

Women Saints of the World - A Speech Delivered in Autumn 1965  
- Swami Omkarananda

Introduction

The Simple Greatness of Women

To turn common things into items of beauty, to pour grace into the style of service, to be calm where the circumstance calls for the play of anger, to be patient where the occasion demands impatience, to be long-suffering where a quick reaction seems to achieve the end in view, to be kind, helpful, generous, artistic, angelic, graceful, devotional, to bend feeling into an attitude of adoration given to a high and elevating Presence, - these are constitutional, natural, intrinsic with, and characteristic of, women. Nature has richly endowed them to make of homes fields of happiness, growth, inner spiritual unfoldment, and little paradises in their own right.

Women Saints of the World

To the supreme Divine Mother, the Mother of Lord Krishna, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Mother of Buddha and to the mothers of you all, I place a few flowers of my heart's worship.

Woman is always a centre of infinite energy. She is an indestructible Light, she is an embodiment of grace, sweetness and love. She is the source of all wisdom, gracefulness, sweetness, tenderness. She carries in herself the graces and the beauties and splendours of infinite Intelligence and Consciousness.

Thousands of years ago, the ancient sages of India, who held in their palm the secret of Life and Nature and God, who, by specific disciplines of their inner consciousness, exalted their whole inner being to the experience of the Godhead, found in mystical experience the real greatness, the divine dignity and the endless spiritual powers resident in something called 'Woman'. They found that woman is an incarnation of infinite Power, they named woman as Shakti. They found in her an indestructible Light, and called her Devi. So, there is in her something called the point and centre and source of an infinite Power, and she is a light, light of the universe, light of the home, light of life. She is a form bearing in herself innumerable potentialities, powers, forces for creation and also for sustenance of creation.

The highest mystical experiences of these towering sages of ancient India, granted them a manysided experience of that one infinite Consciousness and Power which is known as the Godhead. Not with the powers of mind, not with any ability or power resident in the psychological organisation of the human individual, not with any of the methods of knowledge known to us, but directly by the light and soul and eye and powers of the supreme Consciousness in themselves, they have grasped the supreme Godhead in their experience, in their dynamic realisation, and have seen that the supreme Reality subsists

in two definite forms. One is the Unmanifested beyond, the featureless Absolute. The other is the Manifested Being, the Godhead as active and present in all creation.

They found that Truth, Reality, Being is the basis of all consciousness and awareness. They discovered that the infinite, unknown, invisible Being is an indescribable pure Existence. It is a colourless, featureless, attributeless, indescribable Beyond.

This Beyond, this Being which is indescribable, bears in Itself a knowledge of Itself, is conscious of Itself, is aware of Itself and aware of everything.

So, there is something called another aspect of this infinite, featureless, colourless Reality or Being. That is this aspect of Knowledge or Consciousness or Awareness.

Reality or Being or Existence is always seen to be with Consciousness, Knowledge. Therefore, this Consciousness, this Knowledge is an infinity of Power. It is an infinity of Energy, capable of creating all manifestations, the source of all attributes, powers, forces. This Consciousness is therefore called also Power.

When there is Consciousness there is also Delight. Therefore, Consciousness is Power and also Delight. This Delight is the source of all creative activity.

Therefore, there is something called the supreme Reality which is the basis of all existence, and its aspect, inseparable, inalienable aspect of Consciousness, is something which is really the creative Principle.

This creative Principle is indeed the parent, real parent of all embodied life. It is the womb of all beauty, wisdom, grace. It is the parent of Light. Therefore, you see this Consciousness which is dynamic, all-aware, all-creative, this is the Shakti. This is the Woman, this is the Mother, this is the Creatrix, this is dynamic and active and operative. Whereas the supreme Reality as a pure Existence is inoperative, it is featureless, unmanifest, it is something indescribable, unknowable, unapproachable.

Upon this grand divine Foundation of sheer and pure and infinite Being or Existence, there is the play of Consciousness, Self-Awareness, Knowledge, Power.

That is exactly why the popular mind in India is presented a picture of Shiva and Shakti. You might have noticed the picture of Lord Shiva being trampled down by Shakti in her mad dance. Upon the body of Lord Shiva who is lying down on the floor, there is the foot of the Divine Mother or Shakti. This is a popular, anthropomorphic representation of a grand divine spiritual Truth. It signifies the fact that there is something called an infinite Being upon which alone there is the play of Consciousness or Knowledge.

Therefore, this Consciousness is the female, and the pure Existence which is the source of this Consciousness is the male. Is this female different and distinct from the male? It is not. It is inalienable, inseparable. If the life is the male principle, the awareness or consciousness in that life is the female principle. If a mere awareness of our being is

presented to us, the awareness is the female principle, and the being of which we are aware is the male principle.

Wherever there is life there is awareness, consciousness, knowledge. This self-consciousness, or awareness or knowledge is never separable from any form of life.

