

STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE VEDIC PERIOD

Angshumalee Dutta

Research Scholar, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam

Abstract

Women have been actively involved and participated in works from the earliest times. The Vedas accord a very honourable and respectable social status of women. They could occupy administrative and other important jobs mostly performed by men even today. They worked as judged also. In the battlefield, in the absence of the king, the queen took command of the forces and inspired them. They have left remarkable record as a patron of art and culture or as a common subject. The ideal of Indian womanhood as daughter, sister, wife, even mother, has never depicted in terms of equality with men or independence. In a society of prominence of the male beings, the women were taught to accept a position of subordination, listening to the stories of Sita and Savitri who personified the virtues of the Indian womanhood, glaring examples of subordination, service and sacrifice; they were taught that their life was meant for the happiness of their husbands and children. (Bose, p.97, 2002)

Keyword: Women, Men, Wife, Vedic

Objectives:

Objectives of the study are as follows –

- (i) To study the status of women in the Vedic society
- (ii) To highlight some educated women during Vedic period
- (iii) To study the male biasness in the Vedic society

Methodology:

The methodology of the work is both descriptive and analytical. Only second sources (books) were consulted while writing the article.

Discussion and Analysis:

The Vedic society was patriarchal. Such a society as the invariably placed women in a position secondary to the male members in the family. During the Vedic period the birth of a son was much preferred to that of a daughter. As it was a patriarchal family system, descent was counted from the father to the offspring and only the male child was fit to continue the lineage. The Rigveda is replete with references to ardent prayers for the birth of sons. The Rigveda however, does not show that once born a daughter was neglected. This would take place subsequently in the later Vedic texts, which would view the birth of a daughter as of misery (Chakravarti, p. 74, 20, 2021)

There are indications enough in the Rigveda that women married at matured age and no reference to marriage of a girl at a pre-puberty stage is available. There was also little restriction or the choice of spouse in the terms of the varna consideration except that a marriage between the aryavarna and the dasavarna was disapproved. The Rigveda offers a few evidences of parental control and approval on the choice of spouse.

There is a wonderful marriage hymn in the Rigveda, containing benedictions to a newly married wife about to go to her husband's home. The wife in the Rigveda is accorded a position of dignity, she actively participated in the rituals with her husband, and as co-performer in rituals, she rightly called the Sahadharmini (Chakravarti, p.74, 2021).

There is no mention of the custom of sati or the burning of the widow on the same funeral pyre with her dead husband. The widow would perform a ritual lying beside her dead husband on the funeral pyre, but would then actually descend from there at the call of her brother-in-law. The Rigveda allows the cohabitation with her younger brother-in-law till the birth of a male child.

There are different examples of male bias in different historical traditions, in the Manusmriti, a girl, a young woman or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood, a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead under her sons. She should not have independence (Majumdar, p.567, 1970). The position of women may any person, depends to a large extent on his or her qualities, utility and serviceability. As such education and personality are matter of considerable importance in determining her position in the family and the society. In an age of large scale illiteracy and supremacy of the males in patriarchal society where a male child was put on premium, the birth of a daughter passed almost unnoticed and very little care was taken for her education. Exception was there in case of rich and noble families of the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas and vaisyas where the girls were given education. Rich persons engaged tutors to instruct their daughters as there was no system of public education in ancient India whatsoever. Art of dancing and singing were supposed to be provided to the girls for amusement to their husbands. We learn from Vatsyayana that the husband usually appointed his wife to keep accounts of the household to receive and spend money and pay to the servants (Majumdar, p.568, 1970)

On the basis of his deep and extensive study of the position of women in ancient India, Dr. A. S. Altekar in his book *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* has observed, *In the higher sections of society, the sacred initiation (Upanayana) of girls was common and they used to go through a regular course of education. Some attained distinction in the realm of theology and philosophy and a considerable number of women used to follow the teaching career. Women used to take an active part in agriculture, and in the manufacture of cloth, bows and arrows and other war materials* (Aggarwal, p. 307, 2002)

Quoting from *Arthavaveda*, Dr. Ved Mitra in his work *Education in Ancient India* states *Just as boys acquire sound knowledge and culture by the practices of 'brahmacharya' and then marry girls of their own choice, who are young, well educated, loving and of like temperament, so should a girl practice of 'brahmacharya' study the Veda and other success and thereby perfect her knowledge, refine her character, give her hand to a man of her own choice, who is young, learned, land loving* (Aggrwal, p. 307, 2002). *The women should have opportunity to attain knowledge of Vedas for all the four corners* (A.V. XIV 1.64). The Rigveda mention some literate women e.g. Apala, Johi, Gosha, Lopamudra, Angarishi, Visvara, Indrani, Surya etc. They were composers of Vedic hymns (Chakravarti, p.74, 2021).

