

Swami Vivekananda and his thoughts on Marriage

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I. INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda won wide acclaim as a “Hindu monk”¹ and “missionary”² in the West. It was, perhaps, because of his extraordinary ability to expound with enviable clarity some of the complex themes defining Hindu civilization.³ In the process, he ended up answering a series of puzzling questions about Hinduism much like a prophet. In our times, he has emerged as an icon of Hinduism, often being portrayed, contestably though, as a pioneer of the philosophy of ‘Hindutva’.⁴ This portrayal of the Swami has largely been founded upon an interpretation of his thoughts on religious and political matters. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Vivekananda paid considerable attention to other social institutions such as family and marriage. This paper is an attempt to unearth his views on marriage, especially in regard to its philosophy and social significance.

The starting point for any analysis that concerns itself with the ideas of Swami Vivekananda should be the acknowledgment of the fact that being a lifelong *sanyasî*, the Swami had a propensity to shun human relationships in all forms, not to mention his rejection of marriage. He revealed his feelings on the subject in a letter to Marie Halboister dated 25th July, 1897 as he wrote:

I wish I had nobody to love, and I were an orphan in my childhood. The greatest misery in my life has been my own people – my brothers and sisters and mother etc. Relatives are like deadly clogs to one's progress, and is it not a wonder that people will still go on to find new ones by *marriage!!!* (Vivekananda 2006, p. 2204).

However, as a preacher Vivekananda refrained from imposing his personal views on his followers. He, rather, took an analytical approach resulting in a more liberal view about the society. Seemingly unaffected by what he felt deep within his inner core, he took marriage to be the sheet anchor of all humankind. In a letter to Miss Harriet Hale dated 17th Sept., 1896 written from Wimbledon, England, he observed: “marriage is the truest goal for ninety-nine per cent of the human race, and they will live the happiest life as soon as they have learnt and are ready to abide by the eternal lesson – that we are bound to bear and forbear and that life to every one must be a compromise” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1681).

Although he was reluctant to approve of marriage as an indispensable feature of human society, Vivekananda acknowledged the significance of marriage in the lives of common people. Thus, in what follows we shall take a close look at Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on marriage from a variety of viewpoints, especially his thoughts on (i) the origin of marriage; (ii) social significance of marriage; (iii) marriage and *chastity*; (iv) the mother-wife dichotomy, and (v) the issue of choice in mate selection.

Origin of Marriage

In the beginning, there was no marriage according to Vivekananda's reading of the history of marriage in human society. It was so because marriage was a source of selfishness loathed by the primitive man (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1876). Marriage, opined Vivekananda, began in the form of wife-capturing, a view that seems to have been largely influenced by the anthropological research published in the 19th century. The theory gained traction on the basis of John Ferguson McLennan's work, according to which, in the very beginning of the human civilization ‘wife-capturing’ was the only mode of marriage (McLennan 1865). It is much later that marriage became a matter of family consensus and an affair that involved less violence, but even in that benign fashion in which marriage transitioned into a social institution, Swami Vivekananda could discern faint traces of what tradition had still kept alive. The symbolic attack on the bridegroom in some cultures and the ritual act of calling names to men of the bridegroom's party by women of the bride's party appeared to the Swami as a remnant of what could have been the original characteristic of the institution of marriage (Vivekananda 2006, p. 374).

As already evident, insofar as the origin of marriage is concerned, Vivekananda displayed close parallel with the works of western scholars engaged in studying family and marriage in the nineteenth century. He exhibited a strong affinity for Bachofen's ideas developed in his book, *Mutterrecht* wherein Bachofen argues that the original structure of human society was founded on 'matriarchy' in which it were the women who exercised much of the power in society. On account of being matriarchal in nature, those ancient societies also permitted 'polyandry' (and often promiscuity) which is a rarity in our times (and it was also a rarity in the days of Swami Vivekananda). Vivekananda too held that the original state of the society was matriarchal featuring polyandry, although he was averse to the idea of promiscuity forming a defining feature of those societies. While explaining the "Ideals of Womanhood" to one of his audiences in Brooklyn, USA, Vivekananda said: "The earliest system was a matriarchal one; that is, one in which the mother was the centre, and in which the girls acceded to her station. This led to the curious system of the Polianders [polyandrous], where five and six brothers often married one wife. Even the Vedas contain a trace of it..." (Vivekananda 2006, p. 691).⁵

A general corollary of the matriarchal society where polyandry is a commonplace is the lower importance attached to the 'certainty of paternity'. In this regard, John McLennan is quoted as arguing that "anything but the want of certainty on that point could have long prevented the acknowledgment of kinship through males" (Westermarck 1901, p. 105). Going by McLennan's argument, one is led to believe that in the course of human civilization 'fatherhood' was discovered much later than the discovery of motherhood giving rise to a polyandrous society.

