

Status of Women in Vedic Age

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Aryan society , Status and Position of women in Vedic period, Vedic literature , Rig Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda, Brahma-vadinis and Sadyo-vadhooos, *Vidath*(विदथ), Sarva-anukramnika.

Abstract –

The status and the position of women in India, has been a controversial subject, as it reflects the contradictory and the paradoxical nature of the Indian society. While on the one hand, woman has been called *devi* or goddess, the abode of gods, the perfect guide or guru of her children; on the other hand, she has been criticized for the weaknesses of her character, for her unpredictable and impulsive nature and has even been denied the basic right of existence as a human being. The staunch supporters of Indian culture, who believe that women enjoyed an honourable, significant and unique position in the annals of Indian history, unlike other civilizations, quote the verses from ancient Hindu literature to support their point of view. This research paper explores the status and position of women in Vedic age.

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difference of opinion raises many questions, as to the nature, and scope of free will enjoyed by women in different periods of Indian history.

Thus, this situation, or dilemma, demands a thorough and objective probe, to understand the status, position and significance of the role of women as mothers, wives and daughters, and the scope of freedom, free will and personal space as enjoyed by them in their respective roles, along with various social restrictions imposed upon them, from time to time. In order to have a better understanding of the present social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical, political, cultural and economic factors which moulded the society. And such a historical perspective is all the more necessary in the case of a society, with a continuous history of more than three thousand years. It is also crucial to have a brief look at the past society, because some of the norms and values affecting women today have their roots in the past.

Though the necessity of reviewing women's status across historical phases is non-controversial, the task is fraught with innumerable difficulties. "Firstly", observes Sukla Das,¹ "the subject as it is too wide in scope, defies generalization. Secondly, various changes occurred in the different periods of our long history to alter the position and status of women. Thirdly, the contradictions in abundant source-materials with no precise dates and their varied interpretations render it rather difficult to assess the quantum of theory and reality. Fourthly, vastness of the country where a large number of cultures confluenced and where stages of development were not uniform, poses difficulty in drawing any fixed or definite conclusion. Fifthly, conglomeration of facts and fantasies about our past have often blurred a rational judgement. Considering these major constraints it would be unwise to brush aside the matter by a general estimate under any positive notion of 'good' or 'bad' ". Similarly, eminent sociologist Prof. M.N. Srinivas² has observed that "it (i.e. the changing position of Indian women) has many facets and generalization is well nigh impossible because of the existence of considerable variation among regions, between rural and urban areas, among classes, and finally among different religious, ethnic and caste-groups. While in certain contexts the Indian sub-continent is a single cultural region, in many others it is heuristically more rewarding to look upon it as a congeries of micro-regions, differences between which are crucial." Similarly, Dr. Romila Thapar³ believes that "within the Indian sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural milieu, family

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structure, class, caste, property rights and morals." Despite these difficulties, an attempt has been made in this research paper to give an account of the position and status of women in Vedic period.

In the Vedic period (i.e. the period from 2500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. when the four *Vedas* – *Rig Veda*, *Sam Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* were compiled), women were active participants in different spheres of societal activities.⁴ In this period, women enjoyed all the rights in social, economic, political and religious domain, as were enjoyed by their male counterparts. Though the Vedas are essentially works of rituals, ceremonies and of philosophy and references to mundane affairs are very few; yet they show a glimpse of the Aryan society in all its colours and present the condition and the contribution of the women in that age.⁵

In the early stages of the arrival and the expansion of the Indo-Aryans in northern India, they went through a period of long and continuous struggle with the non-Aryan tribes. The constant wars and the resultant calamities demanded a large number of soldiers, who could fight with the enemy in unknown land and who could defeat their rivals, scattered around in large numbers. This very fact forced them to rely upon the masculine power and explains the emergence of a new god *Indra*, who was more masculine, more aggressive than prior gods and who soon captured the title of *devendra* i.e. god of the gods. As the Aryans were driven by a desire to boost up their numerical strength, to make up for the comparative dearth of men, women as progenitors of the race, occupied a central place in the Vedic society.

