

## CHAPTER VI

### **Involvement of Women**

*Culture is connected with the soul and not with the sex*

Rājaśekhara

The generally accepted view of the scholars is that the women were the first to attain the knowledge of agriculture<sup>1</sup>. It was only after the domestication of cattle and invention of plough, which came much later, that women were liberated from the toil of cultivation. In most of the provinces in India the popular practice still now is, while ploughing is done by man, it is the woman who follows behind, and drops the seed in the furrows. Ritchie Calder's depiction of women's role in the development of agriculture may help us to have a glimpse of the whole process. It is said 'When one comes to think of civilization, it is pretty obvious that Women not Man was the innovator who laid the foundations of our civilization. While the men went hunting, the woman was the guardian of the fire and pretty certainly, the first maker of pottery. It was she who went picking the wild berries and nuts and seeds and who went poking with sticks to unearth the edible roots. In the mother to daughter tradition, the knowledge of plants born of long observation led the women to experiment in cultivation. Biologically, woman was more observant than man because the recurring phases of the moon coincided with the rhythm of her fertile life and she could observe the period of gestation, not only in herself but in the animals and in the seasonal reappearance of the plants. So she had a sense of time and the measurement of time was one of the earliest manifestations of constructive and systematic thinking'<sup>2</sup>

The largest period of human history has been spent for gathering food by way of hunting animals and collecting fruits and vegetables from jungles. The division of labour among the hunter-gatherer and shifting cultivators was primarily based on age and sex and to some extent upon knowledge and leadership abilities<sup>3</sup>.

Bernal regards the invention of technique of agriculture in the same rank with the discovery and utilization of fire and power<sup>4</sup>. Development of agriculture and thereby consequent increase in food production necessitated the making of pot for storage of food grains. Actually, the use of pottery extended the range of cooking operations and improved the diet of man. Besides, the making of pots, spinning and weaving is again credited to women. Bernal observes, ‘forms of patterns produced in weaving and the number of threads involved in producing them are essentially of a geometrical nature, leading to a deeper understanding of the relation, between form and humber<sup>5</sup>’. This may be regarded as the fore runner of weaving technology.

So it is logical to think that women’s role in the process of development is very positive.

But to reconstruct a connected account of women’s involvement in the scientific activities and practices during the ancient period is a difficult task. The study of plants and plant life ultimately gave birth to the sciences like agriculture, medicine, arbori-horticulture etc. This branch of study emerged as *Vṛkṣāyurveda* came to be regarded as one of the sixty-four arts by *Vātsyāyana*<sup>6</sup>.

In the *Bhāryyādhikārikākhyam adhikarana* of the *Kāmasūtra* there is instruction extended to the house mistress for creating gardens. A typical garden attached to a dwelling house is described in the *Kāmasūtra*. The house that the *nāgaraka* builds for his residence shows his taste and love of beauty. Attached to the house there must be *Vṛkṣavātika* or a garden with wide grounds, if possible where flowering plants and fruit-trees can grow as well as kitchen vegetables<sup>7</sup>. The garden should be in charge of the mistress of the house. It is the duty of a good housewife says *Vātsyāyana*, to procure the seeds of common kitchen

vegetables and medicinal herbs and plant them each in its season. The exact *sūtra* is:

*mūlakālukapālañkī damanāmrātakairbāruka trapusabārtāku  
kuṣmāṇḍalābu sūraṇa sukanāśā svayamguptā tīla parṇikāgnimantha  
laśunapalāñdu-prabhṛtiñāṁ sarbbauṣadhiñāṁ ca bijagrahañāṁ kāle  
bāpaśca<sup>8</sup>||*

(*Vat.Kām.*, III.29)

**English trans:** (A house mistress) is to duly procure seeds of *mūlaka*, *trapusa* (cucumber), *pālañkī*, *damana* (not identified), *āmrā*, *erbāruka* (kankur), *bārttāku* (brinjal), *alābu* (bottlegourd) *kuṣmāṇḍa* (a kind of pumkin gourd), *sūraṇa* (esculent root akin to arum) *śukanāśa* (in Bengal it is called *Sonāgācch*), *svayamgupta* (sukasimbi), *tīla-parṇika* (sesame and betel leaf), *agnimantha*, *laśuna* (garlic), *palāñdu* (onion) and such others.

The direction is also given — *Paripūteṣu ca haritaśākaba  
prānikṣustambāñjiraka sarsapājamoda śatapuspa tamāla gulmāṁśā  
kārayet* ||<sup>9</sup> (*Vat.Kām.*, III.6)

It is mentioned in the *sūtra* that a house mistress should know as to how greens and vegetables are to be reared in specially prepared soil beds free of grits, sugarcane in clumps, stunted shrubs of mustard, *jiraka*, *ajamoda*, *śatapuspa* and similar herbs in patches and the *tamāla* trees in groves.