But Vivekananda had slightly different ideas as to the nature of polyandry in ancient India. According to him, uncertainty of paternity was not a cause of polyandry. Rather, a high emphasis on the certainty of paternity existed along with the practice of polyandry as far as the society of ancient India is concerned. To this end, he said: "Even the Vedas contain a trace of it in the provision, that when a man died without leaving any children, his widow was permitted to live with another man, until she became a mother; but the children she bore did not belong to their father, but to her dead husband" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 691). Thus, although Swami Vivekananda accepted the matriarchal beginning of human society, much in consonance with the opinions of western scholars, his profound knowledge of the Vedas dissuaded him from accepting polyandry accompanied by 'promiscuity'⁶ as the original condition of human society.

Social significance of Marriage: Duty as the essence of Marriage

Whatever be the beginnings, through the ages, marriage has indeed been a vital social force in human society according to Swami Vivekananda. Deeply engrossed in the teachings of the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures, he considered every aspect of life, in fact, every activity performed by an individual, a manifestation of duty. As a result, he took marriage to be some sort of a duty as well. The role of the householder was of prime importance for the society in his opinion. Especially regarding marital life, Swami Vivekananda prescribed certain norms for the householder performing the role of the husband. Quoting from the *Mahâ-Nirvâna-Tantra*, he said: "Even so is his duty to his wife. No man should scold his wife, and he must always maintain her as if she were his own mother. And even when he is in the greatest difficulties and troubles, he must not show anger to his wife" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 35).⁷ He further opined: "He who thinks of another woman besides his wife, if he touches her even with his mind – that man goes to dark hell (Vivekananda 2006, p. 35). In carrying out his duty in this manner, the householder was no less a noble person than a *sannyasin* according to Vivekananda. Emanating from his preaching of *karma-yoga* is the following doctrine: "Each is great in his own place" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 35). And thus, the life of a married person is in no way inferior to the life of a monk.

Nonetheless, Swami Vivekananda was against the idea of an excessive sense of duty within marriage. Any form of coercion or compulsion was against the ideal rules of existence that the institution enshrined. Again deriving from his idea of *karma-yoga*, from which the roles of husband and wife cannot be excluded, the Swami expressed himself in the following manner:

For instance, in countries where there is no marriage, there is no duty between husband and wife; when marriage comes, husband and wife live together on account of attachment; and that kind of living together becomes settled after generations; and when it becomes so settled, it becomes a duty. It is, so to say, a sort of chronic disease. When it is acute, we call it disease; when it is chronic, we call it nature. It is a disease. So when attachment becomes chronic, we baptise it with the high sounding name of duty. We strew flowers upon it, trumpets sound for it, sacred texts are said over it, and then the whole world fights, and men earnestly rob each other for this duty's sake. Duty is good to the extent that it checks brutality (Vivekananda 2006, p. 57).

Vivekananda's opinion here seems to offer a remedy to low-quality but stable marriages in society that are more often kept intact because of a belief in the unbreakable vow that marriage entails.⁸ Avoiding recourse to any rhetorical statement, one might argue that Swami Vivekananda can be regarded as one of the foremost social reformers of India who advocated an egalitarian marital relationship preceding by almost a century the modern crusade against inequality within marriage which is often portrayed as a consequence of the feminist movement originating in the West.

The indispensability of marriage to the Hindu society that Vivekananda analyzed was rather a constitutive trait of the society which he described thus: "In society the ideal is marriage. [Everyone] must marry. It is the rule. Without marriage, man is not able to perform any religious ceremony; he is only half a man; [he] is not competent to officiate – even the priest himself cannot officiate as a priest, except he marries. Half a man is unfit within society" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 263). This facet of the Hindu marriage, in the Swami's view, is a peculiar characteristic that sets it apart from the notion of priesthood in the West. While priesthood and monasticism were for a long time thought to be synonymous with bachelorhood in the West, the Indian tradition in this regard differed remarkably.

Nevertheless, since Vivekananda was not entirely given to marriage, marriage in his opinion was also a necessary evil of sorts. He once told his audience: "For, mind you, our religion teaches that marriage is something bad, it is only for the weak" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1989). If one could avoid marriage, one is probably on the noblest path in life. But, a lifetime of unmarried existence is too great an expectation as regards ordinary people. Swami Vivekananda probably reflected on this point when he said: "Still, not being allowed to marry must be a hardship to many; I am sure of that" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1989). He spoke thus as he was discussing the condition of Indian widows. In consonance with his view that considered 'duty' as the essence of marriage, he expressed his views on child widows in these words:

The child widows, or women who have been betrothed to children who died before marriage, might be pitied if a marriage were the only real object in life, but, according to the Hindu way of thinking, marriage is rather a duty than a privilege, and the denial of the right of child widows to marry is no particular hardship (Vivekananda 2006, p. 2070).

