, I will love you just the same. I shall not forget you.”

“How shall I know it?”

“What should I do to make you know?”

“I shall be sure of your love for me if you can love everyone at your home.”

“All right, I will love all of them. I will not be naughty anymore.”

38. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 483.

39. Swami Chetanananda, *Sri Sarada Devi and Her Divine Play* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2015), 650.

“That’s very good. But how shall I know that you will love everyone equally, and not some more or some less?”

“What should I do to love everyone equally?”

“Let me tell you how to love everyone equally. Do not demand anything of those you love. If you make demands, some will give you more and some less. In that case you will love more those who give you more, and less, those who give you less. Thus your love will not be the same for all. You will not be able to love everyone impartially.”

The little girl promised to love everyone without demanding anything in return. Her family reported that from that time forward her behaviour was exemplary.

She advised people never to find fault with others:⁴⁰

... if you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather, see your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.

Sarada Devi had no formal education, yet she was forward-thinking and knowledgeable in her dealings with the world.

Sister Nivedita writes about her with great admiration:⁴¹

40. *Sri Sarada Devi and Her Divine Play*, Quotes of Sarada Devi, 876.

41. *The Master as I Saw Him*, 175-176.

To me it has always appeared that she is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood. But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new? In her one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And yet, to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood. I have never known her hesitate to give utterance to large and generous judgement, however new or complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer. Her whole experience is of theocratic civilization. Yet she rises to the height of every situation. Is she tortured by the perversity of any about her? The only sign is a strange quiet and intensity that comes upon her. Does one carry to her some perplexity or mortification born of social developments beyond her ken? With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.

Such was the outstanding personality of the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. Trained in our culture, and rigorously taught the highest spirituality by her husband Sri Ramakrishna, she was the ideal woman and the ideal wife— a concept that Swami Vivekananda so wished to revive in our country.

II

The Ideal Wife

The ideal wife follows in the footsteps of Sita and Savitri. The basic notions of purity, chastity, self-sacrifice, and spiritual union with the husband that we learn from their stories are the very foundations of Indian womanhood.

In this chapter we are going to see what Swamiji said about Sita and Savitri, understand the significance of the two stories, address some of the questions and concerns that the modern woman is likely to have, and then look at the example of Sri Sarada Devi as an ideal wife.

Sita and Savitri

Swami Vivekananda spoke of Sita in glowing terms:¹

Rama and Sita are the ideals of the Indian nation. All children, especially girls, worship Sita. The height of a woman's ambitions is to be like Sita, the pure, the devoted, the all-suffering! When you study these characters, you can at once find out how different is the ideal in India from that of the West. For the race,

1. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.4, 75-76.

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

He was emphatic: ²

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

2. *Complete Works*, 9th ed., Vol.3, 255-256.

modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see everyday. The women of India must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita, and that is the only way.

Before we understand the unique character of Sita, it helps to start with some special characteristics of the epic Ramayana as a whole.

The Ramayana teaches us all about the duties of humans in different stations, both men and women. It delineates ideals for every class of individuals, including brothers, parents, husbands and wives, and rulers, and ethical conduct as prescribed in the scriptures. Even combats have strict rules and wars are totally regulated. In short, the epic is an instruction manual for humans who aspire to live ideal lives. No matter what predicament you are in, the story has a solution for it. Furthermore, the ultimate goals of human life are also interspersed with the narrative.

Swami Vivekananda characterizes Sita as ‘the pure, the devoted, the all-suffering.’ He pointed out that the ideal in India was far different from that of the West. Sita is the ideal of suffering, the ‘idealized India.’ Because, whether or not the story ever happened and she ever existed, the ideal was clearly

there. Sita is a synonym for everything 'good, pure, and holy.' And, most importantly, through all her tribulations and suffering, she never once blamed her husband Rama. It was her fate, and she must handle it as best she could.

Sita was the epitome of strength, courage, sacrifice, and purity. Her chastity stood the test of fire. She was the greatest woman because she supported her husband in upholding dharma, even if it meant giving up the pleasures of the palace and living in the forest in exile. She went to the forest once when she accompanied Rama when he was exiled by his father to keep his promise to his wife Kaikeyi, and then a second time when she was banished by Rama to quell false rumours of her infidelity. She never complained, but simply obeyed, not because she was weak but because she was strong.

Her dharma was to obey her husband which, to her, was not a sacrifice.

Rama is the role model for men because he was devoted to his wife Sita and Sita alone. He vanquished her abductor and rescued her, which was his duty as her husband. She was dearer to him than his own life. Yet subsequently he obeyed the wishes of his people who believed

unfounded rumours of her infidelity, and banished her to the forest. Sita never uttered a word of protest. They both followed their prescribed dharma, one as the king and the other as a wife.

Rama suffered the pangs of separation, too. He did not have an easy time during his wife's captivity. He was devoted to her alone. As her husband, it was his duty to rescue her. She suffered her fate; he suffered his, until he vanquished her abductor and rescued her. The duties happened to mesh with each other.

A modern woman will claim that she is not as naïve as Sita, and that she would go to court seeking retribution against her husband. But the fine point here is that Rama and Sita were a spiritual unity in two separate bodies. When one suffered they both suffered implicitly. Because of their spiritual oneness, they were never really separated in their heart of hearts.

We study the story of Rama and Sita today because they both suffered for the sake of dharma, neither blaming the other in the least for their predicament. Neither thought of filing a lawsuit against the other claiming compensation. The thinking was that, the two of them being one and the same soul, who would complain against whom? Such were the couple's ideals that bound them for life and beyond.

About the other great character from ancient India, Savitri, Swami Vivekananda says with total conviction: ³

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

He then proceeds to narrate her story. We are reproducing it in full here for the convenience of the reader. ⁴

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

Savitri consented and travelled in distant regions, mounted in a golden chariot, with her guards and aged courtiers to whom her father entrusted her, stopping at different courts and seeing different princes, but not one of them could win the heart of Savitri. They came at last to a holy hermitage.

3. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.4, 85.

4. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol.4, 85-90.

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

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

When Savitri returned to her father's house, he asked her, "Savitri, dear daughter, speak. Did you see anybody whom you would like to marry?" Then softly ... said Savitri, "Yes, father." "What is the name of the prince?" "He is no prince but the son of the King Dyumatsena who has lost his kingdom— a prince without a patrimony, who lives a monastic life, the life of a sannyasin, in a forest, collecting roots and herbs, helping and feeding his old father and mother who live in a cottage."

On hearing this, the father consulted the sage Narada, who happened to be then present there, and he declared that it was the most ill-omened choice that was ever made. The king then asked him to explain why it was so. And Narada said, "Within twelve months time, the young man will die." Then the king started

with terror, and spoke, "Savitri, this young man is going to die in twelve months and you will become a widow: think of that! Desist from your choice, my child, you shall never be married to a short-lived and fated bridegroom." "Never mind, father; do not ask me to marry another person and sacrifice the chastity of mind for I love and have accepted in my mind that good and brave Satyavan only as my husband. A maiden chooses only once, and she never departs from her troth." When the king found that Savitri was resolute in mind and heart, he complied. Then Savitri married prince Satyavan and she quietly went from the palace of her father into the forest, to live with her chosen husband and help her husband's parents. Now, though Savitri knew the exact date when Satyavan was to die, she kept it hidden from him. Daily he went into the depths of the forest, collected fruits and flowers, gathered faggots, and then came back to the cottage, and she cooked the meals and helped the old people. Thus their lives went on, until the fatal day came near, and three short days remained only. She took a severe vow of three nights' penance and holy fasts, and kept her hard vigils. Savitri spent sorrowful and sleepless nights with fervent prayers and unseen tears till the dreaded morning dawned. That day Savitri could not bear him out of her sight even for a moment. She begged permission from his parents to accompany her husband when he went to gather the usual herbs and fuel, and gaining their consent, she went. Suddenly, in

faltering accents, he complained to his wife of feeling faint, "My head is dizzy, and my senses reel, dear Savitri, I feel sleep stealing over me; let me rest beside thee for a while." In fear and trembling, she replied, "Come, lay your head upon my lap, my dearest lord." And he laid his burning head in the lap of his wife and ere long sighed and expired. Claspings him to her, her eyes flowing with tears, there she sat in the lonesome forest until the emissaries of death approached to take away the soul of Satyavan. But they could not come near to the place where Savitri sat with the dead body of her husband, his head resting in her lap. There was a zone of fire surrounding her, and not one of the emissaries of death could come within it. They all fled back from it, returned to the King Yama, the God of Death, and told him why they could not obtain the soul of this man.

Then came Yama, the God of Death, the judge of the dead. He was the first man that died— the first man that died on earth— and he had become the presiding deity over all those that die. He judges whether, after a man has died, he is to be punished or rewarded. So, he came himself. Of course he could go inside that charmed circle, as he was a God. Then he came to Savitri, he said, "Daughter, give up this dead body, for know death is the fate of mortals, and I am the first of mortals who died. Since then, everyone has had to die. Death is the fate of man." Thus told, Savitri walked off

and Yama drew the soul out. Yama, having possessed himself of the soul of the young man, proceeded on his way. Before he had gone far, he heard footfalls upon the dry leaves. He turned back. "Savitri, daughter, why are you following me? This is the fate of all mortals." "I am not following thee, father," replied Savitri, "but this is also the fate of women, she follows where her love takes her, and the eternal law separates not loving man and faithful wife." Then said the God of Death: "Ask for any boon, except the life of your husband." "If thou art pleased to grant a boon, O Lord of Death, I ask that my father-in-law may be cured of his blindness and made happy." "Let thy pious wish be granted, duteous daughter." And then the King of Death travelled on with the soul of Satyavan. Again the same footfall was heard from behind. He looked around. "Savitri, my daughter, you are still following me?" "Yes, my father; I cannot help doing so; I am trying all the time to go back, but the mind goes after my husband, and the body follows, does it not?" "Pleased am I with your words, fair Savitri, ask yet another boon of me, but it must not be the life of your husband." "Let my father-in-law regain his lost wealth and kingdom, father, if thou art pleased to grant another supplication." "Loving daughter," Yama answered, "this boon I now bestow; but return home for living mortal cannot go with King Yama." And then Yama pursued his way. But Savitri, meek and faithful, still followed her departed

husband. Yama again turned back, "Noble Savitri, follow not in hopeless woe." "I cannot choose but follow where thou takest my loved one." "Then suppose, Savitri, that your husband was a sinner and has to go to hell. In that case goes Savitri with the one she loves?" "Glad am I to follow where he goes, be it life or death, heaven or hell," said the loving wife. "Blessed are your words, my child, pleased am I with you, ask yet another boon, but the dead come not to life again." "Since you so permit me, then, let the imperial line of my father-in-law be not destroyed; let his kingdom descend to Satyavan's son." And then the God of Death smiled. "My daughter, thou shalt have thy desire now: here is the soul of thy husband, he shall live again. He shall live to be a father, and thy children also shall reign in due course. Return home. Love has conquered Death! Woman never loved like thee, and thou art the proof that even I, the God of Death, am powerless against the power of the true love that abideth!