Among flowers to be planted in the flower garden, mention is made of *kubjaka*, *āmalaka*, *mallikā*, *jāti*, *kurantaka*, *navamallikā*, *tagaranandyāvarta*, *japa* etc., the shrubs include *bālaka* and *uśira* which should be arranged in rows in the garden, yielding fragrance. The garden should be provided with arbors and with raised platforms here and there for recreation and rest. All these are the responsibilities of the mistress of a house which in many ways resemble the duties and responsibilities of the *ārāmādhipati*, a government officer referred to by *Śukra*, who was entrusted with the charge of construction and maintenance of the public parks and gardens<sup>10</sup> (*Śuk.*, II.317-319).

Śukra says, ‘The superintendent of parks and forests is he who knows of the causes of growth and development of flowers and fruits, who knows how to plant and cure the trees by administering proper soil and water at the suitable time, and who knows of their medicinal properties’. It is likely that a house wife’s knowledge was much similar to that of the officer mentioned by Śukra.

Interesting corroborative evidence regarding the horticultural knowledge of women in ancient period is furnished by the *Deopāra* inscription of *Vijayasena*. In the relevant verse it is said — Through his grace the *Brahmanas* versed in the Vedas have become the possessors of so much wealth that their wives have to be trained by the wives of the town people (to recognize) pearls, pieces of emerald, silver coins, jewels and gold from their similarity with seeds of cotton, leaves of *sāka*, bottle gourd flowers, the developed seeds of pomegranates and the blooming flowers of the creepers of pumpkin — gourd respectively<sup>11</sup>.

From the verse quoted above, of the said inscription, one thing is evident that the women generally carried out the task of producing varieties of vegetables in the kitchen gardens attached to the their houses and thereby they developed practical knowledge in this branch of science. The common village *brāhmaṇa* wives were not accustomed to valuable jewels and pearls rather they were quite familiar with the shape and appearance of seeds of different fruits, vegetables and green leaves.<sup>12</sup> It appears that knowledge of women in horticulture was a common phenomenon.

Beside the ancient texts, the folk traditions in the form of aphorisms may be taken into account to make a proper estimate of the contribution of women towards the development of agricultural knowledge in the ancient period. The aphorisms of *Khanā* provide strong evidence in favour of women’s awareness and profound knowledge in agricultural science<sup>13</sup>.

The following maxim of *Khanā* contains the direction of aerating the soil suitable for different plants and crops:

*Solo cāṣe tulā, tār ardhek mūlā |*

*Tār ardhek dhān, binā cāse pān ||*

**English trans:** For the successful cultivation of cotton one has to plough the land 16 times, for radish 8 times, for paddy 4 times, and for betel nil. In this context, G.P. Majumdar, the well-known botanist comments: ‘The soundness of the directions becomes at once manifest when one takes into consideration that cotton plant has an elaborate root system, radish is a herb, paddy is a surface feeder, and betel is a climber that produces numerous adventitious aerial roots’<sup>14</sup>.

It is well established now that the food of plant is manufactured in the green leaves. Before the establishment of the scientific truth by modern research, *Khanā* in the remote antiquity had obviously the perception of this physiological phenomenon of plants. She also realized that the productive output of plant depends on the manufacture of food in the leaves. This is why she comments:

*Chāl bharā kumrā pātā !  
Lakshmi ī balen āmī tathā ||*

**English trans:** A gourd plant if bears numerous leaves (i.e. covers the roof with leaves) *Lakshmi ī*, the Goddess of wealth lives there.

or

*Kalā ruye nā kāṭa pāt !  
Tātei kāpar tātei bhāt ||*

**English trans:** After you have planted the banana plants, do not cut off their leaves as this will bring to you both rice and clothing.

*Khanā*’s wisdom about soil is evident in the following lines:

*sūn re bāpu chāśār betā  
mātir madhye bele jetā !  
Tāte jodi bunis pāṭal  
tātei tor ashār safal ||*

**English trans:** Oh my rustic boy, your desire will be fulfilled if you grow pointed gourd in the sandy alluvial soil.

After a thorough analysis of the *Kṛṣi-Parāśara* and the sayings of *Khanā*, G.P. Majumdar comes to the conclusion: ‘The striking resemblance between some of the aphorisms of *Khanā* relating to agriculture and some of the verses in the *Kṛṣi-Parāśara* on the same subject may warrant us in the supposition that the authentic treatise in Sanskrit might have a good deal to do with the mythical author of the aphorisms of *Khanā* who carried the lessons contained in the *Kṛṣi-Parāśara* to particular applications in minute details.<sup>15</sup>

The study of plants gave birth to another branch of science i.e. science of medicine which is known as *Āyurveda*. The literal meaning of *Āyurveda* is the ‘Science of life’<sup>16</sup>.

The *Kautilya Arthaśāstra* recommends the construction of *bhaisajyagṛha* at the north-west corner of the compound of a fort<sup>17</sup>. The same *Arthaśāstra* refers to an organization which would stand behind the fighting force being equipped with physicians, surgical instruments, machines, remedial oils, and bandages. The women would prepare food and beverage for them<sup>18</sup>. It is well known that food and beverage have great importance in the ayurvedic system of treatment and the women certainly proved themselves competent enough to bear the responsibility of preparing the diet of the patients.