Thus, marriage being a duty, and not a privilege, can't be viewed as a necessary means to a pleasurable living. In this sense, remaining unmarried for life should not be a matter of dissatisfaction, according to Vivekananda. But if marriage can't be avoided, it should be utilized as a means to pursue one's religion. Vivekananda expressed this view unequivocally in a lecture delivered at Boston in 1894. *Boston Herald* dated May 15, 1894 quoted him as saying: "We consider marriage a low vulgar state, and if a man does marry, it is because he needs a helpmate for religion" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682).

Of greater significance in the above sentence is the use of the adjective 'vulgar' to qualify marriage. The statement is redolent of the Christian disapproval of marriage as it was seen as a hindrance in the path of one's spiritual devotion to God. This is how early Christians expressed it: "He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife..." (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).⁹ Since Vivekananda always took care to distinguish the Hindu notion of marriage from the one predominantly held in the West, in calling it a "vulgar state" he might not have meant exactly the same as maintained by notions woven around marriage in the Christian society. Still, one might say that he would prefer bachelorhood over marriage as the ideal to be pursued by the society.

In a letter to Swami Sharadananda dated 20th May 1894, Vivekananda made his abhorrence of marriage quite explicit. He wrote:

I cannot understand why Sanyal is so miserable on account of his daughters' marriage. After all, he is going to drag his daughters through the dirty Samsâra (world) which he himself wants to escape! I can have but one opinion of that – condemnation! I hate the very name of marriage, in regard to a boy or a girl. Do you mean to say that I have to help in putting someone into bondage, you fool! If my brother Mohin marries, I will throw him off. I am very decided about that. . . . (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1153).

Marriage was truly an obstacle in the path of learning and devotion, so thought the Swami. Expressing his worries over the scarcity of good preachers prepared to lead the life of an ascetic, Vivekananda wrote to a friend named Alasinga in 1896:

The Madrasis have more of go and steadiness, but every fool is married. Marriage! Marriage! Marriage! . . . Then the way our boys are married nowadays! . . . It is very good to aspire to be a nonattached householder; but what we want in Madras is not that just now – but nonmarriage (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1222).

His deep concern over the harm that marriage caused to the cause that he thought to be the noblest found vent in following words: "Our beautiful hopeful boys – they have everything, only if they are not slaughtered by the millions at the altar of this brutality they call marriage. O Lord, hear my wails!" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1222). It reflects his feeling of helplessness as he found marriage to be so pervasive in the society. Vivekananda once replied to Alberta Sturges's question "Is there no happiness in marriage?" with an unhesitating "Yes" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 453).¹⁰ Thus, in his opinion, as far as monastic life was concerned, marriage was nothing but a prime source of distraction. Nonetheless, he acknowledged the tempting nature of marriage that the masses found hard to escape. He once consoled one of his disciples as he said: "You need not mind if these shadows of home and marriage cross your mind sometimes. Even to me, they come now and again!" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471).

Such is the attractive power of marriage that only an ascetic could possibly resist it. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda disapproved of marriage only for a monk. Beyond the strictures of monastic life, marriage was

indeed the second best thing possible according to him. Speaking of the ancient Aryans, the Swami highlighted the egalitarian nature of marriage which formed a core characteristic of all religious activity. He emphasized the concept of ‘*sah-dharmini*’ applied to the wife by virtue of which the husband and wife become “co-religionists” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 691). However, the onus of making such an association a success lay on the shoulders of the husband. The Swami preached to his audience: “The householder must always please his wife with money, clothes, love, faith, and words like nectar, and never do anything to disturb her. That man who has succeeded in getting the love of a chaste wife has succeeded in his religion and has all the virtue” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 35).

As a piece of advice to one of his disciples, the Swami once suggested the practical method of leading a successful married life. He said:

What if you have married? As you are maintaining your parents and brothers with food and clothing, so do for your wife likewise; and by giving her religious instruction draw her to your path. Think her to be a partner and helper in the living of your religious life. At other times look upon her with an even eye with others. Thinking thus all the unsteadiness of the mind will die out (Vivekananda 2006, p. 3077).¹¹

This, according to Swami Vivekananda, was precisely the reason why marriage was a prerequisite even for one aspiring to become a priest in ancient India, a feature of the Vedic society that shared some commonality with ancient Greece and Rome (Vivekananda 2006, p. 691).¹² The description of such a marriage based on partnership between husband and wife goes well with the concept of *patnī* mentioned in the *Rigveda* which points to the indispensability of the wife in the performance of *yajnas*.¹³ Thus, marriage for Vivekananda was more of a ‘social action’¹⁴ than an individual action. His unambiguous opinion in this regard could be discerned in the statement which reads: “Marriage is not for individual happiness, but for the welfare of the nation and the caste” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 2679). And it is due to this reason that marriage, according to Swami Vivekananda, earned appreciable significance as a social institution.

