

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Status of Women in India in the Rigvedic Age and Medieval Age

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Abstract:

The condition and status of women in Indian society changed substantially from the early period to the beginning of the present century. The status of women is a relative and multidimensional concept. Indian women at turn of the 21st century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain high status and gender justice. So in this paper, there will be analysis for knowing the ideal, and in fact the original view point of Indian thinkers about the status of women in ancient society and in the medieval society.

Keywords: women, status, ancient age, medieval age

1. Introduction

Men and women philosophically speaking are the two sides of the same coin. Starting from the field of domestic responsibilities, socio-political, moral, economic, intellectual and spiritual duty women has a significant role to play. Here the oldest Vedic texts, namely the Rigveda- Samhita is being discussed to draw conclusions regarding the status of women in the Rigvedic age. One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the positions and status of women in it.

Women were greatly honoured in the ancient India from vedic time. They enjoyed freedom, good status and learning opportunities. In the Rigveda the fact that girls received education is evident from the composition of hymns by the female seers. Some of them are Lopamudra, Ratri, Dakshina, Vak, Sraddha and many more. "A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care"(Mahanirvana Tantra). The girls were entitled to upanayana (to receive sacred thread) and do the privilege of studying Vedas as the boys. Women performed religious rites after completing their education under a Guru. They were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods. According to Shrauta and Grihya Sutras, women chanted mantras along with their husband while performing rituals.

Reference of old age marriage is found in the Rigveda. Rigveda has no mention of child marriage and sati(widow burning). The maiden seems to have been free to make her choice of husband as appears from the verse, "if the girl be born good and fair of features, she finds, herself a friend among the people." In the description of Ushas , the goddess of dawn, certain phases of a maiden are revealed. She is described as marching in the heaven, not with any hesitation but radiant in the pride of her beauty.

Women as wife is denoted by the words jaya, patni, supatni, vadhu, stri, yosa, nari, vena etc. in the rigveda. The idea of equality is expressed in the Rigveda: "the home has, verily, its foundation in the wife; " the wife and husband being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular." (Rigveda 5,61.8).

Rigveda (x.18.8) blesses a women at her second marriage, with progeny and prosperity in this life time : Go up, o women , to the world of living; you stand by this one who is deceased; come ! to him who grasps your hand, your second spouse (didhisu), you have now entered into the relation of wife to husband." The nature of widow remarriage is uncertain but is obvious that the widow was comfortably adjusted in the society and her condition was not pitiable.

In the Rigvedic period the compulsion of veil (purdah pratha) was not in vogue. Women used to take part in social and religious activities with men. The presence of ladies in public gatherings was a normal feature in the Vedic times. Whenever any thing charming or graceful is to be described Vedic poets usually think of the gaily attired lady, going out for a function, as the standard object of comparison. (RV IV.58.7, X.168.2 etc.) . It is also seen that Vishvavara, a lady always gets up early in morning and starts sacrifices all by herself. It is thus probable that some ladies used to take an effective part in the public discussions of the democratic assemblies of the age.

Indian women's position deteriorated during the medieval period, when child marriage and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some of the communities in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought purdah to Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, some of Devadasis were sexually exploited. Polygamy was practised among Hindu Kshatriya rulers for some political reasons.

Inspite of these conditions, women often became prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia sultana became the only women monarch to have been ruled Delhi. The gond queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before losing her life in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564 and many more

The Bhakti movement tried to restore women's status and questioned certain forms of oppression. Mirabai a female saint – poet, was one of the most important bhakti movement figures. Bhakti sects within Hinduism such as the mahanubhav, varkari and many others were principle movements within the hindu fold openly advocating social justice and equality between men and women. Immediately following the bhakti movements, Guru nanak, the first Guru of Sikhs, preached equality between men and women. He advocated that women be allowed to lead congregational hymn singing Kirtan or Bhajan.

2. Historical Practices

Traditions such as sati, jauhar, and devadasis among some communities have been banned and are largely defunct in modern India. However some instances of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The purdah is still practiced by Indian women in some communities. Child marriage remains common in rural areas, although it is illegal under current law.

- Sati : Sati is an old, almost completely defunct custom among some communities, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. In 1987, the Roop kanwar case in Rajasthan led to the commission of sati (prevention) act.
- Jauhar : Jauhar refers to the practice of voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated rajput rulers who are known to place a high premium on honour.
- Purdah : Purdah is the practice among some communities requiring women to cover themselves so as to conceal their skin and from males.
- Devdasis : Devadasi is often misunderstood as religious practice. It was practised in southern India, in which women were "married" to a deity or temple. The ritual was well established by the 10th century A.D. By 1988, the practice was outlawed in the century.

Indian women at the turn of the 21st century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain the high status and gender justice. The above analysis reveals that women had to undergo ups and downs regarding the socio-religious status from the beginning till the present time. The Rigvedic picture of women hood is the real heritage of India. It was an ideal state where women hood was given maximum honour. So we the women must have to take initiative to solve this problem of equality with men in this society.

3. References

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