Their arduous life of expansion had a two-fold impact on the status of women in society. Due to their all-engrossing life on earth, the Aryans showed little concern in the questions related to life after death. Neither had they the time nor the wish to ponder over such sensitive questions at that time. Secondly, this do or die situation forced them to take as well as respect, the work of every member of their community, and consequently the importance of women in political, social, economic and religious fields was soon felt in the Aryan society. Men at that time, were mostly engrossed in military and semi- military pursuits hence they had to rely on the help and cooperation of women in other spheres of life. And as such women were not considered as parasites but were useful members of society for securing material prosperity in peace and victory in war. Women, too, used to take active part in production, agriculture and in manufacture. Thus, for such people, writes P. Thomas, "women were not ornaments but co-partners in life, in its

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pleasure and hazards, in its joys and sorrows and an exuberance of vitality and vigour guided them in forming their institutions of marriage and family life." Similarly, Sukla Das⁶ observes that, "the cheap or forced labour of the enslaved population was not available to the early Aryans hence they could not treat women with disregard or total contempt. Consequently, women had general freedom and a relatively better status in the early Vedic period."

During this period, sons were indispensable as fighters for the family and the clan but it does not mean that a girl-child was neglected or ignored or received a differential treatment by her parents and society, as compared to male-children. In Vedic literature there are many hymns which are addressed to gods and goddesses like *Agni*, *Soma*, *Ashwins*, *Maruts*, *Vishwe-deva*, *Indra*, *Ribhus*, *Brahmanspati*, *Aditya*, *Appanpata*, *Raka*, *Vishwajit*, *Saraswati*, *Usha*, *Anumati*, *Siniwali*, *Savitri* etc. which are expressive of the yearning for sons, but at the same time, there are hymns which present the craving for a girl-child. Some of the hymns, expressive of the yearning for sons, have been mentioned here⁷:

"*Agni* hath bestowed on me riches and sons and this spouse. Be ye not parted, Dwell ye here, Reach the full time of human life, with sons and grandsons sport and play, rejoicing in your own abode."

"O, Dawn enriched with ample wealth bestow on us the wondrous gift.

Wherewith we may support children and children's sons."

"O, Bounteous *Indra*, make this bride blest in her sons and fortunate.

Vouchsafe to her ten sons; and make her husband the eleventh one."

"Vouchsafe blessing upon the wombs that bring male children forth."

"Prepare accordingly the mother for the infants' birth. On the right way bring forth the boy. Make him come hither, I am here. The amulet which Aditi wore when desirous of a son, *Tvashtar* hath bound upon this dame and said, "Be mother of a boy."

"I wish my thought have commenced with divine far-sighted *Dakshina*. Steal not my life. I will not thine, May I, O, Goddess in thy sight find for myself a hero son."

"May he come forth alive, unharmed, yea, living from the living dame."

These hymns can lead one to conclude that the Aryan society was a male-dominated society or it was a gender-biased society. But a close look at the Vedic texts will reveal that an ardent desire for

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the birth of a daughter is not missing in that society either. There are innumerable references to daughters being fondly and affectionately brought up by parents. A simile which has been drawn to express the Heaven and Earth, reflects upon the relations of the girl child with her parents. "Faring together young, with meeting limits, twin sisters lying on their parent's bosom."⁸

Similarly, in one of the hymns of *Rig Veda*, the desire of the couple to reach their full extent of life with sons and daughters, has been mentioned.⁹In another passage, a father is commended for having many excellent daughters as his quiver for containing unerring darts, both being effective in assailing the hearts of men.¹⁰One passage expresses a desire for brave sons and sagacious daughters.¹¹A prayer addressed to Lord *Pushan* likewise evinces a keen desire for daughters. A prayer in the *Yajur Veda* while urging for victorious, sagacious and brave youth for the nation also wishes for like-minded women. Besides this, there are several verses in the *Vedas*, which express keenness for children, which includes both, sons and daughters.¹²It is interesting to note, that for the attainment of wise, educated and erudite daughters, special religious ceremonies were organized in the period of *Upanishads*.¹³These examples prove beyond doubt, that girls were neither considered as unwanted nor inferior at that time and that they were accorded a status of absolute equality with that of a son at all levels -religious, social and political.

