

Socio-Political Status of Women in Ancient India

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Introduction

Women play a crucial role in the dynamism of human society. According to Alektar, studying the history of the role and status of women is one of the best ways to understand the essence of the society, to recognize its excellences, and to realize its limitations. (Alektar 1933).

Despite the fact that many texts on the status of women in ancient India have been centered on women's visibility and historians have created some spaces for women within definite parameters while reconstructing the past, in terms of Indian culture, studies on women have had a tendency to concentrate on the broad terminology of women's status, using a restricted array of questions. These questions, as well as their parameters, aim to examine women's roles and positions in the country like ours with its varied socio-cultural, economic, and political spheres. (Sharma 2014).

The effect of Indian societal structure on gender has varied widely over time and space due to the differences in socio-cultural traditions and practices (Chakravarti & Roy 1988). This paper attempts to evaluate women's roles and positions in ancient Indian society after studying readings on ancient Indian manuscripts and on texts such as the Védas, the Great Epics, Rámáyana, and Mahbharata; readings on Buddhist texts such as the Smritis, the Purnas, and the Dharmastras. The paper critiques the Nationalist reconstruction of history and puts to question such reconstruction.

The status of women has been divided into two distinct periods: The Early Vedic or Rig Vedic era (1500 BC–1000 BC), and the Epic or Later Vedic period (1000 BC–600 BC).

History is interested in the women question. As a student of history we have seen much emphasis on the status of women in ancient Indian societies. It is said that in the primitive age women's position was respectively high but later when agricultural society was formed their position declined, also we must note that texts that I have considered do not give much evidence about this at any point. In the context of India, we find the same saying. In this paper we are specially

discussing the position of women in the Early Vedic or Rig Vedic era (1500 BC–1000 BC), and the Epic or Later Vedic period (1000 BC–600 BC).

There are limitations of the sources for revisiting women's history. We have to depend on some ancient Indian texts such as Vedas, Upanishad's, Smritis, Buddhist literature etc. We can also know the position of women of a particular period through the study of existing society. The position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is thought to be much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been. This paper engages in a brief discussion regarding women's position in Indian societies in early Vedic period.

Early Vedic or Rig Vedic era (1500 BC–1000 BC)

Max Muller, a famous Indologist said that there were two kinds of women at the Rig Veda times - one *Sadyovadhūmthe* one who married and led family life and the other *Brahmavadini*, well-educated and commanding respect in *Pandhitha Sabhas* and congregation.¹ Some women received similar education as men and often took part in philosophical debates. Gargi's debate with Yajnavalka on philosophical issues is much discussed. From the 'Malatimadhava' of Bhavabhuti, written in the 8th century A.D., we learn that the nun Kamandaki was educated along with Bhurivasu and Devarata at a famous centre of education. Names of 23 brahmavadins are found in Rig Veda. They are Gargi, Romasa, Ghosha, Viswavara, Atreyi, Lopamudra, Vasuhvepati, Indrani, Apala, Seaddha, Vaivasvati, Yami, Powlami, Surya - Swasthi, Sikhandini, Oorvasti, Sachi, Devayani, Indradoota, Sarparagni, Vak and Godha. 26 Slokas of Rig Veda were composed by these women. *Gargi* is the most famous among them.

Ancient Indian society followed a patriarchal model of society. But a girl probably had the right to protection in her father's family. After marriage all the money and gifts received by a woman in the ritual belonged to her. What was given to the bride was called *Streedhana*.

Manu has prescribed six kinds of *Streedhana* to the minimum extent. According to Manusmriti, after the death of an issueless woman her relatives are entitled to get her *Stridhana*. If the marriage has been performed in the form of Brahma, Daiva, Gandharba or Prajapatya, the husband of the deceased issueless woman is entitled to get the *Stridhan*. But in case of Asura, Rakhyasa and Paisacha form of marriage, the *Stridhana* of issueless deceased woman will be taken by her father or mother.