When two people are married, an eternal bond is formed between the partners, founded on genuine, spiritual communion. The individual selves meld into a single self. Each partner looks upon the other as a god or goddess. This is what is meant by chastity, which is the bedrock of the spiritual union that is celebrated in marriage.

With everything else going on in her own life, Savitri never once ignored her old parents-in-law. When a woman marries a man, his family comes with him. She should serve them as she would her own parents. In their turn, the parents-in-law should treat her as their own daughter and love her as such. At the same time, it is the husband's responsibility to provide complete care and protection for his wife, to the best of his ability, and with a loving heart. The basis of all real relationships is love.

Love, based on a spiritual bond, can only be selfless and full of sacrifice, both qualities that Savitri abundantly brought to her union with Satyavan. It is because of all these significant ideals that the story of Savitri is the Hindus' all-time favourite.

Modern-Day Concerns

Today's readers of these stories are likely to have some questions.

- *How are these stories relevant today?*

Puranic stories such as these offer role models that women of any era can emulate. They are timeless, since they are based on exemplary character and noble ideals. Sita was a true partner,

staying by her husband through thick and thin. Savitri's love for her husband was so paramount that even death could not snatch him from her.

The situation may change, but we still need the spirit of selflessness and sacrifice that was displayed by Savitri and Sita. The requirement also applies to men, whose role model is Rama. What should not change is the underlying foundation of solid character.

When men and women bring that level of commitment into marriage, its success is guaranteed.

- *There is no appreciation for me if I am like Sita or Savitri. How can I be like Sita if my husband is not like Rama?*

One can be like Rama or Sita even if one's spouse is not Sita or Rama.

Your spouse's attitude need not stop you from living your life with Sita and Savitri as your role models. You should look for, and cultivate the positive in your life. When you are positive, you will also positively influence your partner.

- *What is chastity and why is it so important?*

Chastity involves abstinence before marriage, and staying committed to a single partner when married.

The purpose of chastity is to free up the mind from other stray and energy-sapping thoughts. It promotes creativity and power (*ojas*) in all pursuits, once it becomes natural and effortless. In addition to stabilizing and harmonizing our lives, chastity of conduct and purity of thought endow us with much creative energy.

The stability of a society depends on institutions such as marriage and practice of fidelity within marriage. The alternative, obviously, is total chaos in gender relationships, which leads to disaster within the family and society at large.

At this point, the concept of marriage is elaborated for the benefit of the readers.

A good way to introduce the subject is by asking the question that every young man and woman mulls in his or her mind at the appropriate age: “What is marriage?”

It is our great good fortune in India that the question has been asked before—and answered—in the best possible manner, actually millennia before, by sages and seers who desired to set the course for mankind for all time to come.

What is Marriage?

In the most exalted terms, marriage is an experiment in spiritual coexistence, while at the other end of the spectrum it is a legal maneuver, a business arrangement, or simply a matter of convenience for the parties involved.

Our presentation stresses the following aspects of conjugal life:

- The Indian institution of marriage was specifically meant for the stability of the family and the society.
- The system of marriage, as conceived by our ancients, benefits everyone in the society regardless of their status and the nation as a whole.
- Swami Vivekananda says that marriage is for the propagation of the race, not sense gratification.
- Our scriptures intended the institution of marriage to result in ideal, able-bodied, morally upright, and mentally stable children.

But we see today these values being eroded when marriages end up in divorce court, with the result that, among other things, the children's mental health is negatively impacted.

Swami Vivekananda, discussing women's education, clearly emphasized that the only solution to these and related issues is that "every girl must walk in the footsteps of Sita and that is the only way," and that stories of ideal women like Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti must be ingrained into the minds of young women. He reminded us of the ideals that the Indian woman stood for over the millennia—chastity, commitment, loyalty, self-sacrifice, dignity, virtue and honour. He dinned into our ears once again that exalted tradition that our women have inherited from the ancients.

Today, in many cases, an individual's problems arise with their marriage, sometimes due to a lack of education and an insufficient or incorrect understanding of the institution of marriage in society. This may be coupled with unrealistic expectations leading to disappointment and disaffection in the family. Marriage came into existence to stabilize the society and contribute to the peaceful coexistence of its members. Furthermore, the resulting offspring could lead the country to historical fame and fortune.

A selfish or wrongheaded approach to marriage, these days, is resulting in disillusionment and, yes, divorce, as if the next try is going to be any different, or the one after that. No reconciliation or attempt at constructive coexistence is attempted at all the first time, which might have saved the person from the slippery slope. The question of sacrifice doesn't seem

to enter into the picture in a failed marriage. That is, even if other complications such as love triangles are not present.

So, how do historical examples of great men and women help us get out of this societal mess? First, our youth must look before they leap: they must think twice about what it means to marry, what they expect to get from it, what they are prepared to contribute to it, and how they plan to meet their obligations through thick and thin. They must be prepared to placate the spouse through their patience and sacrifice themselves to the extent practicable, even if it is too much to ask for and the spouse does not deserve it. The principle of trial and error cannot be applied to marriage. One must be always goal-conscious, namely that, as a couple, the spouses have an obligation to society and the country. Self-gratification is secondary, a lesser goal.

This is where the examples of epic men and women come in handy. Those men and women did what they had to do in their time. Our youth have a lot to contribute to the well-being of the family and society today by learning from them. As has been mentioned earlier, Swami Vivekananda stressed that "... the principle is eternal and must be there. Work it out afresh and make a reformed application."

The chief points explained here are those so ably recounted by a monk of the Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad in two articles in the Telugu magazine *Sri Ramakrishna Prabha*.

The swami starts his discussion of the issue that is crucial to the stability of marriage by pointing out that society's trust in the sanctity of the institution has gradually eroded over time. The institution started millennia ago and has endured as something that is universal and as something that benefits all members of the society regardless of their standing in it.

One reason for this erosion is that the would-be couple fail to check three things before they get married: they don't make sure they don't have any unrealistic expectations of their future spouses; they don't already have other real or imaginary men or women whom they fancy as their role models; and that they *have* complete dedication and commitment to marriage under all circumstances. *Those who fail these three tests should not venture into matrimony.* They will be doing themselves and the society a big favour.

The swami points out in his twin articles that our ancients viewed their spouses as god's gifts, the husband was God incarnate and the wife was a goddess in person. The couple shines through selflessness and loyalty to each other. Rama and Sita were concerned

only about their spouses whom they did not want to be subjected to hardship. Nala and Damayanti competed with each other in self-sacrifice. Our youth should keep in mind that self-discipline is essential for building a great society, not unbridled freedom. Man and woman are the reverse and obverse of the same coin of godliness, as symbolized by the androgynous form of Siva, *Ardhanārīśvara*.

The typically Indian institution of marriage, established ages ago, is the bedrock of the society that has withstood the vicissitudes of time and history. It appears to crumble now, along with our society. There seems to be no time to analyze the problem and, unfortunately, we can't sweep the problem under the rug, either, as something that is a sign of the times. How come that an institution that has survived thousands of years has begun to weaken over the last couple of decades or so? One reason is the inadequacy of our educational system that fails to teach our traditional spiritual values. The other reason is the invasion of Western values. In the West marriage does not seem to have an enduring value.

One's own self is everything that has to be cherished at all costs and one's own ego has to be gratified at all times — this is the attitude that has slowly set into the

society. Things like self-sacrifice are a bitter pill and an anathema.

This fact is appreciated by those who have spent some time in the West. They are beginning to appreciate long-enduring institutions and traditions back home.

Some of the reasons today's youth do not appreciate our values and traditions include the influence of cinema, tele serials, wrong notions of beauty where character beauty is not appreciated as much as physical appearance, insecurity, etc. Other factors that vitiate the atmosphere include selfish behavior on the part of parents who encourage the son or daughter to pressure the spouse for more economic gain. Most important of all is a lack of knowledge of the objective and purpose of marriage, which consists in giving oneself completely to the other or extending one's unconditional love to an individual with whom one has social, intellectual, emotional, economic and physical relationship.

The swami closes his arguments by citing the example of Tara, Vali's wife in the *Ramayana*, who begs Rama to slay her, too, after he kills her husband, arguing that no sin of femicide would attach to him thereby, because the wife is an integral part of the soul of the husband. He points out that in our tradition all women should be looked upon as incarnations of Lakshmi and all men as forms of Narayana.

Hence the couple should respect each other; only then do a wife and husband deserve to become parents. We should think of the amazing relationship between Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, whose historic example helps others to live happily together and if understood well paves the way for spiritual illumination as well.

We discuss this question thoroughly drawing examples from our time-honored epics and at least one real-life saintly couple.

Sarada Devi, the Ideal Wife

Sarada Devi had great respect for her parents-in-law. She served her mother-in-law like a dutiful daughter.⁵

She considered the service of the Master (her husband) and his mother to be the only duty of her life. The old lady was then too feeble to move about freely, and so she depended much on the Holy Mother, who was well aware of this. Hence, whenever the old lady called her, she rushed to her side. If anyone warned her that by such heedless dashing she ran the risk of striking her head against the low door frame, she would reply, "What if I do? She is my superior and my mother. Alas, she is old! If I don't hurry up, it may inconvenience

5. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 52.

her and so I run." The old lady then lived upstairs and the Holy Mother on the ground floor of the Nahabat.

When asked by Sri Ramakrishna once whether she "had come to drag (him) down to the worldly level," she answered without the slightest hesitation, "No, why should I drag you to the worldly way? I have come to help you in your chosen path." The Master was only testing her resolve, and she passed with flying colours unlike an ordinary wife.

In her turn, she once asked him how he looked upon her. He promptly said: ⁶

The same Mother that is in the (Kali) temple gave birth to this body and now resides at the Nahabat and she, again, is now massaging my feet. Truly do I see you as a veritable form of the Blissful Mother!

Such was the supernormal relationship between Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. Such was the ideal that Sarada Devi pursued as a wife. Although there was never any question about the nature of their marriage, the Master was still grateful to his wife for not wanting to lead a worldly life.

Sri Sarada Devi as a wife was an embodiment of virtue, purity, and selfless service to her husband

6. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 46.

and her mother-in-law. She was a real *sahadharminii* who fully supported her husband in leading a spiritual life and empowered herself, too, as the ideal wife in the process.

One more story that shows that Sarada Devi's ideals exactly matched those of her husband. Once a devotee wanted to offer some money to Sri Ramakrishna much to his horror. Here is the exchange among the three in the words of Sri Ramakrishna: ⁷

When a ... devotee (Lakshminarayana) proposed to give me ten thousand rupees, I felt as though my head was under a saw. I said to Mother (Kali), "Mother, Mother, dost Thou come to tempt me again after so long a time?" At that time I called her (Holy Mother) to test her mind and said, "Listen, my dear, this man proposes to give me money. As I have refused the offer, he proposes to give it to you. Why don't you accept this?" At this she replied instantaneously, "How can that be? The money can't be accepted. If I receive it, it will be as good as your receiving it... Therefore the money can never be accepted." At these words of hers I felt intensely relieved.

7. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 102-103.

The Story of King Nala and Princess Damayanti

Summary

[The story is found in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*.]

Nala, son of Virasena, ruled over the country of Nishadha earning for himself the reputation of an ideal king. He was good at training horses and cooking. Hearing about the storied beauty of Princess Damayanti, daughter of King Bhima of Vidarbha, he pined for her. As it happened, Damayanti was equally enamored of Nala, and chose him as her husband from among an assembly of suitors that included even celestials.

An ideal king though he was, he was fond of gambling, a weakness that his older brother Pushkara exploited. Nala lost his kingdom to him in a game of dice and was expelled from Nishadha along with his wife Damayanti. One of the disappointed suitors of Damayanti, the evil spirit Kali, was responsible for his misfortune.

Damayanti sent her two children to her parents' place.

Once in the forest, Nala felt bad that his wife had to suffer the consequences of his mistake. So, hoping she would return home to her parents,

he quietly left her in the forest while she was sleeping.

Once on his way, he rescued a great serpent from a forest fire, who then did him the favour of changing his appearance to a hunchback to prevent him from being discovered. However he had the ability to change back into his own form when he desired.

In his changed form, he was able to obtain employment with King Rituparna of Ayodhya as his charioteer and cook, under the name Bāhuka. In the meantime, after some problems of her own, Damayanti found safe haven in another kingdom and decided to look for Nala. She received intelligence about his whereabouts but could not be sure it was he.

She thought about a plan: why not announce in that one town where Nala might be living incognito that she was going to marry a second time and all suitors were welcome. The list included Rituparna, whose kingdom was too far from Vidarbha to be reached in a day trip by chariot—that is, by anyone other than Nala.

When Bahuka arrived with the king, Damayanti ascertained that he was indeed Nala.

And Nala for his part ruefully explained that his loss at the gambling table was not his fault, having been possessed by the demon Kali.

The reunion of Nala and Damayanti was highly touching; Nala's re-ascension to the throne was joyous beyond description.

The Story

King Nala was the exemplary ruler of the Nishadha country. He was the most handsome man around and a bachelor. He was an extremely skilled horse-trainer and an expert player of dice. He was a great archer. He mastered the Vedas. He was honest and truthful and took great care of his subjects.

His contemporary and an equally well-renowned king was Bhima, the ruler of Vidarbha. He was the embodiment of virtue. But he had no children. One day a great sage named Damana visited him and, pleased with his hospitality, he granted the king his wish. As a result, Bhima had a daughter named Damayanti, and three sons named Dama, Dānta, and Damana. Damayanti was a jewel of a daughter and was exceedingly beautiful, whose fame spread far and wide. The sons were valorous and of an enviable character.

Damayanti with large eyes and wearing lovely ornaments shone brightly in the company of her attendants. People compared her to Indra's wife Śachi. She had no equal in beauty and grace among humans or celestials. Nala among men had no equal, either, in looks or reputation. He was like the god of love Kandarpa (Manmatha) himself. Intermediaries began to sing the praises of each before the other in due time. Without seeing each other, they each began to cherish thoughts of love for the other. Their love progressed rapidly.

Wandering distraught in his gardens, one day Nala caught hold of a swan with golden wings. The swan, thinking that he was going to kill it, said to him: 'Please don't kill me; I will praise you before Damayanti so much that she will not be interested in any other man.' He let the fowl go which, along with some others soon flew to the land of Vidarbha and landed in front of Damayanti.

Damayanti, sitting in the company of her handmaids, was attracted to those unusual birds and started to pursue one of them. The bird artfully led her to a private place and addressed her in a human voice: 'Nala, the king of the Nishadhas, handsome as the Aswins, is best suited to be your husband.

I have seen celestials, *gandharvas*, *nagas*, *rakshasas*, and men, but none is like Nala. You are the best among women, and he among men, and yours will be the union of the best with the best. Damayanti then requested the swan to speak to Nala about herself in a similar way. The swan did so.

Damayanti soon began to pine for Nala more than ever before and lost weight. Her behavior changed, and she lost interest in all pleasure. She could not sleep. This situation was reported to King Bhima, who understood that it was time for his daughter's marriage. He announced the *svayamvara* (self-selection of husband) to all the world. The response was overwhelming. All the magnificent princes arrived in Vidarbha. Furthermore, informed by the sage Narada, Indra and the lords of the quarters rushed there. And so did Nala, his heart full of love for Damayanti.

The gods, seeing that they had no chance competing with Nala, came up with an idea. They approached Nala *en masse* and asked for a favor, which he readily granted, not knowing who they were and what the favour was. The gods Indra, Agni, Varuna, Yama, and others then asked him to

be their messenger to Damayanti to ask her that she should marry one of them. Nala feebly protested that he was himself there for the hand of Damayanti and that he couldn't do it. But the tricky gods held him to his promise and insisted that he carry out their mission. Though in an extremely awkward situation, Nala kept his word. The gods helped him sneak into Damayanti's inner chambers where he narrated his message.

Damayanti spoke her mind firmly: 'O King Nala, it is you whom I love. I have arranged for all the princes to gather here so that you would come here. If you reject me, I will end my life by means of water, fire, or poison.' He asked her again, 'These gods are the creators of the world. I am not equal to the dust of their feet. I may lose my life if you spurn their advances. Besides, which woman does not want the life of a goddess? Please accept my friendly advice.' Damayanti's eyes welled up with tears as she suggested a way out: 'O King, you will not be blamed if you attend the *svayamvara* along with the gods and if I choose you from among those gathered in the assembly along with the gods.' He reported to the gods all that had happened at his meeting with Damayanti, including her plan to choose himself at the groom selection ceremony.

On the appointed day, into the assembly of gods and princes, the bride walked mesmerizing everyone. Right away, she noticed a problem. Seated in the gathering were *five* Nalas, not one. How could she decide which was the real Nala. She then mentally prayed to the gods themselves for guidance and, through the characteristics betrayed by the gods such as not blinking, sweating, or touching the ground, she could isolate Nala and coyly garlanded him to the delight of everyone. Everyone, that is, except the evil Kali and Dvapara who wanted to participate in the groom selection process but missed it. Disappointed, Kali swore to ruin Nala and his fortune at the opportune time. He decided to possess Nala and, with Dvapara animating the dice, make Nala lose the game of dice when it happened next. The celestials advised him against it to no avail.

King Bhima performed many sacrifices and gave abundant gifts to his subjects.

In due time Nala and Damayanti had a son and a daughter named Indrasena and Indrasenā respectively.

It was not easy for Kali to accomplish his mission of destroying Nala. He needed to wait for a lapse in Nala's conduct before he could possess him. After waiting for twelve years, he noticed Nala

offering his morning prayers without washing his feet first, which was a violation of the rules. Kali then promptly entered his body. He invited Nala's brother Pushkara to play dice with Nala when his success was guaranteed. Nala reluctantly agreed, played the game and lost everything. Exiled from his kingdom, he started on his way to the forest with Damayanti with just the clothes on their backs. Damayanti had already sent her children to Ayodhya, the kingdom of Rituparna for their safety along with Nala's charioteer, Varshneya.

Since the citizens were ordered by Pushkara that Nala should not be entertained by anyone, he and Damayanti had to spend three nights under the open skies subsisting only on water. When at one point he thought he could catch some birds by trapping them under his one piece of clothing, the birds flew away carrying his cloth with them. The birds were the dice that had cheated him in the first place! Knowing that he could not procure sustenance for himself and his wife, Nala said to Damayanti: 'Here are different roads to towns and villages. Take the one to Vidarbha and be safe and happy.' But Damayanti would not hear of it, and instead suggested that he go to Vidarbha with her. Nala replied that he couldn't go to Vidarbha where

he had once gone in all glory. He wrapped himself in a strip of cloth cut from her robe, and they moved on and arrived at a travel shelter and fell fast asleep from utter fatigue. Damayanti, equally tired, sank into deep sleep herself.

It was time for Nala to reflect on his condition again. He thought a great deal about it and decided to leave Damayanti there and go on his way, to save her further tribulation. His mind greatly agitated, as he left her behind, he entrusted her to the care of the winds, the sun, the elements, and the forces of nature, praying to them to protect her. He then walked away reluctantly, crying profusely as he left.

She soon woke up and realized that she was alone in that frightful forest. Grieving inconsolably, she started moving again until she came upon a huge serpent which caught her and wrapped its coils around her. As she helplessly yelled for rescue, a passing hunter chopped off the head of the snake and began to comfort her. However, he soon succumbed to desire on seeing the semi-clothed woman and began touching her. Enraged, Damayanti cursed that he should fall dead for his actions. He died on the spot, and she moved on.

She then came upon a hermitage where the ascetics treated her kindly and told her that better

days were ahead. Before she could ask any more questions, the band of sannyasins disappeared from her sight. Proceeding further, she entered a tranquil part of the forest with a river on whose banks a caravan was resting. She found out that they were headed to the city of the Chedis for trade, and she tagged along with them.

To her misfortune, when the merchants were sleeping fast, a herd of elephants in rut trampled on the caravan and caused great destruction of life and property. The merchants blamed her for the disaster calling her evil and threatening her life. She had to flee the scene and rush toward the Chedi capital. The urchins of the city thought she was a lunatic and tormented her but, luckily for her the Queen Mother saw her from her balcony and had her brought into the palace. Hearing her story, she accepted her into the family and assigned her daughter Sunanda to take care of her. Damayanti was very pleased with the Queen Mother's hospitality.

Meanwhile, Nala...

Having deserted his sleeping wife, Nala came upon a burning forest where he had heard a strange voice asking for help. Moving closer, he found that there was a mighty serpent in a burning tree

speaking to him: 'O King, I am a *naga*, and my name is Karkotaka. I have been cursed by the sage Narada to stay immobile until King Nala comes along and moves me to a different spot. It would help you, too, if you help me, and I will be your friend.' So saying the mighty snake shrank into the size of a thumb. Nala carried him to a place where there was no fire and was about to put him on the ground, but the snake wanted him to take him a few more steps. Then without warning, on the tenth step, he bit him, changing him into a misshapen hunchback. The snake explained to the confused king that his changed shape would prevent him from being recognized by those that wish to hurt him. He granted him several boons and directed him to Ayodhya, the kingdom of Rituparna, instructing him to seek employment as his charioteer under the name Bahuka. Rituparna was an expert gambler whose skill Nala could acquire. He then gave him a robe that, when worn, his original form would be restored.

Ten days later, Nala entered the city of Rituparna and introduced himself as the world's greatest horseman. 'I can also give you good counsel to solve difficult issues. Moreover, I am a good cook.' Much impressed, Rituparna employed him

superintendent of his stables. Varshneya, Nala's old charioteer, was already in the King's employ.