Marriage as the harbinger of Chastity

William Lecky (1869) defined *chastity* in the following words:

Chastity is merely a social law created to encourage the alliances that most promote the permanent welfare of the race, and to maintain woman in a social position which it is thought advisable she should hold.¹⁵

This definition of chastity emphasizing social control of women represents a European viewpoint on the subject and might not seem fully agreeable to Swami Vivekananda who believed that chastity is a desirable trait to be borne by both men and women. Therefore, he held that ‘chastity’ within marriage was the key to an ideal marriage. He expressed this explicitly in the form of a blessing to Harriet Hale in a letter dated 17th Sept., 1896. He wrote: “May you be like Umâ, chaste and pure throughout life – may your husband be like Shiva, whose life was in Uma!” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1681).

However, the idea of absolute chastity seemed to be at odds with ‘marriage’ in the opinion of the Swami. He once remarked:

A man feels that if he is unchaste, spirituality goes away, he loses mental vigour and moral stamina. That is why in all the religious orders in the world which have produced spiritual giants you will always find absolute chastity insisted upon. That is why the monks came into existence, giving up marriage. (Vivekananda 2006, p. 83).

He saw quite an antagonistic relationship between marriage and the idea of living chaste as a monk or *sannyasin*, so much so that he considered marriage as an impediment in the path of greatness that only highly enlightened ones called *sannyasins* can dream to achieve. He emphasized that in order to reclaim their individuality, it’s essential for them to go unmarried (Vivekananda 2006, p. 263).

Swami Vivekananda also tried to draw a parallel between the idea of chastity in India and Europe based on his own experience of the two, otherwise dissimilar, societies. Commenting on the French society, he pointed out the fact that the chastity of women in France is as important an issue as it is in India (Vivekananda 2006, p. 370). He told his audience that marriage brings about some freedom for women as far as interaction with others is concerned, but unmarried women live under high level of restriction in French society (Vivekananda 2006, p. 370). He relates it with the etymological foundation of the word, ‘virtue’ which he considers to be phonetically close to the word, “*Viratva*” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 370). And the highest virtue for a French woman is chastity in his opinion (Vivekananda 2006, p. 370). In addition to it, Vivekananda also highlighted the gender differential that existed in French society. A little lax conduct on the part of men is seldom taken to be a matter of serious concern whereas chastity for women seems inviolable he observed (Vivekananda 2006, p. 370).

But all that discussion on chastity which, in a sense, is indicative of the fact that Swami Vivekananda held marriage in a relatively lower esteem should not, even in the least, lead one to conclude that he abhorred marriage in all forms and for all reasons whatsoever. Being a follower of *Advaita Vedanta*, he moved away from common binaries to suggest that the beauty of Hinduism lay in its acceptance of all paths to be equally good for the realization of the ultimate truth. He explains his stand on marriage by citing the example of Tibetan society which he says is free from all the perturbations in life caused due to marriage and its proverbial jealousies.

Nonetheless, he also expresses his concern for the Tibetans, as in his opinion, there is something vital to human experience that the Tibetans who never marry miss out on. In a lecture delivered in London on November 3, 1896, this is how he summed up the argument:

In Tibet there is no marriage, and there is no jealousy, yet we know that marriage is a much higher state. The Tibetans have not known the wonderful enjoyment, the blessing of chastity, the happiness of having a chaste, virtuous wife, or a chaste, virtuous husband. These people cannot feel that. And similarly they do not feel the intense jealousy of the chaste wife or husband, or the misery caused by unfaithfulness on either side, with all the heart-burnings and sorrows which believers in chastity experience. On one side, the latter gain happiness, but on the other, they suffer misery too. (Vivekananda 2006, p. 566).

The ambivalent character of marriage impelled Vivekananda to come up with a novel interpretation of marriage which seemed rather rare for a monk. He extolled marriage as a higher ideal in life which he took to be equivalent to other forms of renunciation. In a letter to Miss Mary Hale dated 1st November, 1896, he remarked, “The formation of society, the institution of marriage, the love for children, our good works, morality, and ethics are all different forms of renunciation” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1686). In one of his lectures where he equates marriage with renunciation that ennobles one’s soul and upholds morality in society, he said:

Renounce the lower so that you may get the higher. What is the foundation of society? Morality, ethics, laws. Renounce. Renounce all temptation to take your neighbour's property, to put hands upon your neighbour, all the pleasure of tyrannising over the weak, all the pleasure of cheating others by telling lies. Is not morality the foundation of society? What is marriage but the renunciation of unchastity? The savage does not marry. Man marries because he renounces (Vivekananda 2006, pp. 1008-09).

