



Status of Women in the Vedic Literature with special reference to Rig-Veda

Puspa Saikia

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit,
Ghanakanta Baruah College, Marigaon, Assam, INDIA

(Corresponding author: Puspa Saikia)

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Abstract: Rig Veda is the only scripture in which the divine truths revealed to women sages and some of hymns describing the revelations find a prominent place in the Rig Veda Samhita like the hymn of Devi Sukta attributed to woman sage Vaak Ambhrini. There are more than thirty sages in RV with specific hymns associated with them. Women were respected and valued in the Vedic society not merely as mothers for bringing a new generation, but also as individuals with great potential to perceive the truth and contribute richly to human society. We should have to take the path of Vedic advices to improve our society regarding women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Vedas containing the earliest recorded human thoughts that form the very foundation of ancient society. The women of the Vedic society were given high respect. They were the members of the family. Two wheels of a cart man and woman as perceived in Taitriya Samhita implies that both man and woman resemble two bulls yoked in a chariot. The Samhita further asserts that women are stepping stones of their families [1]. In Vedic accounts, the legend has it that from the right side of the body of Brahma (the Creator) emerged a man from his left side a woman. Thus message conveyed by the Vedas through this symbolic account is that there exists parity between man and woman in this world that humankind should regardful of it in all their dealings. In an episode in Brihaddharma Purana, Maharshi Jabali asks Maharshi Vyasa, in all the three worlds what elements are the supreme ones? To which Maharshi Vyasa replies –That there is, no place of pilgrimage as great as the Gangage, no sustainers of the world as great as Lord Vishnu, no one as venerable as lord Shiva, and there is no greater guru than one's own mother.

Apart from the above, in the Manava Dharma-Sutra it is mentioned that the importance of motherhood is ten lakh times more than that of a teacher (upadyaya, one who imparts formal education), a lakh times more than that of the preceptor (acharya), and thousand times more than that a father [2].

The objectives of the research paper

1. To find out the women status reflected in the Vedic literature and
2. To highlight the relevant of these thoughts in present time.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva samhitas with the commentary of Sayanacharya have been studied for formulating the research paper. In addition to these some Brahman literature have been consulted.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

For data, we propose to rely on the text of Vedic samhitas, their commentaries, Vedic literature and relevant primary and secondary literature. For methodology, we propose to follow the analytical method.

The words used for woman: The word stri is the most prevalent word to denote women in the Sanskrit language. The word nari is absent in the RigVeda, but naryah is found in the meaning of sacrifice. The word Jaya is to be the ideal wife [3]. It is said that the house becomes meaningless without a Jaya [4]. An important and mostly used word to denote the wife in the Vedic literature is Patni. In the Satapathabrahmana it is said that the man is incomplete without patni [5]. The word mata is found everywhere in the above terms carries the sense and the respect of people towards women in the Vedic heritage.

IV. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Rig-Veda, the earliest of all the Vedas is full of hymns with the natural phenomena. In the Rig-Veda, the status of women is described with great respect. The Rig-Veda describes the picture of Usha (the goddess of Dawn) and Aditi

the mother of many Gods like Mitra, Varun, Rudra and Aryaman. The goddess Usha begins the new day by removing the darkness and waking up the earthly beings. Whereas Rati, the Night is the sister of Usha, due to which all the creatures take rest after the day's labour i.e. Usha and Rati are daughters of Heaven. In the Rig-Vedic age family was an important institution. In the family daughter was called Duhitri. It seems that society gives importance to the male child but the references in the Rig-Veda prefers that female children were also honoured [6]. A father in the Vedic time did not want to distinguish between his son and daughter. He treated them equally [7]. The women were given perfect education so that they could be able to conduct her social and personal life with full grandeur. There are instance like Gosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Saci and Vishvavara who composed hymns and got an important intellectual status.

In the Vedic age marriage was regarded as a sacred task. In this regard, daughters were given chance to select their husbands. But the girls who were unmarried could also stay in her father's house. There is no mention of child marriage in the Rig-Vedic age as the girls were matured at the time of her marriage. After marriage the brides were seen as bringing fortune to their groom's house. There were assigned a position of great honour. It is mentioned [8] that matured girls attended various festivals and public gathering for meeting with their prospective husbands and their mothers also used to allow them for the same. Nursing and taming children was one of the important duties followed by Vedic women [9]. In a RigVedic hymn it informs that women should perform the sacrifices, weave clothes, water in the plants and to fulfil the desires of the members of her family [10].

In Vedic hymns Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Indra, Agni etc. Gods are worshiped, and at the same time Goddesses like Saraswati, Laxmi and Mahashakti receive equally high privilege and status.