Settled in relative comfort, Nala used to recite every evening in great anguish a *śloka* which meant: 'Where is that helpless woman afflicted with hunger and thirst and thinking of the wretched person whom she still adores?' Asked by a stable hand about this daily recitation by a stable hand, Nala sorrowfully narrated the story to him, without giving himself away. Nala thus lived in Rituparna's stables for some time unknown to him.

King Bhima in the meantime sent search parties to locate both Nala and Damayanti. "He who will find the whereabouts of the couple and/or bring them to me will receive a reward of a thousand cows and a village," he announced. After a while, one Sudeva searching in the capital of the Chedis saw Damayanti in the company of Sunanda in the palace. Her emaciated appearance and her unconcealed charm gave her away. He respectfully approached her and introduced himself as her brother's friend, and told her about the welfare of everyone in her family. Damayanti could hardly contain her happiness at seeing him and wept with joy. The Queen Mother noticed it and queried Sudeva about Damayanti's antecedents.

Damayanti's identity was established beyond question, when the mole in her forehead was uncovered by Sunanda.

Sudeva narrated the story of Damayanti, saying that she was the daughter of Bhima and the wife of Nala, the ruler of Nishadha; that he lost his kingdom in a game of dice with his brother Pushkara, and that he went into exile with his wife. Sunanda and the Queen Mother wept hugging Damayanti. It turned out Damayanti's mother was the Queen Mother's sister. The gracious lady told Damayanti that her kingdom equally belonged to her, as Damayanti bowed to her reverentially and asked her to send her to her father's place where her children were. Appropriate travel arrangements were made at once, and Damayanti arrived at her father's place to his delight. Sudeva got his reward of the cows and the village.

The next morning Damayanti spoke to her mother about organizing a search for Nala, who then requested the king to do so. Damayanti instructed the search party to announce this cryptic message in every town and gathering: 'Dear gambler, where have you been, you who cut part of my robe and deserted me overcome by grief? The wife should always be protected by her husband, but you have neglected your duty. Have

pity on me.’ She further told the party that whoever answers should not know that you had been dispatched by me.’ After searching for a long time without success, one of the searchers, Parnada, had some news for Damayanti. He said, ‘Looking for Nala, I reached the city of Ayodhya and repeated your message to King Rituparna who showed no reaction. Later, a deformed employee of the king named Bahuka greeted me. He was his charioteer and a skilled cook. Sighing profusely and weeping bitterly, he said that chaste women, though deserted by their husbands, protect themselves and reach heaven. Therefore she should not be angry with one whose robe had been stolen by birds while trying to feed his wife, and one who was destitute and without his kingdom.’

Convinced that Nala had been found, she consulted with her mother and came up with a plan. Without the knowledge of her father, she would send Sudeva back to Ayodhya with an urgent message to Rituparna: ‘Damayanti will hold another *svayamvara* to select a husband, since Nala’s whereabouts are not known. The auspicious ceremony will take place tomorrow at sunrise. If you are interested, you should go there.’

The Impossible Day Trip to Ayodhya

Rituparna summoned Bahuka and told him that, being an extraordinary charioteer, he should take him to Ayodhya for the event by the following morning despite the distance. This put poor Bahuka in a bind: why would Damayanti do such a thing? Did she lose her mind because of her grief? She is the mother of my children. Women are known to do unpredictable things. Or, is it just a strategy on her part to find me? No matter, I will go there and find out for myself. I will thus accomplish Rituparna's task as well as my own.'

Bahuka went to the stables right away to select the right team of horses suitable for the long lightning trip. He found just the right steeds, lean and mean, and fleet of foot, displaying all the auspicious marks. He then gently caressed the horses and, with the old charioteer Varshneya by his side, he was all set for the ride of a lifetime.

With Rituparna aboard, driven by Bahuka, the horses seemed to fly much to the amazement of the passengers. Bahuka's extraordinary skill reminded Varshneya of King Nala. Rituparna was lost in disbelief. Crossing hills and streams in quick succession, Bahuka soon landed his chariot in Ayodhya.

But before that, *en route*, Rituparna's upper garment fell off and he wanted to retrieve it. Bahuka was reluctant to halt the chariot, so the king wanted to create a diversion. He showed him a tree and told him that he could tell him how many leaves and fruits that tree had. Bahuka was intrigued by this amazing feat and wanted to learn that skill in exchange for his knowledge of the horses. While this exchange was going on, the king's robe was probably retrieved. Furthermore, the king taught the ins and outs of the game of dice to Bahuka, whereupon Kali was ejected from his body. Bahuka still had his deformities, though.

Rituparna was properly welcomed by King Bhima to his city and Damayanti was delighted to hear the clatter of the horses driven by Nala. Yet she thought to herself that, if that was not Nala who drove the chariot, she would end her life.

From the upper storey, she looked down on the chariot and those that were alighting. King Bhima, though not sure why Rituparna had come to visit him, yet received him with proper honors. As for Rituparna, he looked around and did not see any signs of the proclaimed *svayamvara* around. Bhima thought he would wait to see what the matter was. Not having seen Nala among the occupants of the chariot, Damayanti was sad. She

called her attendant Kesini and sent her to Bahuka to find out who he was and also about Nala.

Kesini gingerly approached Bahuka and welcomed him. She then asked him who he was, when they started, and why he was there, adding that the princess of Vidarbha would like to know all about him. Hearing from Bahuka that Rituparna came for a purported second *svayamvara* of Damayanti, and that Varshneya, the charioteer of King Nala, was the third person on the chariot, Kesini then asked him about himself. 'Rituparna had hired me as his charioteer and cook,' Bahuka said. Kesini then mused aloud whether Varshneya might know where Nala was, to which Bahuka replied that, after he left Damayanti's children at her father's place, Varshneya went his way and would not have any idea of Nala. And Nala himself would not reveal who he was, so no one would know where he was.

After further probing by Kesini, Bahuka replied with a heavy heart what he had told Sudeva before: 'Chaste women, though overtaken by misfortune, will yet protect themselves and earn for themselves a place in heaven. Deserted by their husbands, they will never get angry and are saved by their own

virtue. No matter whether they are treated well or ill, they would never be angry with their husbands in misfortune.' He broke down in tears. Kesini reported all that transpired verbatim, including the fact that Nala wept uncontrollably.

Damayanti once again dispatched Kesini to Bahuka to observe everything that he did including anything that was unusual, asking her to report back to her.

She reported: 'I have never seen anyone with such control over the elements. Any time he passed under a low ceiling, he wouldn't bend; instead, the ceiling would rise to accommodate him. Narrow passageways would automatically widen as he approached them. When he was ready to cook, the grass in his hands lights itself up. If he touched fire, he wouldn't be hurt. Flowers squeezed between his fingers do not wilt; instead, they become fresher and more fragrant.

Still not sure, Damayanti yet again sent Kesini to go to the kitchen and bring her some meat cooked by him unbeknownst to him. Tasting it, Damayanti came to the conclusion that Bahuka was indeed Nala, with her heart melting. She sent her children to Bahuka, whom he scooped up, placed

them on his lap, and began weeping aloud. He then hastily dismissed Kesini.

Nala Discovered

Damayanti, with the permission of her parents, had Bahuka brought to her chambers. Thus surprised, he could not help shedding tears profusely. Her appearance was unkempt. She quizzed him: 'Have you seen anyone deserting his wife for no fault of hers? He married me in the presence of the celestials and the god of fire.' She spoke through flowing tears.

Bahuka finally answered. 'The loss of my kingdom and my walking out on you were the acts of Kali, who possessed my body. The evil spirit has now left my body, and I have come here for you.' He then asked her, 'How could you marry a second time, having been mine once and forever?' Damayanti hastened to respond: 'Please don't suspect me. I chose you over the celestials as my lord. When a searcher found you in the kingdom of Rituparna, I devised this plan of a second *svayamvara* to bring you here. I swear that I have not committed any sin in thought or action.' As she was saying this, the god of wind confirmed that she was truly sinless, saying, 'The sun, the moon, and I have been her protectors these three years.'

Nala had no more questions regarding Damayanti's loyalty and love for him. There was a shower of flowers from the heavens and celestial music began to play. He took out the garment that Karkotaka gave him and wearing it, regained his original appearance. The couple hugged with overpowering affection and love. Next morning, they presented themselves before the king with due ceremony. And King Rituparna asked Nala for his forgiveness for any possible mistreatment by him during his employment as his charioteer. Nala then formally transferred his knowledge of horses and their training to Rituparna who, in turn, passed on his knowledge of the game of dice to Nala.

After spending a month in Vidarbha, Nala and Damayanti returned to Nishadha with a small entourage. Nala went straight to the wily Pushkara and suggested a revenge match of dice. The wager would be everything Nala possessed at the time along with Damayanti against Pushkara's kingdom. He also offered the choice of a sword fight to Pushkara. Pushkara mockingly responded: 'I am glad that you and your wife are still alive. It's certain now that she will now serve me like Sachi serves Indra. I have waited all this time for you to return for the game. Winning Damayanti in the game is my greatest desire now.'

Nala Regains His Kingdom

Nala urged Pushkara to start the game without further talk. And with a single throw of dice, he won back everything he had lost before. He also won the life of Pushkara which had been wagered. He addressed Pushkara: 'The whole kingdom is mine now. You cannot even look at Damayanti, for you and your whole family are her slaves. My earlier defeat did not reflect your skill at the game: it was Kali who did it. So I won't blame you for what happened. I will let you live any way you like. I will also give you your share of the paternal kingdom with all its appurtenances. I will not love you any the less now than before.'

Pushkara, thus chastised by the noble Nala, said to him with folded palms:

'May your fame spread far and wide and may you live for a thousand years.'

After a month, he went to his own town with his family and retinue. The King of Nishadha reclaimed his palace and comforted his subjects.

The Message

Nala and Damayanti symbolize eternal commitment between the spouses and readiness to sacrifice all if needed. A couple derives lasting

happiness with the assurance that each spouse is there for the other forever. No hardship makes them swerve from the ideal of togetherness. It's a story of two souls bonding with each other for life and beyond.

The Story of Princess Savitri and Prince Satyavan

The story of Savitri and Satyavan, also occurring in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, is the shorter and the more popular of the two episodes in the great epic. The daring and unprecedented spiritual exploits of a chaste and devoted wife who outwits the very god of death and literally plucks her husband from the jaws of death cannot but be fascinating. It exhorts mortal women of lofty character to achieve the ultimate, namely immortality through their exemplary conduct, overcoming insurmountable odds.

Summary

Subtitled *pātivratya māhātmya* (Power of Chastity), it is a minor episode in the epic that has been immortalized by Sri Aurobindo's poem where it is transformed into an epic in its own right. The story however is simple and straightforward.

Savitri was the gift of the goddess Gayatri to Asvapati, King of Madra.