Thus, the same institution that he saw as an obstacle to observing the strictures of a monastic life, in another context, appeared to him as a form of renunciation, an ideal worth chasing if the notion of chastity within marriage is not forgotten. Swami Vivekananda opined as to the hierarchy of human activities that marriage, if pursued with restraint, is clearly better than savagery characterized by promiscuity. His didactic commandment on this reads thus: “forget not that thy *marriage*,¹⁶ thy wealth, thy life are not for sense-pleasure, are not for thy individual personal happiness” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1109). Thus, within a broader framework that values self-restraint, it is recommended that one not use marriage merely as a tool to acquire sensual pleasure.

A major step towards realizing this ideal could be the establishment of the inviolability of marriage that leads to the cultivation of a perfectly chaste society thought Vivekananda as he wrote this in a letter: “In my opinion, a race must first cultivate a great respect for motherhood, through the sanctification and inviolability of marriage, before it can attain to the ideal of perfect chastity” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1285).¹⁷ In fact, Swami Vivekananda saw in a chaste marriage the guarantee of a healthy culture of monasticism as well. He pointed out the link between the two while reflecting on Japanese society. In a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull dated 14th June, 1902, Vivekananda wrote:

Modern Buddhism – having fallen among races who had not yet come up to the evolution of marriage – has made a travesty of monasticism. So until there is developed in Japan a great and sacred ideal about marriage (apart from mutual attraction and love), I do not see how there can be great monks and nuns (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1285).

Elsewhere, the Swami commented on the cardinal influence exerted by culture on the norms guiding marriage in the society. Comparing the relative advantage that marriage brings to a culture, Swamiji made the following observation:

The Roman Catholics and the Hindus, holding marriage sacred and inviolate, have produced great chaste men and women of immense power. To the Arab, marriage is a contract or a forceful possession, to be dissolved at will, and we do not find there the development of the idea of the virgin or the *Brahmachârin* (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1285).

Therefore, it is not marriage as a universal phenomenon, rather it is its manifestation in a particular culture that renders it useful armed with the potential to produce chastity among men and women. The reference to the Hindus in the statement comes as veneration for the society of which he was a part. It is probably a sign of approval by Swami Vivekananda as to the type of marriage that he thought would have a constructive effect on the society.

Probing Mother-Wife dichotomy in the context of Marriage

The question of the ideal never ceased to attract his attention, and therefore, Swami Vivekananda, during a lecture on the “ideals of womanhood” traced the evolutionary history of womanhood in quite scholarly a manner. The contrasting nature of various phases in the development of womanhood was explained by him in the following words: “The development of all monasticism always meant the degeneration of women. But eventually another idea of womanhood arose. In the West it found its ideal in the wife, in India in the mother” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 691). Swami Vivekananda held that the status of motherhood occupies a much more exalted position in India which raises the overall status of women in India. In seemingly close agreement with

Swami Vivekananda on this, the thought regarding the significance of mother in the scheme of things that guides the minute details of this universe, was expressed by Aurobindo in the following words:

There is one divine Force which acts in the universe and in the individual and is also beyond the individual and the universe. The Mother stands for all these, but she is working here in the body to bring down something not yet expressed in this material world so as to transform life here – it is so that you should regard her as the Divine Shakti working here for that purpose. She is that in the body, but in her whole consciousness she is also identified with all the other aspects of the Divine.¹⁸

It goes to show that reverence for women in the form of the mother forms a founding principle of social life for the Hindus which stands in sharp contrast to the relationship between man and woman founded on the principle of reciprocity manifested in the husband-wife dyad in the West. Swami Vivekananda explained the difference in the following words:

In India the wife must not dream of loving even a son as she loves her husband. She must be Sati. But the husband ought not to love his wife as he does his mother. Hence a reciprocated affection is not thought so high as one unreturned (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471).

Great reverence for women as ‘mother’ appears to the Swami as a hindrance to one’s contemplating the idea of marriage in Indian society. As it gains in intensity, taking women as wife becomes all the more difficult. Vivekananda expressed his thoughts on this quite succinctly when he said, “The Hindoo is taught to see in every woman his mother, and no man wants to marry his mother” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682). The impossibility of marriage owes to the fact that mother is equated with God in Hindu theology (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682). And it is a matter of common sense that nobody can ever marry God (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682).