Therefore, there is also a beautiful presentment of this fact in the Bible. We are told that God created Eve from the rib of Adam. That means, Eve is the product of the substance that Adam is. It also means what we have philosophically seen, that a female principle could emerge only from a male principle. Is the rib or bone of Adam different and distinct from Adam himself? No. They are one and the same.

Come back to the great truth that there is everywhere one life, and that life is everywhere characterised by consciousness or self-awareness. This truth, if it has to be presented to the popular mind, has to be presented in the form of a Being who is half man and half woman. Therefore, the Hindu pantheon presents the figure of Lord Shiva as half man and half woman.

To the rational mind which knows nothing of the philosophical truth and divine fact hidden behind this, it looks something fantastic. But, if we try to discover the inner significance and the internal meaning, we find that it represents a glorious divine truth. It presents to us of the fact that there is something called one infinite divine Truth or Reality or Being or Absolute, and Its inseparable feature, inseparable quality is Consciousness or Knowledge.

This Knowledge, as we have earlier pointed out, is also Power - wherever there is Knowledge, there is Power. Wherever there is Consciousness, there is Energy.

Upon the basis of an infinite Reality, this Consciousness which is the Eve or the creative Principle or the Power that procreates things, is eternally active, and its activity is the cause of the birth of the manifestation, the universes, and also the sustaining or the maintenance of these manifested universes and life. And each form of life carries in itself all the potentiality, all the power, all the life of the Infinite.

Right from the stars beyond and also the members and inhabitants in the worlds beyond, down to a small worm upon this earth, everyone bears the potentialities of the infinite Being and Consciousness. Among the female species, there is a greater force and power of this supreme Consciousness.

And consciousness, as we have earlier stated, is something which is the source of all grace, beauty, sweetness, softness, love, delight. Therefore, Indian cultural view accepts every woman, and reacts to the phenomena of woman, as a bearer of infinite Power. She is given utmost reverence and viewed as someone who embodies in herself the beauties of the infinite Light.

The cultural traditions in India, the spiritual traditions in India, have preserved to this day that ancient attitude which looks upon every woman as a mother, as an adorable deity. Whether the girl is aged only six years or seven years or ten years, she is still regarded as a mother, addressed as such. This form of address is a tacit acknowledgement of the fact that she is an expression of the infinite, supreme divine Mother, a representative of that grace and light and consciousness which is upon the bosom of the infinite Being.

Having seen the attitude of the Indian mind to the phenomena of a female being, let us now rapidly survey some of the greatest women saints, sages and mystics that have arisen upon that soil.

Men who could behold the female beings as embodiments of infinite Strength and Power and Grace and Beauty, could not have failed to grant them complete freedom in every field of life. In that grand freedom and reverence granted to them, the women blossomed into greatest intellectuals, mystics, philosophers.

Ancient India furnishes a number of most illustrious women who had so developed their philosophical abilities, so brought into everyday life the powers of their intuitive consciousness, that they are seen to be constantly exchanging illuminations, intuitions, revelations with men.

The Veda presents us some of the instances of women seers and sages who have held in their living, dynamic, all-absorbing experience, every aspect of the supreme Godhead.

One of the women seers and mystics of Vedic times called Vak, pours her inner experience in a wondrous piece of poetry. So grand, great, overwhelming is her inner experience of the Divine, her conscious union with the infinite Power and Reality, that she says, "Behold my greatness. I am the one Reality. I am the indescribable Supreme. Apart from me, there is nothing. I am the Delight indescribable. I am the Beauty imperishable. I am the Parent of all that you see and do not see."

This is one of the many experiences she presents in the Veda. And even a few centuries later we find a number of women seers, sages and mystics. These women seers, sages have been in no way inferior to men saints, sages, mystics.

Is such a potentiality present in every woman on earth? It is present. It may be that most of the women around the world are trapped in their own phenomenal limited experiences, with the result some of the higher emotions, higher powers, abilities are rendered inoperative. Their distractions are so many that the inner powers of the Consciousness are not given the scope and the opportunity for operation and manifestation. But the potentiality for the infinite divine experience is present, latent in every human heart.

In the Upanishadic times, there have been women sages who could strip off men seers of a lesser calibre and attainments.

There was one called Gargi. She used to visit the courts of the kings and hold debates on the nature of the supreme Reality. One of the great men sages that she had had to battle with was Yajnavalkya. She asked him, "Upon what is the manifested universe supported?" That great philosopher and mystic himself stated that it is supported upon the ether of consciousness, the space. She asked him further, "Upon what is the space or the ether of consciousness supported?" And he responded in this manner, "Upon the imperishable Infinite". Thereupon she had proclaimed to the audience there, that "This man-sage is one of great attainments".

We should not forget that in all these debates, there is purely an exchange of illumination and intuitions concerning the Divine Being.