A girl had rights to choose their life partner. Though the marriage was considered as *Samskara*, it was not compulsory for everyone. She could remain unmarried for a long time. According to Rig-Veda "The women gently in nature and graceful in form, select from among many their own loved once as their husbands." The happy and beautiful bride chooses (vanute) by herself (svayam) her own husband" – (bhadrā vadhūr bhavati yat supesāḥ svayaṃ sā mitraṃ vanute jane cit – Rig Veda 10. 27.12).

Monogamy was generally observed but rich and royal families could practice polygamy. R.C. Majumdar opines that women are the pivot in the family. The word *Dampati* indicates that the wife and husband constituted one unit. She could exhibit her talent in public places but had to work within a framework of rules. A woman was not confined behind purdah. Women used to move freely in the society, often even in the company of their lovers as seen in old plays. Devadasi system was also found in that period. The episode of "Paruchapa" in Rig Veda supports that view. There is no mention regarding widow marriages anywhere. The sati system was also absent in that period.

Women enjoyed an equal status in many ways to the men in the eye of religion. (Roy 1999) They participating in many fields of activity and some were also worshipped as *devis*. Some of the deities were Aditi, *Pridhvi*, *Bharati*, *Indrani*, Usas etc.

Later Vedic period (1000 BC–600 BC).

Marriage became compulsory for every women in that period. Manusmriti is variously dated to be from the 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE says that:

One shall give his daughter in the proper form, even though she may not have attained (the age), to a bridegroom who is of exceptionally distinguished appearance, and her equal.—(88)

The age was not mentioned. But Manu describes 8 forms of marriage (III.20-34).

- (1) Brahma form of marriage:
- (2) Daiva form of Marriage:
- (3) Arsha form of Marriage:
- (4) Prajapatya form Marriage:

- (5) Asura form of Marriage:
- (6) Gandharva form of marriage:
- (7) Rakshasa form of marriage:
- (8) 'Paishacha' form of marriage

For a girl who remained unmarried life became unbearable.

Recognised marriage procedure was similar to the Rig Vedic period. Several vows were made at the time of marriage.

Importance of a girl child was on the decline during the later Vedic period. In the 11th *sloka* of *Atharva Veda* there is a prayer that in the womb of his wife should not be a girl. If all born child are girls, then it was considered a greater sin. A son is necessary for relieving parents from *Punnama naraka*, it was believed. To beget a son, a man was allowed to marry any number of times. That is how polygamy was justified.

The hymn below has been interpreted by some as O.P. Gupta as a permission for widow to remarry. *Adharva Veda blesses the widow to have a happy life with present husband as expressed by:*

This is thy husband: joyfully receive him and let him mount into the world of Svarga.

The speed of rivers craving heaven and cane, thou, Agni, art the waters' gall.

Cool, Agni, and again refresh the spot which thou hast scorched and burnt.

Here let the water-lily grow, and tender grass and leafy plant.

Here is one light for thee, another yonder: enter the third and be therewith united.

Uniting with a body be thou lovely, dear to the Gods in their sublimest mansion..
AV (XVIII.3.4)

But there is no historical evidence of widow remarriage.

But during the later Vedic period women were forced to live within the four corners of the wall and her main purpose of life became begetting sons and her life was controlled by men. Women were restricted in their movement. They were not allowed to attend any assemblies. This sort of restriction was found

mentioned for the first time in *Aitareya Brahmana* and *Mytrayani Samhita*. *Brahmanas* reveal that many of the religious ceremonies formerly left to the wife were now performed by the priests. Women were considered as *Asuchi* during certain days of the month and during such days she was not eligible to perform religious acts. Polygamy became common in that period. In some *Brahmanas* it is described that a king had four kinds of wives. First wife was *Patta Mahishi* (*dharmaoatni*). *Parivartaki* was wife without children. *Vivata* was the most loved wife of the king. *Pingali* was the daughter of head of the *dashav*. These positions indicate further decline of a women's status.