In the process of explaining the concept, the Swami takes care to make it amply understood to his audience that holding marriage as a secondary thing in India does not owe its origin to the thoughts of misogyny as is largely, mistakably though, held by many in the West. Rather, it is immeasurable reverence for women that renders the thought of marriage almost impossible. A report in the *Boston Herald* dated May 15, 1894 quoted the Swami on this topic. It read: “The Hindoo nation is not given to marriage, he said, not because we are women haters, but because our religion teaches us to worship women” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682).

He further contrasts the status of the wife in India with that in the West affirming before his audience the better position of the Indian wife. This is how he compared the two civilizations:

In Europe or America a man can marry a woman for money, and, after capturing her dollars, can kick her out. In India, on the contrary, when a woman marries for money, her children are considered slaves, according to our teaching, and when a rich man marries, his money passes into the hands of his wife, so that he would be scarcely likely to turn the keeper of his money out of doors (Vivekananda 2006, p. 682).

In saying this, Swami Vivekananda also faintly refers to the egalitarian nature of the Hindu marriage, a feature of marriage in India that he also alludes to in his lecture elsewhere (Vivekananda 2006, p. 2049). A parallel could be drawn between Vivekananda’s thought in this regard and other classical Hindu texts that assign higher prestige to the wife and prescribe for the husband certain acts of dutifulness towards his wife.¹⁹

In his characteristic style that looked to forge a synthesis between the quests of a modern scholar trained in humanities and that of a practitioner of *Vedanta*, Vivekananda aspires to blend the best of the two worlds – East and West – by advocating an exchange of ideas on this issue. Speaking to an unnamed European, “the joy”, he confessed, “of the contact of husband and wife is not admitted in India” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471). As a corrective measure, he continued, “this we have to borrow from the West. Our ideal needs to be refreshed by yours” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471). He did not stop at that and in the same breath issued an advice to the whole of western civilization: “And you, in turn, need something of our devotion to motherhood” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471). He summed up the argument as he said: “We have exalted motherhood and you, wifehood; and I think both might gain by some interchange” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 471).

The Swami further contrasted marriage in the West with that in India as he thought that the idea of an eternal marriage in the East casts a cardinal influence on the institution of marriage as a whole. This notion of marriage among Hindus could be seen as a corollary of the high respect accorded to women as they ought to be respected first as mothers and then as wives. Vivekananda remarked:

The West regards marriage as consisting in all that lies beyond the legal tie, while in India it is thought of as a bond thrown by society round two people to unite them together for all eternity. Those two must wed each other, whether they will or not, in life after life. Each acquires half of the merit of the other. And if one seems in this life to have fallen hopelessly behind, it is for the other only to wait and beat time, till he or she catches up again! (Vivekananda 2006, p. 423).

The last line of the statement must be emphasized to discern a nuanced argument in Vivekananda’s thoughts on marriage by virtue of which he considers marriage to be an egalitarian affair with neither the husband nor the wife being entitled to a rightful superiority over the other. As the tie of marriage has an eternal existence, the rules of the relationship do not vary according to gender. One who falls behind needs to catch up, opined Swami Vivekananda.

To bring out the mother-wife contrast more clearly, Swami Vivekananda in one of his lectures, *My Master* referred to the ideas of his teacher, Ramakrishna. About him, Vivekananda made the following confession: “We hear in the West about worshipping woman, but this is usually for her youth and beauty. This man meant by worshipping woman, that to him every woman's face was that of the Blissful Mother, and nothing but that” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 982). The problematic of the mother-wife dichotomy was further explained by the Swami deriving from a real life anecdote from the life of Ramakrishna. Without making it a question of East versus West on this occasion, Swami Vivekananda alluded to the example of his teacher in order to illustrate that the duty of a husband surely binds one to worldliness which is not the way of religious men, one of whom was Ramakrishna. In trying to placate his wife's anxiety over his inability to perform the duties of a husband, Ramakrishna said to her:

As for me, the Mother has shown me that She resides in every woman, and so I have learnt to look upon every woman as Mother. That is the one idea I can have about you; but if you wish to drag me into the world, as I have been married to you, I am at your service. (Vivekananda 2006, p. 981).

Ramakrishna was filled with a strange mix of guilt and apology. Neither did he wish to give up his spiritual journey towards truth nor did he consider it proper to desert his solemnly married wife. Such is the complication of marriage in the life of every practicing Hindu according to Vivekananda. Turning his attention to a more experiential, practical application of the concept of mother-wife dichotomy in Indian society, Vivekananda revealed his personal belief in the matter. He said: “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” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1987). Thus, one might argue that Swami Vivekananda, on a personal level, approved of the superiority of the mother to the wife within the realm of the household.