Women often leave their mark of talent in original thinking. A story of *Aśokāvadāna* may be remembered in this context<sup>19</sup>. Once, Emperor *Aśoka* fell ill. *Tissarakkhā*, his queen diagnosed the disease and cured the Emperor. The diagnosis was conducted by finding similar symptoms in another person and then eliminating various possibilities by the application of variety of treatment until the proper antidote was identified. R. Thapar comments that this event throws light on the medical analysis of the time<sup>20</sup>. *Tissarakkhā*’s success in curing her husband by following a process of trial, error and elimination indicates her way of scientific thinking. It shows that she was well aware that experiment and observation are the basic requisites for any success in medical research. If the core of this episode may be appreciated without any patriarchal or religious bias, this lady in spite of being shaded with

criticism for some reasons in the Buddhist literature should be credited for her intellectual perception.

The women in spite of having inherent talent and merit could not give expression to their intellectual urge due to absence of privilege of education. Still, amidst this situation, a few of them displayed their intellectual promise, but mostly in literature. Among women interested in science, the name of *Rūsā* should be referred<sup>21</sup>. This lady wrote a medical treatise on the diseases of women which was translated into Arabic in the eight century A.D. *Rūsā*, certainly was a great authority on Gynaecology. It is reasonable to think that *Rūsā*'s work was of a high order; unless it was a good piece of work, it would not have attracted the attention of the Arabic world. The medical scholars of the countries contributed much to the mutual enrichment of knowledge and in this exchange the contribution of a lady authority is simply fascinating in the history of medical science in ancient India<sup>22</sup>.

Central to the idea of conservation of nature, has been the tradition of conceiving nature and earth as feminine entities. As the natural forces were typically seen as feminine a 'feminine principle' existed, a reflection of women's particular relationship to nature through the reproductive and productive work giving birth to children and feeding them and keeping healthy as they grow. This feminine principle ensured that the natural environment was not abused but was cared for and used carefully<sup>23</sup>. The Vedas dedicate many hymns to *Prthvī* which is regarded as one of the important component element of environment. 'Truth and moral order sustains her. She is the mistress of past and future, giver of the wide and wild-life world of human life'<sup>24</sup>. 'Earth is the upholder of moral order. The Earth is indeed a female entity whose loyalty and veracity was unquestionable'<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps, challenged by *Māra* on his claim of attainment of the supreme knowledge, the *Bodhisattva* called veracious Earth to act as witness of his innumerable acts of virtue and piety. The event of *Bodhisattva*'s calling the Earth to witness in view of the challenge of *Māra* and the pose of touching the Earth (*Bhūsparśa mudrā*) are the unequivocal recognition to the women ethos.

Countless myths relating to Earth, unswerving, steadfast pervade the Indian psyche in all regions, all levels of society giving rise not only to major cults but also making way for depiction of feminine spirit in art as well as in literature.

Consequently corresponding imageries of women as close associates of nature is widely available in sculpture and literature. Every day duties and responsibilities to be extended to the plants and animals in the hermitage of *Kanya* by *Sakuntalā* and other girls as portrayed by *Kālidāsa* may be viewed as true perception of the role of women in conservation of nature.

In this context the name of a Bishnoi woman should be mentioned. She is *Amritā Devī* after whose name a memorial has been built near Jodhpur. The Bishnoi religion was founded by Guru *Jambojī* in 1451 who believed that the environment had to be protected in our own interest.

It was in 1730, the prince of Jodhpur needed wood to fuel lime kilns for building a new palace and for that purpose sent troops for felling *khejadi* tees. But more than 300 hundred Bishnois laid down their lives while trying to save their trees from being hacked by the prince's soldiers. They were led by young *Amritā Devī*. She had hugged a tree asking the soldier to cut her before felling the tree. *Amritā Devī* became a martyr and the Bishnois one by one followed her and sacrificed their life for protection of trees, animals and Mother Nature. When the appalled prince finally reached the spot and stopped his men, 363 Bishnois already lay dead.<sup>27</sup> This is a unique instance of martyrdom of a woman for the noble cause of protection of trees which in wider perspective is to be viewed as selfless sacrifice for the cause of environmental protection. The event though occurred at a later time which is beyond the time limit of this discourse, yet it should be remembered that the women of this community are strong believer of traditional religion and ideology.

The illustrated manuscript of the *Hastividyaṁava* which was composed in 1734 A.D. under the order and inspiration of Ahom King

*Sīva Sinha* and his Queen *Ambikā Devī* by Sukumar Barkath carries special value from the point of view of women history<sup>28</sup>. For this great work *Ambikā Devī's* inspiration was equally countable with that of King *Sīva Sinha*. The Queen's vision as well as urge for documenting the indigenous knowledge on the characteristics and behaviour of elephants adds a new dimension to gender study. S. Barua finds in it an indication of better position of women in Assam than elsewhere in India<sup>29</sup>.

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