In the Vedic age, women used to be well-educated, well-cultivated and were refined in their manners and etiquettes. Some of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* have been attributed to female *rishis*. According to the orthodox tradition recorded in *Sarva-anukramnika*, there are as many as twenty women among the authors of *Rig Veda*.¹⁴Dr. S.R. Shastri has classified these hymns as follows: hymns that are entirely attributed to female *rishis*; hymns that are partly attributed to female *rishis*; hymns that are attributed to female *rishis*, but are of dubious authorship.¹⁵

The first category includes hymns composed independently by Apala and Vishwa-wara, who belonged to the Atri family. Apala addressed hymn 91 of the tenth book and invokes *Agni* in Book V of the *Rig Veda*, while Vishwa-wara has composed hymn 91 of the seventh book.¹⁶The second category includes hymns which have been traditionally attributed to female *rishis*, Lopamudra and Sachiya, addressed jointly with their spouse or some other seer. Lopamudra has composed a hymn jointly with her husband Agastya.¹⁷The last category represents hymns of Ghosha, Indrani, Urvashi, Surya Savitri, Shraddha, Kamayani, Shachi, Paulomi, Sarparagini. With the exception of Ghosha the rest are mythological or divine figures, who obviously cannot be accepted as the real

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authors. The real composers may have been some one else, possibly women, opines Dr. S.R. Shastri.¹⁸

These illustrations demonstrate a healthy tradition of imparting training to daughters, equivalent to that of sons. To impart education to all children and to help them in settling in life were the twin duties of the Vedic parents and in this there was initially no discrimination between a boy and a girl. *Upanayana* or ceremonial initiation into the Vedic studies at par was the rule. The initiation ceremony of girls used to take place as regularly as that of boys.¹⁹The Vedas unambiguously underline the indispensability and significance of education for maidens²⁰ and held such educated maidens in high esteem. In the following hymn of *Rig Veda*, the qualities of a leading lady are described by comparing her to dawn. Just as the dawn is luminous because she gets all the light from her veritable father, the sun, so the daughter of illuminated parents, it is stated, alone could be the enlightened one:

"O Ideal Lady of the earth, shining as luminous light of dawn. Endowed with inspiring speech and mirth. You are the leader luminous love born. Your glory is sung by the noble ones, your achievements praised by one and all. Creator of refined daughters and sons, to you flock millions, big or small."

Similarly, at other places it is mentioned that:

"An unmarried young learned daughter should be married to a bridegroom who, like her, is learned. Never think of giving in marriage a daughter of very young age."

"A young daughter who has observed *brahmacharya* i.e. finished her studies should be married to a bridegroom who, like her, is learned."

The *Atharva-Veda* also advocates female education categorically.

"A king by observing *brahmacharya* can protect his kingdom easily. An *acharya* can impart education to his students, if he has himself observed his *brahmacharya*. A young daughter, after the observance of *brahmacharya*, should be married to a young man."²¹

Women were imparted training in spiritual and temporal subjects in Vedic period. The spiritual aspect of education comprised training in religious lore, historical tradition and mythology. The scholars were divided into two classes-- *brahma-vadinis* and *sadyo-vadhoos*.²² The former were life-long students of theology and philosophy and considered the attainment of knowledge and