This Gargi, the woman mystic, sage and seer, was a virgin, but the mystics, sages, seers, saints among women have arisen not only from among the virgins but also from the householders, the housewives.

One of the sages desired to leave his house and become a hermit. Before leaving for the forest for a secluded and hermetical life, he called his wife and asked her to take charge of the properties that belonged to her. When her portion of the property was given to her by the husband, this lady who is known by the name Maitreyi, asked her husband thus, "Will I obtain immortality by all this wealth that you are bequeathing to me?" Her husband replied, "Well, with this wealth you will be like every other wealthy woman. You could have any number of worldly pleasures. But by this wealth, there is no hope of your attaining Immortality." Then, the wife said, "Lo, I need nothing of this wealth, teach me the way to Immortality".

Thereupon the husband imparts to the wife all the wealth of inner divine wisdom that he has obtained in consequence of his own internal exercises in Consciousness. Having obtained the knowledge of the infinite Godhead from her husband, Maitreyi contemplated upon it, and gained an experience of the Divinity, obtained Immortality, eternal peace, joy, absolute divine Perfection.

At a later period too we find a number of women saints and seers in India. There have been women saints from among writers, poets, princesses, scholars, and also from among the common women.

Among the princesses we will present one notable example and a notable instance of high sainthood. There was one princess, Mira, whose heart from childhood was given over to love of the Divine. The pleasures of her royal life did not interest her, the luxuries that the royal household could offer held no interest for her. She was the wife of one of the leading princes of those times. But her heart, her mind, her whole inner being was given over to a continued love of that omnipresent, omnipotent Divinity. Her whole inner being was responsive, sensitive, susceptible to the divine Presence. Her strength, her joy, her power emerged from her contact, minute by minute contact with the Divinity. While living here on earth, her whole inner being laid itself upon the bosom of the infinite Love and Beauty that God is.

And there have also been other great women saints in India, who have approached the Divine through the peculiarity of their personal endowment. In many ways, by many methods, they have attained mystical powers, saw the Divinity face to face, rather in fact their whole conscious being was living and moving with the Divinity.

This sainthood, seerhood, sagehood is not the privilege of Indian woman alone. Women seers and saints have arisen in all lands, in all religions, in all cultural systems and in all periods of world history.

Their inspiring lives, their illustrious examples are presented to us. Almost in every little country in Europe we find one or two examples of women saints. There have been Italian women saints, Spanish woman saints, German woman saints. There have been women saints all over Europe.

Thanks to the grand traditions of Roman Catholicism, the Church has produced some of the most glorious and immortal women saints. Saints like Catherine of Siena have seen Jesus Christ face to face many a time. Her whole life was characterised, rather, by these repeated heavenly visitations and divine visions. So are some other examples of women saints in Christendom which are most inspiring. Their methods have been simple, but these simple methods are the universal methods.

The women saints around the world have sought to grasp God in their living experience, through prayer and meditation, sometimes through song and praise, sometimes through dance and devotion, sometimes through austere detachment from life and discrimination. Thus, in many ways, they have approached and contacted the Divine.

Women, as a rule, are more devotional than men. That is why as early as the ancient times, Pythagoras stated that woman as a sex is more alive and akin to piety. There is in them a tenderness, a compassion, a love which becomes a powerful means for all higher divine experiences. Their nature is richly endowed with finer excellences. They have far more patience, perseverance than man. They are far more selfless, self-sacrificing and self-effacing than man. They have such graces that are just the qualifications and powers essential for our spiritual unfoldment. Not for nothing, then, have the world mythologies always spoken of wisdom, love as goddesses.

In fact whatever is beautiful, whatever is loveable, whatever is grand and great and colourful is feminine in its substance and spirit. And if God were to come down to earth, it is always by and through a woman. Therefore, the women are the embodiments of all that is tender, sweet, graceful, beautiful and compassionate.

It is far more easy for them to develop their higher devotion to the Divine, and make their lives a great field for experience of the Divine in and through their daily activity. All the attributes and qualities and sentiments that we find in women, when they are exalted, developed to almost unlimited proportions, would enable them to live here on earth as goddesses, graces, angels.

Even in those men who obtained high divine experience and have sought to express for humanity a heart of love, we find something distinctively feminine. Christ in his tenderness, in his love, is more a woman than a man. So is Buddha in his compassion and love for all creatures.

It seems that the graces of the feminine nature are direct manifestations of the supreme Divinity. The daily attributes of a woman are the expressions or manifestations of the attributes of the Divine Consciousness. Therefore, I personally feel that it is possible for them to realise the Divine far more rapidly than men.

I have already stated that tenderness, compassion, perseverance, patience, selflessness, spirit of self-sacrifice, self-effacement, are predominant in women. And they, and their development, are the one means of our spiritual unfoldment and divine experience.

- Swami Omkarananda