She grew to be a beautiful and highly accomplished maiden ready to get married. The

king suggested that she find her own husband. She traveled to many lands in search of a suitable life partner. Finally, in a hermitage in the woods, she saw a young man tending to his aged parents. The father, a deposed king, was blind. She chose the young man as her husband and, returning home, told her father about him.

Satyavan was endowed with every virtue that a young man could have. But sage Narada who was at the royal court at the time said that, though the groom was highly qualified in every respect, he was short-lived and would die in a year from that day. He however approved of the marriage, saying it was divine will and Savitri's resolve should not be countermanded.

The marriage was performed with due pomp and ceremony, and a year had quickly passed. When it was just four days until the fateful day of Satyavan's death, Savitri undertook a fast, refraining from sustenance. On the fourth day, she worshipped the god of fire and, obtaining the blessings of her parents-in-law, followed Satyavan to the forest to collect fruit and firewood for the family. Soon Satyavan felt tired and had a severe headache. Unable to stand on his feet, he tried to rest for a while with his head on Savitri's lap.

Forthwith appeared a fearsome god on the scene with a noose in his hands yanking away the life-spirit from Satyavan's body. Savitri followed him for a long distance saying that her place was always with her husband and that she went where he went. She discoursed with Yama on a variety of subjects such as virtue and piety, praising him as the lord of justice. Yama was very pleased with her and granted her as many as five wishes. The first ones included restoration of his vision and his kingdom for her father-in-law, and one hundred children for her own father to extend the Salva lineage. The next one granted one hundred sons to Savitri herself, a wish that meant that Satyavan be resurrected. So Yama restored his life and sent the loving couple on their way.

It was getting dark when the couple were about to return home so, after some debate, they decided to brave the darkness so as not to let Satyavan's elderly parents get worried. They were very happy to see the young couple return though rather late. There was much jubilation all around, seeing the King Dyumatsena regained his eyesight as also his old kingdom.

The Story

There was a king of the Madras named Aśvapati of noble character with a big heart who ruled wisely and benevolently over his people. He had no children. So he started to undertake all prescribed observances and perform all sacrifices to placate the gods and goddesses, including Savitri, also known as Gayatri.

The goddess appeared before him and, finding that he desired offspring, granted him a baby girl. He named the girl Savitri as an expression of gratitude to goddess Gayatri.

In course of time, Savitri came of age and was ready to get married as prescribed in the scriptures. But no groom ever sought her hand. So Asvapati advised her to go out and find her own husband. She left the palace accordingly and began to visit where the sages practiced austerities living self-controlled lives.

Returning home after some time, she saw her father hosting the divine sage Narada, who enquired about her unmarried status. The king explained that she was just returning from that quest and that they would find out how her search for a groom went.

Savitri spoke in right earnest:

Dyumatsena was a king of the Śālva country. He lost his vision over time. He had a son named Satyavān. Seeing that the king had been incapacitated, a neighboring ruler invaded and occupied his kingdom. Dyumatsena had to leave the kingdom along with his wife and their young son and go into the forest. The king was very devout and practiced austerities and in those ascetic surroundings the boy grew. It is that boy that I chose to be my husband with all my heart.

The omniscient Narada, upon hearing this said that Savitri made the wrong choice. Explaining himself, he continued: ‘Satyavan always speaks the truth, which is why he is so named. He is fond of horses and has earned for himself the nickname *chitrāśva*. He is devoted to his father. He is energetic like the sun, intelligent like Brihaspati, brave like Indra, and forgiving like the Earth. He is charitable like Rantideva, and is charming like the twin Asvins. He mastered his senses and was always correct in his conduct.

Somewhat puzzled, Asvapati asked Narada as to what the problem was with Savitri’s selection of him for her husband, if he was endowed with so many virtues. Narada’s response was shocking:

‘he has just one year to live from today.’ Asvapati asked his daughter to choose someone else to marry.

Savitri’s response was amazing: ‘Death comes but once; a daughter is given away just once; and one says ‘I give away’ something only once. I have selected my husband, whose life may be long or short, for once. I will not select twice.

Narada then told Asvapati that his daughter’s mind was made up. No other person equaled Satyavan in virtue. He therefore approved of this marriage. Asvapati, in obedience to Narada’s instructions, started making arrangements for the festivities.

On an auspicious day, he set out with the other ascetics and priests for Dyumatsena’s hermitage. Seated on a clump of grass, Dyumatsena asked Asvapati the reason for his visit, to which the latter replied pointing to his daughter: ‘This lovely girl is my daughter Savitri. I request you to accept her as your daughter-in-law.’ Dyumatsena then asked, ‘I am living the life of an ascetic in a hermitage. How can your daughter, used to regal comforts, live in the forest?’ Asvapati told him that he and his daughter were well aware that happiness and misery are fleeting and things could change for the better any time. He pointed out that he came to offer the hand

of his daughter to Satyavan in marriage, fully convinced that the families were equals.' Dyumatsena then confessed that he had previously wished for an alliance with him but hesitated because of the loss of his kingdom. He decided to conduct the wedding the same day.

Having performed the marriage of his daughter, Asvapati returned home. The newlyweds were extremely happy. Savitri soon gave up her royal robes and ornaments and dressed herself as a forest-dweller, making everyone happy. Her skills in household duties, respect for her parents-in-law, and unbounded love for her husband pleased everyone no end.

But Narada's prophecy of a short life for Satyavan never left her mind. She kept counting down the days to the end.

When it was just four days till Satyavan's death, Savitri started fasting day and night much to the distress of her father-in-law, who tried to dissuade her from that difficult vow. She however persisted saying that she had perseverance enough to fulfill her vow and that he did not need to worry.

Her perseverance literally played a life-changing role soon after.

Dyunatsena let her observe her vow, as she became thin quickly. The night before the fateful day, Savitri was extremely agitated. When the sun rose that morning, she offered her prayers to the god of fire. She paid homage to the ascetics and her parents-in-law who all blessed her with a long married life.

She however steeled herself against the appointed hour and time.

Urged by her parents-in-law to eat since she had completed her fast, she told them that she would do so when the sun went down. While this conversation was happening, Satyavan was preparing to gather fruit and firewood, axe in hand, in the forest. Savitri told him that she wanted to accompany him to the forest. She could not bear the separation even for a day.

Satyavan was somewhat surprised that she, who had never wanted to go with him before, should now want to accompany him. He tried to dissuade her saying that the trails in the woods were hard to navigate and that she was too weak to walk after her fast.

Savitri without a moment's hesitation replied that she was not tired from the fast at all, that she

was determined to follow him, and that he should not discourage her. Relenting, Satyavan asked her to obtain the permission of his parents. She told them with great humility that it had been a long time since she went into the woods that were reputed to be beautiful and bounteous with fruit and flowers. Seeing her determination, they gave her permission advising her not to interrupt his work.

She happily followed her husband, though she was a mental wreck knowing that that was his last day on earth. While he was pointing all the picturesque scenes of the forest to her, her mind was not at ease, expecting death to strike him any minute.

Satyavan started picking fruit with which he filled his basket and axing dead branches for firewood. He soon tired of the work and began to sweat. He felt his head aching. He told his wife that he was feeling unwell and was unable to stand, so he wished to sleep. Savitri quickly went to him, and resting his head on her lap, sat down on the ground.

The next moment, she saw a large dark person with red eyes shining as the sun in front of her. He had a noose in his hand and was frightening to see. He was gazing intently at Satyavan. Savitri slowly

placed Satyavan's head on the ground and stood up. Approaching that dreadful person, she asked him who he was and what business he had there. Yama told her his name, adding that she was able to see him and talk to him because of her austerities. He was there to take Satyavan whose time on earth had ended. She queried Yama: 'I understand that you send your attendants for that purpose, so why are you here personally?'

Yama told her that because Satyavan was a man of great virtue, he did not want to send his attendants for him. So saying, with his noose he extracted the thumb-sized spark of Satyavan's life and proceeded to depart toward South. Satyavan's body lay lifeless on the ground. Savitri started following Yama, when he asked her to return and perform her husband's last rites. He advised her that she had come as far as she could in pursuit of him.

Savitri was not done with him. She addressed the Lord of Death: 'I go where my husband goes or is taken away. This is our custom. And since it is said that two people become friends if they walk seven paces together. We have walked longer than that and, as a friend, listen to what I have to say.'

'The merit acquired through religion is the best merit, superior to properly leading the four stages of

life, namely those of the student, householder, forest-dweller, and renunciate.'

Yama was pleased, but still urged her to turn back, offering her any boon other than the life of her husband. Savitri asked that her father-in-law recover his vision, which Yama readily granted, and hoped she would turn back. He told her that she would be exhausted following him, whereupon she told him that she wouldn't feel any fatigue at all in the company of her husband. Whatever befell him would befall her as well, and wherever he was taken she would go as well. Time spent in the company of great people would not go to waste. She was happy to be conversing with him.

Yama was happy with Savitri's lofty statements and granted her a second wish, with the exception of her husband's life. She asked that her father-in-law regain his kingdom, and that wish was granted.

Savitri did not show any sign of turning back. She said that the good folks always show kindness even to their foes and do other virtuous deeds. That observation earned her a third wish from the Lord of Death. She asked for a hundred sons for her father so that his lineage would not end with him. That wish too granted, she kept following Yama. She

argued that going with her husband was no hardship at all and that she was prepared to travel much further.

She praised Yama for the way he treated everyone equally, calling him the Lord of Justice. She then said that everyone wanted the company of the righteous because it was ennobling. That conversation earned Savitri one more wish from Yama. She asked that she would like to have and raise one hundred sons with Satyavan, which that god cheerfully granted.

She continued to tell Yama about the pious people who harmed no one and whom no one feared. It was because of such people that the planets move in their allotted orbs. It was because of them that the sun shone. He asked her to choose some special boon this time, to which she replied that He had already granted her one. She was going to have one hundred sons with Satyavan.

Yama then graciously released Satyavan's life, saying that he would be free from disease and would live for four hundred years. He would perform all religious rites, and would achieve much fame in the world. He would be the father of one hundred sons, who would all become great kings and be grateful to Savitri.

Savitri then hurried back to where she had left her husband's body and gently placed his head back on her lap. Satyavan slowly opened his eyes and made anxious enquiries of her. He claimed he had slept for a long time and told her that she should have awakened him. He also asked her about the godlike person who was dragging him away. He regained the strength of his limbs back.

Savitri wanted to spend the night in the woods and go back home the following day. But he told her that his elderly parents would be worried and they should go home that very same night. So they started back on their way and arrived at home to the delight of the inhabitants of the hermitage.

Eventually, Savitri related all that had happened to everyone. Dyumatsena regained his sight and also got his kingdom back when the usurper was slain by his ministers. Savitri in course of time became the mother of a hundred warrior sons so that the Salva lineage was continued indefinitely. Asvapati sired one hundred sons as well.

The Message

Savitri was not a mere princess; she was the embodiment of love, sacrifice, and commitment. So, too, all other characters in the story, each with

an additional spiritual dimension to them, on top of the abundant virtue they personified. Ultimately, love conquered all, including death itself.