To choose or let others choose? The puzzle regarding ‘Mate Selection’

Half the world population lives in social systems dominated by arranged marriage (Penn 2011). Geographically speaking, Asia and Africa are the regions where love marriage is less preferred over arranged marriage as a mode of finding a marriage partner (Penn 2011). In keeping with these findings at the global level, India too has largely been a society where arranged marriage has come to be the most preferred form of mate selection across religious groups, namely Hindus, Muslims, and Christians (Kapadia 1966; Kurian 1974, 1975). But this is not to say that mate selection in India is a matter of parental imposition. Rather, a strange blend of marriage arranged by parents in consultation with their children has been observed in regard to Indian society (Banerji, Martin, & Desai 2013).

It must also be noted that the phenomenon thus observed is far from being a very recent feature of Indian society. Soliciting one's opinion before finalizing on the prospective match was not completely unknown in India even a few decades ago. Writing in 1976, Giri Raj Gupta made the following remark to explain his findings: “Most Indian marriages are arranged, although sometimes opinions of the partners are consulted, and in cases of adults, their opinions are seriously considered” (Gupta 1976, p. 77). In sum, one might argue that India has been a society with a strong acceptance for arranged marriage but not in complete disregard for individual choice. In light of this, it would be interesting to find out how Swami Vivekananda looked at the issue.

As far as choice in marriage was concerned, Swami Vivekananda took liberty to be the guiding principle as becomes evident from the following statement:

Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and *marriage*,²⁰ and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others. (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1061).

But, being a staunch advocate of the idea of liberty did not lead him into embracing ‘love marriage’ as the ideal form of marriage. Taking a more pragmatic view of society, Swami Vivekananda would generally rate arranged marriage above marriage based solely on one's own choice. He held this view because, in a sense, he accorded primacy to the society over individual. Influenced by the teachings of Manu, he affirmed that a child born out of lust ceases to be an Aryan (Vivekananda 2006, p. 864). Hence, the society has all the right to determine the system of marriage that should be the prevalent norm. He warned against individual adventurism in matters related to marriage in one of his lectures delivered at Lahore in 1897:

If a man or a woman were allowed the freedom to take up any woman or man as wife or husband, if individual pleasure, satisfaction of animal instincts, were to be allowed to run loose in society, the result must be evil, evil children, wicked and demoniacal (Vivekananda 2006, p. 864).

It is through the containment of such unfettered individual choice based on animal instincts that a civilization germinates and grows, argued Vivekananda. He was so impressed with the system of societal match-making that he went on to attest his liking for the system in the following words: “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” (Vivekananda 2006, p. 864).

The supreme authority vested in the society in this regard owes its existence to the fact that every marriage, in Vivekananda's view, was a matter concern for the entire society as it would affect the society as long as the married individual lived. He once remarked: "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" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 864).

But why would Vivekananda be against individual choice in marital affairs when in principle he was not opposed to individual liberty? He had his own reasons to argue that way. Swami Vivekananda opined that choosing one's spouse by oneself did not show any sign of producing more happiness. (Vivekananda 2006, p. 538). To strengthen his argument, he gave the example of the Indian daughter who he thought was more practical than sentimental, hence high in terms of satisfaction compared to her counterparts in the West (Vivekananda 2006, p. 538). He also emphasized that husband-wife feud in India was less common than in the United States, a society often portrayed as one with greater liberties (Vivekananda 2006, p. 538). It owed to the fact that marriage in India was not considered a means to maximizing personal happiness. It was rather a mixed bag of joyful living and responsibility towards one's family and the society.

One important aspect of the debate was the symbolic tussle between modernity and tradition pointed out by Swami Vivekananda. He explained the difference in the following manner:

On one side, new India is saying, "We should have full freedom in the selection of husband and wife; because the marriage, in which are involved the happiness and misery of all our future life, we must have the right to determine according to our own free will." On the other, old India is dictating, "Marriage is not for sense-enjoyment, but to perpetuate the race. This is the Indian conception of marriage. By the producing of children, you are contributing to, and are 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 wellbeing; do you give up your desire of individual pleasure for the good of the many." (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1108).

Being averse to the idea of marriage focusing on "sense-enjoyment", he summed up his opinion on the issue in this fashion: "Because I love Jennie and Jennie loves me, is no reason why we should be married" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 2070).²¹

Thus, the views expressed here by Swami Vivekananda on choice in marital selection seemingly uphold India's traditional wisdom in this regard that puts a greater sense of confidence in parental intervention, not to mention the broad influence of societal norms in deciding upon matters of mate selection.