Findings

From the above discussion we can't exactly say what women's status was in Vedic Period because the sources which we have are not enough to reconstruct their whole history. We find that men controlled most historical records so women were often refused and where they were included it was frequently a narrow section. But there is a romantic reconstruction of history that looks at the status of women as indeed very high in Vedic period and a little declined in later Vedic period. The traditional writing on the position of women is based entirely on Bhraminical sources. But the interpretations are under doubt. They carry the problem of an inherent bias towards the *Brahmanas*, reflecting the precepts of the *Brahmanas* rather than the actual practice of people and a confining of themselves to the upper castes or elitist positions.

The analysis of the position of women in ancient India has also been colored by the fact that almost all the works have been written by scholars who would fall within the nationalist school of history. (Chakravarti, 1999) The scholars of this school tried to show that the position of women had been high in the ancient past, that the British were responsible for the contemporary evils, such as sati, purdah, female infanticide etc. reflecting that the rigid model of patriarchy of Hinduism was not so much responsible for the low position of women and the Hindu sense of inferiority was only in relation to the British. As a reaction to colonialism they glorified our past and said that the position of women was very high in Vedic period. There is an effort at the establishment of the fact that after the coming of the Muslims the condition of the women became degenerated and the circumstances resulted in the development of some social evils as already mentioned. Shakuntala Rao Shastri writes in his book *Women in the Sacred Laws*,

The tenth and the eleventh centuries saw the advent, and later, the firm establishment of Muhammadans in this country. When Hindu culture came into clash with a culture far different from its own, the leaders of society began to frame rules and laws to safeguard their interest - specially the position of women. Rigorous restrictions were placed on them... We find at this stage child marriage firmly enforced. The death of a widow was preferred to her falling into evil hands. Hence self-immolation of a widow was enjoyed by the law codes giving the unfortunate victim the hope of heavenly bliss. Such and several other customs were introduced which curbed the freedom of women to a very large extent. This was done perhaps to save her from the foreigners and to preserve the purity of the race. (Shastri 1953)

Similarly, according to R.C. Dutt, "Absolute seclusion and restraint (of Women) were not Hindu customs. They were unknown in India till Muhammedan times... No ancient nation held their women in higher honour than the Hindus." (Chakravarti 1999)

Alteker surveys the condition of women in ancient Greece, Rome and Palestine and then restated that the position of women was much better in Vedic period than in later Vedic period or in other eras. The nationalist historians selectively focus on certain aspects of the ancient text to view the lost glory of Indian womanhood. Historians give much of importance on *Gargi-Yajnavalkya* debate. This has become the most popular example of women learning.

As a nationalist viewer Alteker's study on *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* is a popular work. But his work is based on Brahmanical sources whose evidences should be appropriately questioned. Although his presentation explores some new possibilities of study in the area his approach is problematic. Alteker's sources were very limited and his approach is orthodox and traditional. The study surveys the position of widow, women in public life, property rights and general position of society (within a confined area). The types of opinion he provides is steeped in the nationalistic understanding of the women's question. Further, his overwhelming concern is with women in the context of the family and one almost gets the feeling that the status of women needs to be raised in order to ensure the healthy development of the future race of India. In this Alektar was reflecting the opinion

of nationalist writers from the second half of the nineteenth century who placed tremendous importance on the regeneration of the hindus.

A study of Alteker's work will indicate the limitations inherent in his approach. His theoretical framework is spelt out in the very first page of his work. According to him,

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellence and realise its limitation is to study the history of the position and status of women in it... The marriage laws and customs enable us to realize whether men regarded women merely as market commodities or war prizes or whether they realized that the wife is after all her husband's valued partner in life . The rules about sex and morality enable us to know the ethical tone of the society and ascertain how far men were prepared to be themselves judged by the standard they set for women. ...the best way to begin our enquiry is to study the condition of women during their childhood and find out the general arrangement made about their traning and education. (Alketar 1)