VI. RELIGIOUS STATUS AND RESPECT

In Vedic period women were advised to perform some duties according to her ability. She had some religious rights under which she could perform the sacrifices [11]. She was given important place in the sacrifice [12]. We find Gargi and Maitreyi distinguishing themselves in Brahavidya the highest knowledge. We find Visvavara taking place of a rtvik in a sacrifice [13].

VII. EDUCATIONAL STATUS

Education was not only for male students in the Vedic age, they had given importance on women education too. As the first step to their education, they were given the holy thread. It was thought that only such girls were able to perform the hard works who are 'upanitas' [14]. The women had the military education as the boys in those days. We find Vispala [15] and Mudgalani going to the battle fields [16]. That was possible for the military education which they got in their earlier life. In Rig-Veda it is mentioned that the educated women were invited to attend the sabha [17]. To make herself eligible for the membership of the sabha a woman was to be educated. The women of the Vedic heritage got such education through which they could control the household problems in their life. In Vedic India the female students were requested to mingle with the learned women whenever they had to go because knowledgeable ladies were found everywhere [18]. These show that education was considered essential for women in the Vedic culture.

VIII. POLITICAL STATUS

In Vedic society women were the contributor in the political sphere also. She is the prominent element of the society as it is reflected in the Atharvaveda [19]. The popular assemblies to which women flocked and in which they spoke undeterred, were the Sabha [20], Vidatha. An Atharvavedic passage informs that when a newly married girl was sent to her husband's house, she was blessed to be a member of the Vidatha [21]. In that time women were appointed as messenger forms. As Duti Sarama had been appointed to carry the messages to the Panis. She was successful in her duty [22]. The ladies of the Vedic age were going to the battle field to help their husbands in political aspects. As for instance Vispala lost her one leg in the war which was cured by the Asvins by adding an iron leg [23]. Moreover, some sacrifices are related with the social and political life, such as Rajasuya, Vajapeya, Asvamedha, Purusamedha and Sarvamedha. In the Asvamedha sacrifice God Savita occupies an important place. God Savita is called in the sacrifice and a seat is offered [24]. The evidences denote that in Vedic time political responsibilities of women was not only introduced but continued in full vigour.

IX. CONCLUSION

"Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there was no restrictions upon her remarriage [25]". In the light of above discussion, a truly empowered woman in Vedic era is highly privileged and attain higher status in the Vedic Society as she used to possess following virtues -

- a) Bravery a virtue woman should possess;

- b) Expertise in all affairs in life such as cultivation, warrior;
- c) Earning fame and dignity in all walks of life;
- d) Earning knowledge;
- e) Economic prosperity and affluence;
- f) Intelligence and relentless knowledge seeking attitude;
- g) Woman possesses an illuminating mind that provides wealth, food and prosperity; and
- h) A woman is not only a protector of her family but also a protector of society and even she can join army to protect her motherland.

Vedic woman was supposed to be an important factor of the nation. They could do everything for the sake of society and the nation. To be a respectful woman, she has to be educated. Without proper education, she could not be a wise lady as expected. In the later Vedic period status of woman was started deteriorating. Rights which they had earlier were not enjoying in that period. Restrictions were put on social, economic, religious sphere. In medieval period, women lost their right of education. For which they were humiliated in the society. But after that society become changed by grace of revolutionary. They showed honour for the women by giving them the opportunity for compulsory education through these steps women become enlightened with vigorous growth as before. But the complete women are not able free from the bandage of society even today. There is much that modern society can learn from the Vedic culture. In this era, women empowerment is a much talked issue and in this ongoing discourse of women empowerment throughout the world, virtues of Aryan womenfolk in Vedic Era should receive prime attention. Marginalised and vulnerable women of modern age can improve their status in the society by imbibing virtues and attributes of women in Vedic Age to a large extent.

*“Yatra naryastu pujoyante tatra ramante tatra devata.
Yatra itaastu na pujoyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah.”*

A famous sloka taken from Manusmiti which means where women are honoured, divinity blossoms there, and where women dishonoured, all actions no matter how noble remain unfruitful.

Sri Aurobindo thus rightly says “It may be noted too that in law and theory at least women in ancient India, contrary to the sentiments of other ancient peoples, were not denied civic rights, although in practice this equality was rendered all but nugatory for all but a few by their social subordination to the male and their domestic preoccupation; instances have yet survived in the existing records of women figuring not only as queens and administrators and even in the battlefield, a common enough incidence in Indian history, but as elected representatives on civic bodies [26]”.

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