Why Ancient Stories?

Stories like that of Sita-Rama, Savitri-Satyavan and Nala-Damayanti have been etched into the national psyche over the millennia, with every boy and girl at one time or other hoping to become a Rama or a Sita.

Sita inspired Rama's heroism, Damayanti enhanced Nala's reputation, Savitri accomplished the feat of wrenching her husband's life back from the god of death and, more recently, the ideal and noble wife of Sri Ramakrishna played the role of a mother to all the residents of Belur Math. An important point to note here is that the men were ideal in themselves to begin with and thus deserved all the adoration that they received from their wives.

In the case of Sri Sarada Devi, it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who personally guided his wife in every aspect of womanhood and motherhood, though they never lived as a married couple.

We have emphasized in this chapter that marriage is a serious and morally noble covenant that should not be entered into lightly. Having entered it, both spouses should strive to live up to our noble, time-honoured, and enlightened ideals of lifelong commitment such that not only the family, but the entire society is benefited. Marriage in our tradition is the centerpiece of fulfilling and spiritual coexistence.

We will conclude our discussion of the Indian ideal of marriage with the words of profound wisdom kindly shared by the monk mentioned before of Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad. In the present-day context, incidence of the dissolution of marriage in specific instances for specific reasons also needs to be addressed, as the Swami has done.

It is a given in traditional Hindu marriages that both spouses should be faithful to each other, as long as they both live, despite sundry temptations to slide from the path of virtue. They must resist them with a strong will and unwavering commitment to the ideal of chastity and the institution of sacred matrimony. Illegitimate liaisons out of wedlock are imprudent, immoral, and inimical to happiness on all levels of life. Didn't Mandodari give vent to her grief when Ravana was killed with these words? 'O, Lord! You have conquered death, gods, and

brought other elements under your control but could not master lust, and though we dissuaded you against kidnapping Rama's spouse, you didn't listen to us. Now see our fate, Lanka has become orphaned'.

Clearly, extramarital relationships cause immense pain to spouses, because the spiritual union of marriage occurs only when there already exists a bond extending over lifetimes. In other words, two people happen to be married, based on their mutual prior bond. Marriages are indeed *made in heaven*, whether we accept it or not. During the marriage ceremony, the groom is made to promise that he will not violate the vow of loyalty: *kanyām nāticarāmi*, where *aticar* means 'to break one's promise.' Needless to add, the commitment equally applies to the bride.

Given that, commonsense—and psychology—tell us that any transgression on the part of one spouse shatters the ego of the other spouse, makes them feel totally rejected and worthless, and keeps gnawing at their vitals lifelong. That's the way we humans are, or we would be saints. Our history has plenty of examples of men jilted by their wives ending up as great saints. The example of King Bhartr̥hari comes to mind. The saint of course

disavows his body and, by extension, that of the unfaithful wife. In the case of normal human beings, marital indiscretion is tantamount to cleaving the one soul (of the couple) into two. In a society where such spiritual unity in marriage either does not exist or exists only in name, its members feel free to create and dissolve partnerships almost at will—which is what our tradition discourages. The reason? Several habitual broken relationships constitute a restless life, which has no chance of spiritual advancement, let alone Self-realization. Those lives are wasted without ever realizing their full potential.

Contrast this with what Sri Ramakrishna said about self-control *in* marriage. The spouses should live as siblings after they sire a child or two, and strive for spiritual advancement so that their entire lives are not wasted in physical craving. Surprising as it may sound, the goal of marriage is to rid oneself of the ego through unconditional service to one's spouse, through total self-effacement. In this kind of sacrifice, any self-gratification is incidental. Rama and Sita symbolize this kind of ideal relationship, each living for the sake of the other, the self being totally eliminated. That's why we call them gods and make them our role models for all time to come.

Finally, a word about ideals. Ideals are always very difficult to follow and live by. It is a constant struggle to live by even a simple ideal, let alone deal with the complexities of spousal coexistence. While the decisions made by the spouses are based on their particular circumstances, our tradition exhorts us to keep in mind our time-honoured and culturally sanctioned mode of life.

Practicing an ideal is a spiritual exercise in itself, involving sacrifice and suffering. Our tradition teaches that pain and suffering are an integral part of spiritual advancement.

It is well known that putting an ideal into practice is easier said than done. The ideals, however, must exist and be taught to promote right conduct in the society.

We conclude the discussion with an observation by Swami Vivekananda (in a lecture, "God in Everything," delivered in London on 27th October 1896), "If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, I am sure that the man without an ideal makes fifty thousand. Therefore, it is better to have an ideal."

III

Woman as Mother

The Glory of Motherhood

India has a great ancient tradition in which the mother was always honoured far above even the father because of the tremendous significance of her role in the family and society. The mother is the very anchor, the bedrock, and the foundation of the family.

When it was time for graduating students to return home, their āchāryas in the old gurukulas explicitly instructed them to honour their parents, teacher, guests, and so on in that order, beginning with the mother: *mātrdevo bhava*, let your mother be your first god.¹

Says Swami Vivekananda:²

The position of the mother is the highest in the world, as it is the one place in which to learn and exercise the greatest unselfishness. The love of God is the only love that is higher than a mother's love; all others are lower.

1. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 1.11.2.

2. *Complete Works*, 12th ed., Vol.1, 68.

The ancient law-giver Manu says that the mother is a thousand times to be venerated as much as the father.³ There is a popular *subhāshita* that reads, *na mātur daivatam param*, suggesting that the mother is the highest form of divinity. In the *Mahabharata*, it is declared that there is no teacher like one's mother.⁴ In the famous *yakshaprasna* sequence, Yudhishtira (Dharmaraja) says that the mother is more venerable than the earth itself.⁵

More recently, in the Eighth Century C.E., Sankara the great philosopher and ascetic, pays a personal tribute to his mother on her deathbed like no other son ever did. He proved he was a son before he was an ascetic. He pours forth his love for his mother in five heart-rending *ślokas*:⁶

Mother, you never complained when you were carrying me for months, when you lost your taste for food, and when you were greatly debilitated, or underwent severe labour pains to deliver me.

When you once dreamt while I was a student that I became an ascetic, you ran to the school crying. You hugged me and cried some more, which made everyone at the school cry.

3. *sahasram tu pitṛn mātā gauraveṇātiricyate*, Manusmṛti, 2.145.

4. *nāsti mātṛsamo guruh*, Śāntiparva, 13.61.81, 13.109.62.

5. *mātā gurutarā bhūmeh*, Śāntiparva, 3.297.41.

6. Sankara, *mātṛpancaka*.

I have not offered you even water when you were dying, have not uttered *tāraka mantra* in your ear at the last minute, and I cannot perform your last rites as a *sannyasin*. Please forgive me.

Mother, with your nectar mouth you called me the apple of your eye, your life, and your precious jewel, blessing me to live long. Into that mouth I am now putting a few grains of raw rice (as is the custom when someone passes away).

To you who in great pain cried out when you delivered me “O Mother, O Father, O Siva, O Krishna, O Govinda, O Hari, and O Mukunda,” all I am offering is this salutation with my folded palms.

And the mothers, in their turn, were very high minded. Among the epics, the world’s very first one is the Ramayana. It may be called the “ideal” epic, that is the epic that is full of the noblest ideals for living. To cite one example from it, when Lakshmana goes to his mother Sumitra to take leave of her before he accompanies Rama to the forest, the noble lady instructs him that he has to respect Rama and Sita as though they were his own parents and to let the forest be his Ayodhya for the duration of the exile:⁷

7. *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ayodhya Kanda, 40.9.

*rāmam daśaratham viddhi mām viddhi janakātmajām
ayodhyāmaṭavīm viddhi gaccha tāta yathā sukhām*

Sumitra specifically tells her son to enjoy his self-imposed exile, not wanting for anything, happily!

In India, motherhood has always been considered the pinnacle of a woman's glory. Swami Vivekananda wholeheartedly endorses this view and devotes a large amount of thought to it. This chapter therefore constitutes the most significant part of the book.

Here we will see how our tradition glorifies motherhood, how Swamiji sharply contrasts it with the Western views on women, and why we in India worship women.

We then address the practical aspects of motherhood. Based on the teachings of Swamiji, we will talk about how future mothers can bring ideal babies into the world. We support these claims with evidence from the scriptures, the puranas, and recent history. Modern science also confirms that mothers can influence babies in the womb. We make the argument that the entire future of children is in the hands of their mothers.

We will end the chapter with a discussion of the life of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna's wife, as the perfect role model of motherhood. She did not have any children of her own, but she looked upon every monk, every disciple, and every visitor as her own child. She showered her selfless love and compassion on everyone, sacrificed personal comfort and convenience for the sake of others, and proved herself to be a living goddess.

Swami Vivekananda's Views

Swamiji extols the qualities of the Indian woman as a mother, in comparison with her Western counterpart, in the following passages, addressing the American women: ⁸

Now the ideal woman, in India, is the mother, the mother first and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother. As children, everyday, when we are boys, we have to go early in the morning with a little cup of water and place it before the mother, and mother dips her toe into it and we drink.

In the West, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there— as the wife. To the ordinary man in India, the whole force of

8. *Complete Works*, 4th ed., Vol.8, 59-62.

womanhood is concentrated in motherhood. In the Western home, the wife rules. In the Indian home, the mother rules. If a mother comes into a Western home, she has to be subordinate to the wife; to the wife belongs the home. A mother always lives in our homes: the wife must be subordinate to her. See all the difference of ideas.

Now, I only suggest comparisons. I would state facts so that we may compare the two sides. Make this comparison. If you ask, "What is an Indian woman as wife?" The Indian asks, "Where is the American woman as mother? What is she, the all-glorious, who gave me this body? What is she who kept me in her body for nine months? Where is she who would give me twenty times her life if I had need? Where is she whose love never dies, however wicked, however vile I am? Where is she, in comparison with her who goes to the divorce court the moment I treat her a little badly? Oh, American women, where is she?" I will not find her in your country. I have not found the son who thinks mother is first. When we die, even then, we do not want our wives and our children to take her place. Our mother! —we want to die with our head on her lap once more, if we die before her. Where is she? Is woman a name to be coupled with the physical body only? Ay! The Hindu mind fears all those ideals which say that the flesh must cling unto the flesh. No, no! Woman! Though shalt not be coupled with anything connected

with flesh. Thy name has been called holy once and forever, for what name is there which no lust can ever approach, no carnality ever come near, than the one word mother? That is the ideal in India.