Alteker's own genuine commitment to reforming women's status led him to make quaint statements sometimes which he intended as positive and progressive. Thus he suggests that although

The daughter on the other hand had no fighting value whatever. It is no doubt true that women have potential military value, by giving birth to sons they contribute indirectly to the fighting strength and efficiency of their community." (Alketer,3)

In Altaker's programme of reformation enough education was to be extended to women but in doing so one had to ensure that no undue strain was placed upon them He express his fears thus

As things stand to-day, girls have no passed the same examinations as boys and to learn house-keeping at home as well, all the while having less physical strength than their brothers. This certainly puts too much strain upon them and injurious to future well being of the race. (Alketer 33)

Alteker did not accept the work *A History of British India* (1817) by James Mill which is a "critical history," that critiques Hindu customs and a "backward" culture which notable for superstition, ignorance, and the mistreatment of women. Mill found much of the Hindu Civilization to be a barbaric. So Alteker was obliged to provide explanations for existing biases against women. He attempts to explain the Hindu preference for a son over a daughter by advancing a psychological argument as in the passage below.

If a cruel fate inflicted widowhood upon the daughter, the calamity would break the parent's heart. Remarriage being no longer possible, parents had to see the heart-rending pain of seeing their daughter wasting herself in interminable widowhood... parents had often to pass through the terrible ordeal of seeing their daughters burning themselves alive on the funeral pyre of husbands. To become a daughter's parent thus became a source of endless worry and misery... As a natural consequence ... passages about the undesirability of the birth of daughter became more numerous.

Alteker is particularly weak in his attempts at relating the status of women at a given point of time with social organization as a whole. Thus early Vedic society which did not as yet have noticeable concentration of power, or a well developed institution of kingship, is the context for Alteker's unnecessary explanation for the absence of queens. Since Alteker is convinced about the high status of women in the Vedic period, he feels he has to account for why we do not hear of women as queens. Thus he is constrained to suggest that

Aryans were gradually establishing their rule in a foreign country surrounded on all sides by an indigenous hostile population that considerably outnumbered them. Under such circumstances queens ruling in their own rights or as regents were naturally unknown. (Alteker 1859,339)

Alteker also explains why women did not own property. According to him, "Landed property could be owned by one who had the power to defend it against actual or potential rivals and enemies. Women were obviously unable to do this and so could hold no property".

Likewise others Alteker was reflecting a deeply internalized belief in biological determinism and therefore in the physical inferiority of women.

Alteker discussed about the causes for the fall of the status of the Aryan women. He said that The Aryan conquest of the indigenous population and its loose incorporation as members of a separate Varna had given rise to a huge population of semi - servile status. In such a situation Aryan women ceased to be producing members of society and thus lost the esteem of society.

Alteker has thus focused only on the Aryan women. He regards Sudra women as a threat and in his raciest view Sudra women counted for nothing. The most important consequence of Alteker's imitated repertoire of biological and psychological explanations was that the logic of the distorted social relations between men and women is completely obscured. The kind of explanation offered by Alteker might appear to be astoundingly trivial to us today but it is important to remember that, by and large, nationalist historians were content to restrict historical explanations to cultural factors while writing about ancient India. This was in contrast to their focus on economic and social factors while discussing British rule in India". (Chakravarti 1999)

Conclusion

The study regarding the condition of women in Vedic period is a very controversial issue. We can't depend only on the nationalist historians' work because history writing should be impartial. Just as Alteker displaced Mill in his work, it is time we realized that despite Alteker's substantial contribution, we must try to think afresh on the subject. There is an urgent need to rewrite the history of women, a history that does justice to women.

Note 1 The Sanskrit text brahmavadini is the female of brahmavadi. According to Monier-Williams's Sanskrit-English Dictionary, "brahmavādīn" means 'discoursing on sacred texts, a defender or expounder of the Veda, one who asserts that all things are to be identified with Brahman'. It doesn't mean "one who speaks like God".

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