There are instances when women were so advanced in learning that they challenged men of acknowledged learning in public discussion on philosophical and metaphysical subjects. The role of mother in the education of children was greatly recognized. *A mother should impart education to her children so as to broaden their horizon.*

Vedic society was by and large monogamous but the determining factor of the number of wives of person was perhaps the economic condition. The Smritis do not prohibit polygamy, rather provide for the rules of determining the status of the wives that one might have married from the different varnas of course they discourage on the whole pratiloma marriage (Bose, p. 92, 2002)

Widows were eligible for remarriage. *Rise O Women, rise accept new as your new husband, someone. The person with whom you have been living all these days is now dead. May you through your new husband if he so desires and be happy and rejoice.* (R. V., X.18.8)

The maiden who herself choose the husband among men, is really fortunate and happy (R.V. X.27.12)

Marriage was regarded as a samskaras, sadhadharmini-samyoga. The Smritis hold it to be bond of union between two persons for their eternal progress through the performance of duties in family life. (Bose, p.86, 2002) The martial union was regarded as a divine dispensation, a heaven ordained relation. *The wife stood by the side of the man in life and through death in the gladder life beyond; she was verily the half of man.* The Arthava veda quoted that husband and wife complementary, *May the husband and wife be each other's complementary. The husband is a song and the wife a verse. The husband is the sky. The wife is the earth. It is in their union that offspring result. Each emotionally fulfils the other to completion.* (A. V. XIV, 2.71)

As a wife, women are highly placed in the vedic literature. She is identified with the house and the home. *The home has verily its foundation in the wife, the house is called the home.* It would appear that a virtuous wife was always desired for all comforts of the home and fulfilling all requirements that a householder needed. Manu ordains that the wife should be entrusted with

material and financial resources of the home, with collecting and spending. There is no difference between the house wife and the goddess of fortune; both illumine the home and are to be adored as such. Everyone in the house, the parents-in-law, brothers-in-law and the husband, shall honour her and keep her happy and bedecked if they want to prosper. *Where women are honoured, there the gods revel; where they are not honoured, all religious acts become futile; that home perishes in which daughter-in-law suffers; homes cursed by them come to grief.* (Bose, p.92, 2002)

The position of women seems to have taken a worsening turn from the later vedic times. The birth of a daughter become pronounced. The later vedic texts strongly favour the lowing of the age of marriage of girls to pre-puberty stage. There is also a clear disapproval providing education and vedic learning for women in the later vedic times. In fact, it is said that an educated women becomes devoid of her femininity and assumes more male like features. Sukumari Bhattacharji argues that with the lowing of the age of marriage and little prospect of education, women of the later vedic period were trained primarily in domestic chores (Chakravarti, p.75, 2021). The preference for marrying them off at a pre-puberty stage leaves little scope for women to voice their choice of spouses, which is then decided upon by the father.

The later Vedic texts speak of polygamy, which was a marker of opulence and prestige of the husband, but the existence of co-wives was hardly conducive to the dignity and honour of the wife. The principal duty of the wife in the later vedic period was to follow and obey her husband. The other principal expectation from the wife was her bearing male children. There is little doubt that the later vedic text glorifies the position of the mother in the family. The role of the later vedic wife is reduced to the bearer of male children, a producer of the producers (Chakravarti, p.75, 2021). In fact, Apastamba recommends that the wife who bore only daughters should be abandoned in the tenth year, who gave birth to still-born children in the twelfth year, but one who talked back to the husband must be discarded forthwith. With domesticity increasingly becoming the yardstick in the social and cultural life of women, the later vedic texts, unlike the Rigveda, offer little or no reference to women's presence in the popular assemblies (Sabha and Samiti). The ardent desire that a woman remains a non-widow during her life is a powerful commentary on the deteriorating condition of widows in the later Vedic times.

Conclusion:

The general position of the women during the later vedic period deteriorated as compared with the early vedic period. Several of the religious ceremonies earlier performed by women began to be performed by the priestly class. Usually women were required to remain within the walls of the house. The girls gradually lost the privilege of *Upanayana* and were not considered fit to recite Vedic Mantras (hymns) or perform vedic rites. In the early vedic period, the girls were married at about the age of 16 to 17 but during the later vedic period the marriageable age was lowered down to about 12. Girls, in rich, aristocratic and royal families, however, continued to receive education.

From the above discussion it is very clear that in the patriarchal social and family life of the vedic times, women did not enjoy an honourable position in the society.

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