II. CONCLUSION

A major theme in Swami Vivekananda's views about the world seems to have emanated from his recognition of a visible set of differences that separated the East from the West (Vivekananda 2006, p. 375). Nonetheless, he once candidly acknowledged the limitation of his knowledge as he said, "I am an ignoramus myself; I do not pretend to any scholarship" (Vivekananda 2006, p. 379). This simply outlines the modesty of his character which came out in clearer terms in another of his lectures where he conceded his ignorance regarding things such as marriage. In a lecture titled "Women of India", he confessed:

I must begin by saying that you may have to bear with me a good deal, because I belong to an Order of people who never marry; so my knowledge of women in all their relations, as mother, as wife, as daughter and sister, must necessarily not be so complete as it may be with other men (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1985).²²

The discussion in the previous sections of this article belies his candid confession made here. Not only did he analyze human marriage from a religious-spiritual viewpoint, he also applied the logic of history and sociology to his analysis of the subject. In comparison to how things were in the West, he considered Indian marriage to be a sublime feature of the society; in fact, he took marriage to be indispensable to the cultivation of chastity among men and women across societies.

Nevertheless, Swami Vivekananda, on other occasions, decried marriage. He once expressed his disapproval as: "Marriage and sex and money the only living devils." (Vivekananda 2006, p. 1236).²³ To conclude, it may be said that in the schema of society suggested by Swami Vivekananda, the world could be divided into two groups of people – one that may marry and the other that need to eschew marriage, preferably even thoughts of it. The latter group would consist of those who lead a monastic life. With the exception of these men and women, the rest of society may feel free to embrace inviolable marriage as an institution, the marker of a chaste society.

Notes

¹ Soon after his arrival in the United States, the American Press called Swami Vivekananda a 'Hindu monk'. One of the earliest such references can be found in a report of *Evanston Index* dated October 7, 1893 published

shortly after the conclusion of the Parliament of World Religions. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 3, 'Reincarnation', p. 894.

² This term in reference to Swami Vivekananda was used by *Madras Times*, February, 1897. See 'The Missionary Work of the First Hindu Sannyasin to the West and his Plan of Regeneration of India' in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 5, p. 1304.

³ 'Hindu Civilization' can be referred back to Samuel Huntington's use of the term in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).

⁴ Jyotirmaya Sharma in his book, *A Restatement of Religion – Swami Vivekananda and the Making of the Hindu Nationalism* (2013) portrays Swami Vivekananda as probably the pioneer of political Hindutva.

⁵ Swami Vivekananda delivered a lecture organized by the Ethical Association of Brooklyn. These lines from the lecture were quoted in a report published by the *Brooklyn Standard Union* on January 21, 1895.

⁶ Edward Westermarck (1901:51) expressed his concern over the fact that the idea of a promiscuous past that began as a "probable hypothesis" later took the form of a "demonstrated truth".

⁷ This he explains during his exposition of the Karma-Yoga.

⁸ Jessie Bernard's (1972) *The Future of Marriage* is a classic in the field that draws our attention to this aspect of marriage where the wives despite not getting a fair deal in the form of marriage carry on with it, largely due to their commitment to the traditional notion of marriage.

⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 5 of Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage: A History*. New York: Penguin Books. The verse quoted is as per Coontz's reference to The Bible in her book (p. 86).

¹⁰ Also see *New Discoveries*, Vol. 5, p. 138.

¹¹ Vivekananda spoke these words in 1902 in response to a question from his disciple named Sharat Chandra Chakravarty.

¹² A somewhat similar precept could be found in the Talmud that recommends marriage for the scholars of Torah to keep them away from sexual thoughts. See Coontz (2005, p. 86).

¹³ See *The Rigveda* VIII.31, VIII.33. 18, X.102.10.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion on 'social action', see *Economy and Society* by Max Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 22).

¹⁵ This definition of chastity was presented in *Saturday Review* dated Aug. 10. 1867, and was quoted by William Lecky (1869) in his book, *History of European Morals*, Vol. 1. The reference here is to the third edition of Lecky's book (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1917, p. 12).

¹⁶ Italics not found in original.

¹⁷ The opinion was expressed in a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull dated 14th June, 1902.

¹⁸ See *The Mother* by Sri Aurobindo, Volume 25, pp. 49-50. The quotation could be accessed online at https://www.sriarobindoashram.org/mother/sriarob_on.php.

¹⁹ The 46th verse of the 85th hymn of *Mandala X* of the *Rigveda* portrays the wife as the 'sovereign queen' of the household, the sway of her sovereignty extending over all her in-laws. A similar idea is contained in the *Manusmriti* (9. 26) where the wife in the household is considered a goddess. High reverence for the wife akin to that offered to a goddess as a recommendatory act is also to be found in the *Atharvaveda* (14. 2. 15).

²⁰ Italics added for emphasis.

²¹ The statement is a part of the report on Vivekananda's lecture delivered at Oakland on March 19, 1900 with editorial comments from *Oakland Enquirer*.

²² The lecture was delivered at the Shakespeare Club House in Pasadena, California on January 18, 1900.

²³ The sentence is to be found in a letter dated 9th July, 1897 written from Almora to Miss Mary Hale.

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