There she is— the Hindu mother. The son's wife comes in as her daughter; just as the mother's own daughter married and went out, so her son married and brought in another daughter; and she has to fall in line under the government of the queen of queens, of my mother. Even I, who never married, belonging to an order that never marries, would be disgusted if my wife, supposing I had married, dared to displease my mother. I would be disgusted. Why? Don't I worship my mother? Why should not her daughter-in-law? Whom I worship, why not she? Who is she, then, that would try to ride over my head and govern my mother? She has to wait till her motherhood is fulfilled; and the one thing that fulfils womanhood, that is womanliness in woman, is motherhood. Wait till she becomes a mother; then she will have the same right. That, according to the Hindu mind, is the great mission of woman— to become a mother. But oh, how different! Oh, how different! My father and mother fasted and prayed for years and years, so that I would be born. They pray for every child before he is born. Says our great law-giver, Manu, giving the definition of an Aryan: "He is the Aryan, who is born through prayer." Every child not born through prayer is illegitimate, according to the great law-giver. The child

must be prayed for. Those children that come with curses, that slip into the world just in a moment of inadvertence, because that could not be prevented—what can we expect of such progeny? Mothers of America, think of that! Think, in the heart of your hearts, are you ready to be women? Not any question of race or country, or that false sentiment of national pride. Who dares to be proud in this mortal life of ours, in this world of woes and miseries? What are we before this infinite force of God? But I ask you the question tonight: “Do you all pray for the children to come? Are you thankful to be mothers, or not? Do you think that you are sanctified by motherhood or not? Ask that of your minds. If you don’t, your marriage is a lie, your womanhood is false, your education is superstition, and your children, if they come without a prayer, will prove a curse to humanity.

See the different ideals now coming before us. From motherhood comes tremendous responsibility. There is the basis, start from that. Well, why is mother to be worshipped so much? Because our books teach that it is the pre-natal influence that gives the impetus to the child for good or evil. Go to a hundred thousand colleges, read a million books, associate with all the learned men of the world—better off you are when born with the right stamp. You are born for good or evil. The child is a born god or a born demon: that is what the books say. Education and all these things come

afterwards— are a mere bagatelle. You are what you are born. Born unhealthful, how many drugstores swallowed wholesale, will keep you well all through your life? How many people of good, healthy lives were born of weak parents, were born of sickly, blood-poisoned parents? How many? None— none. We come with a tremendous impetus for good or for evil— born demons or born gods. Education and other things are a bagatelle.

Thus say our books: direct the pre-natal influence. Why should mother be worshipped? Because she made herself pure. She underwent harsh penance sometimes to keep herself as pure as purity can be. For, mind you, no woman in India thinks of giving up her body to any man; it is her own. The English, as a reform, have introduced at present what they call 'Restitution of conjugal rights'; but no Indian would take advantage of it. When a man comes in physical contact with his wife, the circumstances she controls, through what prayers and what vows! For that which brings forth the child is the holiest symbol of God himself. It is the greatest prayer between man and wife, the prayer that is going to bring into this world another soul fraught with tremendous power for good or for evil. Is it a joke? Is it a simple nervous satisfaction? Is it a brute enjoyment of the body? Says the Hindu: no, a thousand times no! But then, following that, there comes in another idea.

The idea we started with was that the ideal is the love for the mother— herself all-suffering, all-forbearing. The worship that is accorded to the mother has its fountainhead there. She was a saint to bring me into the world; she kept her body pure, her mind pure, her food pure, her clothes pure, her imagination pure, for years, because I would be born. Because she did that, she deserves worship. And what next follows? Linked with motherhood is wifehood.

Your Western people are individualistic. I want to do this thing because I like it; I will elbow everyone. Why? Because I like to do. I want my own satisfaction, so I marry this woman. Why? Because I like her. This woman marries me. Why? Because she likes me. There it ends. She and I are the only two persons in the whole, infinite world, and I marry her and she marries me; nobody else is injured, nobody else responsible. Your Johns and your Janes may go into the forest and there they may live their lives; but when they have to live in society, their marriage means a tremendous amount of good or evil to us. Their children may be veritable demons, burning, murdering, robbing, stealing, drinking, hideous, vile.

Swamiji restates in a different context the ultimate function of marriage in society:⁹

9. *Complete Works*, 8th ed., Vol. 4, 477.

Marriage is not for sense-enjoyment, but to perpetuate the race... By the producing of children, you are contributing to, and responsible for, the future good or evil of the society. Hence society has the right to dictate whom you shall marry and whom you shall not. That form of marriage obtains in society which is conducive most to its well-being; do you give up your desire of your individual pleasure for the good of the many.

So long as you live in society your marriage certainly affects every member of it and therefore society has the right to dictate whom you shall marry, and whom you shall not.

He explains how an ideal marriage conduces to an ideal society when it is based on principles of morality and spirituality, not convenience and expediency:¹⁰

But let me tell you now that the ideas behind our marriage system are the only ideas through which there can be a real civilization. There cannot be anything else. If a man or a woman were allowed the freedom to take up any woman or man as wife or husband, if individual pleasure, if satisfaction of animal instincts, were to be allowed to run loose in society, the result must be evil, evil children, wicked and demoniacal. Ay, man in every country is, on the one hand, producing these brutal

10. *Complete Works*, 9th ed., Vol. 3, 408-409.

children, and on the other hand, multiplying the police force to keep these brutes down. The question is not how to destroy evil that way, but how to prevent the very birth of evil, and so long as you live in society your marriage certainly affects every member of it; and therefore society has the right to dictate whom you shall marry, and whom you shall not... And in passing I may remark, that according to Manu a child who is born of lust is not an Aryan. The child whose very conception and whose death is according to the rules of the Vedas, such is an Aryan. Yes, and less of these Aryan children are being produced in every country, and the result is the mass of evil which we call Kali Yuga. But we have lost all these ideals; it is true we cannot carry all these ideals to the fullest length now, it is perfectly true we have made almost a caricature of some of these great ideas. It is lamentably true that the fathers and mothers are not what they were in old times, neither is society so educated as it used to be, neither has society that love for individuals that it used to have. But however faulty the working out may be, the principle is sound; and if its application has become defective, if one method has failed, take up the principle and work it out better; why kill the principle?... The principle is eternal and must be there. Work it out afresh, and make a reformed application.

The Mother and the Perfect Child

Today the world has become incredibly more complex and our daily lives are more stress-prone. The level of anxiety that is experienced by us all is higher than it has ever been. People are unable to face the challenges of life. They are unable to lead upright, happy, and successful lives. This problem can only be addressed—and resolved—at the prenatal level. The ability of people to withstand stress and lead ethical lives must develop even before they are born. So, it is the would-be mother who plays a major role in the development of the child.

It is a scientific fact that babies in the womb are conscious beings, very impressionable and highly receptive to mental stimuli from the outside world, especially from the mother. They are in fact powerhouses of information storage from all sources that they are exposed to. This information “absorbency” on the part of the foetus is a great tool in the hands of the mother, for she can mould her baby’s thinking and future growth outside the womb any way she wants. Every thought, feeling, sensation, and aspiration of the mother directly impacts the personality of the baby. Therefore, the mother’s mind should always entertain only pure and lofty thoughts and ideals.

The prenatal care that is exercised by the mother directly affects the kind of “smarts” that the baby develops in all the areas of life including physique, intellect, logical thinking, competitive skills, and self-discovery.

The emotional stability of the mother is of supreme significance. The most harmful factor is stress on the part of the mother. Stress induces anxiety, which in turn affects the entire psychophysical complex of a human being. If the mother’s psychophysical well-being is affected by adverse environmental, dietary, or familial factors during gestation, the foetus in the womb, which is highly vulnerable, suffers the consequences in a variety of ways that haunt it for its entire life. To mitigate these negative effects, the mother must listen to soothing music, live in a peaceful environment, do selfless activities and always entertain positive thoughts. She should also pray, meditate, practice mild yoga, and read and listen to inspiring stories in addition to eating healthy.

According to both religion and modern science, the health of both mother and baby are improved through prayer. Pregnancy-related problems are eliminated.

The appropriate kind of education that will shape the future child while in the womb is spiritual

education. It is achieved through the mother's pure and lofty thoughts, noble feelings, and by staying in pleasant, calm and harmonious surroundings.

There is much evidence to support this view both in our puranas and also in our more recent history.

The Puranas

The epics of a civilisation are the recorded documents of that civilization's glory and accomplishments. The exploits described therein are actual events that were handed down to posterity. These epics contain specific references to how seriously the women of yore took their maternal responsibilities during pregnancy and after childbirth. They were fully aware of the environmental and cultural influences on the fetuses and harnessed that knowledge for the benefit of the children and the community. The West had to wait until the invention of the ultrasound to realize this age-old phenomenon.

Let's look at some examples from our epics of noble women who shaped the future of their children, who in turn shaped the history of mankind. These women are the perfect representatives of Aryan tradition in its best sense—noble, lofty, distinguished.

Prahlāda, while in his mother's womb, was exposed to Narada's devotional songs in his hermitage, and consequently became a 'Bhāgavatottama', the foremost among devotees. He was taught by Narada as a child as well. He became a great devotee of Vishnu, to the dismay of his father, the demon-king Hiranyakaśipu, who considered Vishnu his mortal enemy. After warning the child Prahlāda, his father had him tortured in every possible way, but Prahlāda survived unscathed. The venomous snakes that were supposed to bite him became a bed for him to sleep on. The elephants who were supposed to trample him to death became his docile playmates. It is said that Hiranyakasipu's sister, Holika, could not be burnt by fire. Prahlāda was to be burnt to death on her lap, but it so happened that Holika herself burnt to death instead, while Prahlāda walked away unharmed. Eventually, Hiranyakasipu became so intolerant of his son's devotion that Vishnu had to burst forth from a pillar in the shape of a man-lion, and kill Hiranyakasipu.

The earliest evidence in our epics of how parents were able to influence their future children occurs in the Ramayana. Desirous of progeny, Dasaratha performed the special sacrificial rite of *putrakāmeshti* on the recommendation of Sage Vasishtha, at the completion of which the God of

Fire appeared with a bowl of rice pudding and told the king to have his queens eat it. This resulted in the birth of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Satrugna—the four princes of extraordinary character, valour, and virtue, Rama being the noblest of them all. In addition to the devotion of the King, it was the collective aspiration and prayer of the residents of Ayodhya that led to the glorious descent of Sri Rama.

Kunti and Mādri were the queens of King Pāndu of Hastināpura. Pāndu once accidentally killed a sage and his wife. As he died, the sage cursed Pāndu that he would be unable to have children by his queens. However, Kunti had a prior boon from Sage Durvasa that she could have sons by any god that she prays to, through immaculate conception. God of Dharma granted Yudhishtira, who was thus the embodiment of Dharma, righteousness. Vāyu, the wind God, granted Bhima, the epitome of physical prowess. Indra's grace resulted in the birth of Arjuna, the consummate warrior. Kunti shared the boon with Mādri, to whom were born Nakula and Sahadeva, the handsome twins, due to the grace of the Asvins. The story of the birth of the Pandavas is a perfect example of the unlimited benefits and the power of prayer.