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the spread of knowledge as the aim of their lives and for that, they remained unmarried throughout their lives. *Brahma-Vadinis* were women of high scholarship. Many of them composed hymns which enriched the Vedic literature. Ghosha was a celebrated *rishika*,²³ so were Lopamudra,²⁴ Apala²⁵ and Vishvavara²⁶. Vishvavara not only composed hymns but performed the function of a *ritvij* or priest at a sacrifice,²⁷ a privilege that was denied to women in subsequent period. Many of the women scholars took to teaching profession and were known as *acharyas*.^{27(a)} Vak, the daughter of Abhrma, to whom the authorship of hymn 125 of Book X of *Rig Veda* is attributed, marks the beginning of the line of the *brahma-vadinis* who flooded the later Vedic literature with their number and philosophical discourses, discussions and speculations... The hymn embodies in it the language of tremendous force and vigour, the concept of the unity of the universe. This hymn is one of the earliest precursors of the non-dual doctrine of the later Vedanta philosophy.²⁸ This proves that not only mythology and tradition were taught to women, but also the intricate principles and concepts of metaphysics. The *sadyo-vadhoo*s prosecuted their studies till their marriages at the age of 15 or 16.

The Vedic literature also testifies to women's proficiency in fine arts.²⁹ From the *Taittiriya Samhita* (VI.6.5), the *Maitrayana Samhita* (III.7.3), and the *Shatpath Brahman*, we know that women were taught to dance and sing, which appear to be recognized feminine accomplishments.

They appeared even in tournaments³⁰ like horse and chariot races³¹ and publicly attended feasts and gatherings³². There are certain references in the *Rig Veda*, which point out that women, too, received military training. It was a necessity for a society, which was engaged in long and continuous struggle with the non-Aryan tribes, to train their women in self-defense. At times, women even accompanied their husbands in the battle field. In the *Rig Veda* we come across women of military profession like Mudgalini³³, Vispala³⁴ and Shashiyasi³⁵ who took active part in battles and who astonished their rivals with their bravery. Mudgalini, Mudgal's wife, was a brave warrior, who in the hour of crisis, drove the chariot for her husband and acted as a *rathi* or *saarathi*. She is said to have overpowered her husband's enemy, who thus defeated, took to his heels chased by her. Similarly, Vispala, the wife of king Khela, accompanied her husband to the battle field, where she lost her leg, which was later replaced with an iron one by the Ashwins³⁶.

These references to women warriors in the *Rig Veda* prove beyond doubt that women received some kind of military training in those days.³⁷ Similarly, in the *Atharva-Veda*, there are several

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allusions to the bravery of women.³⁸

In the Vedic period, women used to take part in the decision-making bodies of the society. In a hymn, in *Rig Veda*, a desire is expressed in the marriage ceremony that the bride would figure not only as a mere housewife but also as an eloquent speaker in the *Vidath* (fonFk).³⁹ This was true about the women of the aristocratic families as well as common ones. In the *Rig Veda*, the scene of *Vidath* and the maiden's curiosity/inclination to attend to the discussion and to participate in it is described in more than one hymn.⁴⁰ Further, grown up males are described as deputing strong and social maidens to the *Vidath*. In the deliberative functions women enjoyed an equal voice with men. In the *Rig Veda* and the *Atharva-Veda*, both men and women were expected to speak to *Vidath* in their advanced age.⁴¹ Bloomfield's view that the Vedic women had nothing to do with the public life⁴² has been refuted by several writers including R.S.Sharma⁴³ as it pertains to a period when the patriarchal society was established on a firm footing and women had lost their hold over social and political structures. These examples clearly show that the activities of women were not confined to the hearths and homes alone, but they also played an important role at the political front.

Thus we see that women enjoyed a comparatively better status in the Vedic period. In fact, in the later periods of Indian history, their position became subservient to their male counterparts. They were accorded an equal status, in the Vedic period, as their brothers, fathers and other male members enjoyed. They utilized and enjoyed every facility to develop their personalities and used to learn the arts of singing, dancing, cooking, knitting, warfare and also took active participation in the representative assemblies. Further, they were given full freedom in matters of education and marriage. It is interesting to note that the society at that time did not impose any restrictions on widows on their remarriage. In that period we have not come across any example of child marriage. This contradicts the prevalent notion of historiography that Indian women have always been considered as unequal or subservient to males.

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