The mother of the Kauravas, Gāndhārī, was a woman of high moral stature, who always exhorted her sons to follow dharma and not fight with their cousins. Even though she was virtuous, she was jealous of her sister-in-law Kunti because Kunti had a son before she herself did, potentially denying her own son the throne. That base emotion of jealousy was passed on to Duryodhana, her first born, whom even Lord Krishna failed to reform. Once the baby's personality has been crystallized in the mother's womb, it sticks with the child, and then the man all through his life. It is evident that care must be taken by the mother not to give in to the least negative feeling or emotion during pregnancy.

Abhimanyu, the boy warrior and son of Arjuna and Subhadra, Krishna's sister, learned the art of penetrating the complex military formation known as the lotus array (*padma vyūha*) in his mother's womb, while his father Arjuna was explaining it to Subhadra. Subhadra dozed off while the discussion was going on, but Abhimanyu in her womb was quite alert. Knowing the child's destiny, Krishna took Arjuna away on some pretext before he had explained the exit strategy. So, Abhimanyu never got to learn how to get out of the formation unharmed. Abhimanyu's story tells us how alert the

foetuses are even when the mothers are in the sleep mode, and how they absorb all that they hear around them.

Parīkshit, son of Abhimanyu who started off the Kaliyuga, had a magnificent vision of the Lord while in the womb and looked all around for the Lord even after his birth. Hence his name, which can be translated as 'looking around intently'. Foetuses just don't sleep 24/7 in the mothers' wombs.

Sage Mrikandu and his wife Marudmati worshipped Lord Siva with a view to obtaining the boon of a son from Him. Mrikandu chose a short-lived but illustrious son, who was named Mārkaṇḍeya. When Markandeya's allotted life-span ended, the God of Death, Yama appeared and found the young boy deeply meditating on Siva. On seeing Yama, he instinctively hugged the Śivaliṅga, and Yama's noose tightened around Siva's neck! Siva didn't take kindly to it and promptly vanquished Death, releasing the boy from his clutches. Markandeya thus became immortal and went on to write his famous Markandeya Purana, and Lord Siva earned for himself the title Kālāntaka, the vanquisher of death.

Madālasā, an ancient queen married to King Kuvalayāśva, was a yogini and a spiritually

accomplished person. She made her first three children saints, by singing to them spiritual lullabies while rocking them to sleep. They then left for the forest to practice austerities. When the king, who needed an heir to the throne, mentioned his concern to his queen, she said that their next born could be groomed to be the ruler of the kingdom, because it was within her power to do so. Lo and behold, they did have a fourth son who became a great ruler and continued his father's rule of the kingdom as desired by him. Madalasa proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the mother can mould the character of the baby she is carrying to her liking.

Historical Evidence

There is historical evidence also to show the influence of the pregnant mother on her future offspring. The following are relatively recent instances.

Adi Sankaracharya's parents Sivaguru and Arya visited a number of shrines in Southern India praying to Lord Siva for a son. When they were sleeping, exhausted after a long fast, Lord Siva appeared to Sivaguru in a dream and offered him the choice of a saintly but short-lived son and a long-lived but ordinary boy. Sivaguru wisely chose the former, and he saw a bright ray of light emanating

from the Siva image. After Sankara turned sixteen, his life was later extended by another sixteen years for a total of thirty-two years, during which time he wrote monumental philosophical and literary works and established religious orders which survive till today.

Sri Ramakrishna's parents were very poor but very religious and devoted to Lord Rama. When the father visited Gaya, the Lord Gadadhar told him that He would be born as their son. At the same time, Sri Ramakrishna's mother had a vision of light emanating from the Siva temple and entering her. Soon Sri Ramakrishna was born. He grew to become living proof of the existence of God as also the living proof of the equality of all religions and devotional paths.

Later still, Bhuvaneswari Devi of Kolkata personally prayed and requested her relative in Varanasi to pray to Lord Siva on her behalf for a son. Naren, later Swami Vivekananda, was Siva's gift to her. She exposed the baby before his birth to music and devotional discourses. He had a prodigious memory remembering anything and everything after just reading it once or listening to it. And he was a natural leader. Swami Vivekananda was a marvel in every sense of the term, who clearly started a new age in India, all because of his

mother's diligent pursuit of her wish for an ideal son.

Shivaji was totally devoted to his mother Jijabai, a deeply religious person. The principal Hindu values were inculcated in him even before his birth, along with a desire to establish a "*Haindavi Swarajya*" (independent Hindu state) once again, at a time when the Mughals and the British were chipping away at the fabric of Hindu society. That aim however also included fairness and compassion for all, no matter what their beliefs were. His armies were very disciplined and the codes he established were considered models by later rulers in India.

Jijabai named her son Shivaji in honor of Lord Siva whose gift he was. She had prayed to Siva for a strong and healthy child who could restore the nation's ancient glory and its timeless message of dharma. Shivaji once again is clear recorded proof that a mother can get a son with any characteristics that she desires.

Jijabai is also an example of how the mother can continue to teach her child for a few years after birth the same way that she had done in the womb. She told her son stories from the epics and puranas and continued to inspire him for the first few years of his life to become a patriot and a unifying force in the country.

There is ample evidence in the history of our great country to show that mothers in the past started teaching their children while still in the womb, and also continued the same instruction for some time after they came into the world— time-honoured examples for our modern mothers to follow.

Though this presentation focuses on the role of the mother in conceiving and bringing up children, the role of the father is by no means denigrated. The fathers too prayed for illustrious offspring along with their wives.

For instance, just the mention of the name Narayana by the demon king Hiranyakasipu to his wife during conception is said to have made Prahlada a great devotee.

The story goes thus:¹¹ The demon's severe austerities made Brahma uneasy. Narada reassured his father saying that he would distract the demon. He then disguised himself as a bird, sat on a tree branch near him and started chanting "Narayana" loudly. The demon was indeed perturbed, gave up his penance and returned home. When asked by his wife, Kayādhū, why he terminated his tapas so soon, he narrated this incident to her. It was then that Prahlada was conceived.

11. *Narasimha purāṇa*, 41.28.

Both parents must therefore have a prayerful attitude during conception.

Sarada Devi, the Mother of All

Even though she had no children of her own, there are many examples of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's motherly love towards the devotees, monks, workers, and everyone around her. Everyone was equally her child, and everyone was very dear to her:

I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous. Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, "I have a mother." ¹²

A few instances of her infinite love are given below. ¹³

Brahmachari Rashbihari, while busy in connection with the work of the new house of the Mother at Jayrambati, had to go on an errand to a distant village from which he could not return in time for his noon-meal. It was winter when days were short. Returning only a few hours before sunset, he was taken aback to learn that the Mother waited for his return and would not sit for her meal. He remonstrated, "Mother, your health is bad, yet why have you kept fasting till this hour?" The Mother replied, "My son, how can I eat so

12. *Sri Sarada Devi and Her Divine Play*, Quotes of Sarada Devi, 876.

13. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 339-340.

long as you have not done so?" Rashbihari sat down for his food without further delay; and the Mother and other women, who had been waiting for her, sat only after he had finished.

Brahmachari Jnan (Swami Jnanananda) suffered from itches which became so pervasive and painful that he could not eat with his hand; and so the Mother mixed the rice and curries for him and put them morsel by morsel into his mouth.

As misfortune would have it, someone was leaving the Order. As he came to bid farewell, the Mother began to weep and so also did the devotee. A little later she wiped her tears with the edge of her cloth and asked the devotee to wash his face. Then she said, "Don't forget me. I know you won't; still I say so." "What about you, Mother?" asked the devotee. "Can a mother forget?" replied the Mother, and she added, "Believe me, I shall ever be with you. Don't be afraid." When the devotee got down on the road, the Mother kept on looking at him from the window till he could be seen no more.

Her niece Nalini was once shocked when she saw the Mother cleaning the leftovers of food after the devotees had eaten. She cried out in horror, "Ah me! She's removing the leavings of a multitude of castes!" To this the Mother retorted, "What if they are from various castes? They are all my children." ¹⁴

14. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 359.

When a mother looks upon everyone as her child and bestows her unconditional love on all of them, distinctions of status or class or caste do not apply.¹⁵

She would clean all the dirty dishes after the devotees had eaten and would not even let them carry them to the washing area.¹⁶

One day at Jayrambati, Swami Vishveshvarananda was on the point of carrying away his plate after meal when the Mother stopped him and took it away herself. The Monk protested, "Why should you carry it? I shall do it." But the Mother said sweetly and persuasively, "What indeed have I done for you? A child even soils its mother's lap and does so many other things. You are rare jewels to be sought for by gods."

When the other women who lived with the Mother protested, she answered in her own artless manner: "Well, I am their mother. If a mother shouldn't do it all for her children's sake, who else should?"¹⁷

When a lower class person hesitated to move about in the Mother's house in Jayrambati, she reassured him that he belonged there:¹⁸

15. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 359.

16. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 359.

17. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 359.

18. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 359-360.

Do you hesitate just because you are a *yugi* (weaver)? What of that, my son? You belong to the Master's fold—you are of his family, and you have come here."

If a devotee committed an offense, she would readily forgive him, saying, "If my son wallows in the dirt or mud, it is I who have to wipe all the dirt off his body and take him in my lap."¹⁹

In the words of Swami Gambhirananda:²⁰

The Mother's infinite love transcended all limitations of caste or colour, merit or demerit, in fact, of all conditions of life. Anyone that took refuge in her, was treated kindly, helped with medicines and other necessities, and filled with sympathy. She consciously ignored people's frailties and foibles, and asked others also to do the same. The result was that even criminals behaved decently and sometimes changed their habits.

The 'mulberry-robbers' terrorized the neighbouring villages, including Jayrambati.²¹

Amzad was one of those 'mulberry-robbers' who had a hand in erecting the mud walls of the Mother's house. One day the Mother seated him on her verandah for his meal. Nalini Devi served him, but owing to caste

19. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 368.

20. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 371.

21. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 372.

prejudices she stood at a distance on the courtyard and tossed the food on to the man's leaf-plate. This displeased the Mother, who said, "Can one have any relish for food if it is served in such a fashion? If you can't serve him properly, I shall do it." When Amzad had finished his meal, the Mother cleansed the place herself. At this, Nalini Devi loudly denounced the act saying, "O dear aunt, you lose your caste thereby!" But the Mother cut her short, "Amzad is as truly my son as Sarat himself is."

Sarat is Swami Saradananda, one of the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who was very devoted to the Holy Mother.

One last observation crystallizes her maternal affection for all:²²

In every word and movement, her motherliness was so strikingly evident that anyone who happened to come within its orbit had some of his life's wants removed at once without any effort. Brahmachari Rashbihari, having lost his mother as a child, felt an inexpressible void in the deep recesses of his heart. Other children called on their mothers affectionately and had their feelings reciprocated; but he had none to turn to. When as a young man he came to the Mother, he felt as though she had been waiting there all the

22. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 377-378.

time with a heart full to the brim with affection for him.
A little touch of it changed his whole life.

These and many other incidents in Sri Sarada Devi's life show that she was indeed the ideal woman that this book is about.