



VIDATHA TO CABINET

THE POLITICAL JOURNEY OF FEMALE FROM THE RIG-VEDIC TO LATER VEDIC PERIOD

*Anjali Verma**

*Mamta Devi***

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Himachal Pradesh University, Summer Hill, Shimla-171005. Himachal Pradesh, India.

**M Phil student in the Department of History, Himachal Pradesh University, Summer Hill, Shimla-171005. Himachal Pradesh, India.

Abstract: The difference in the position of female during the Rig-Vedic and Later Vedic age remained a parameter to check the position of female as progressive or under recession for a very long time. The existence of political institutions like *Sabha* and *Vidhatha* and presence of female as an active participant in these assemblies remained a point of attraction as during the later times, these institutions vanished and could not be revived back. The present study tries to explore the political reasons behind this extinction vis-à-vis change in political position of female. It reaches to the conclusion that due to change in social and political structure of the period, the change in position of female also took place but it was never a kind of sharp decline in her position. Rather her visibility in more stratified form came out in later Vedic age.

Index Terms - Vidatha, Rigvedic, Later-Vedic, Sabha, Samiti

I. INTRODUCTION

Re-looking at the period of *vedic* and *later vedic age* throw a significant light on the position of woman. The study of the period undertaken still holds relevance as Harappan female's position, though considered high, but most of the aspects of her life are still shrouded under mystery due to lack of decipherment of script. Thus, the study of *vedic* and *later vedic* period provides a fertile ground to understand not only the position of women in ancient times but sets a parameter which is relevant even till today. The *vedic* civilization is named after the vedas especially Rigveda which is the earliest specimen of the Indo-European language and the chief source of information on the history of this period.

II. Political and Social Structure during Rig-vedic period

By the sixth century BC, the *Aryans* occupied the whole of North India, which was referred to as *Aryavarta*. This period between 1500BC-600BC is divided into the *Early Vedic period or Rigvedic period* (1500BC-1000BC) and the *later vedic period* (1000BC- 600BC). Many historians have given various theories regarding the original place of the Aryans, however, largely accepted view is the central Asian theory given by the Max Muller. Our knowledge of the Indo-Aryans is based on the evidence of the vedic literature of which the chief constituents are the four collection known as the *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* (Majumdar,1951).

The basis of the political and social organisation of the *Rigvedic* people was the patriarchal family. The successive higher units were styled *grama*, *vis* and *jana*. The precise relationship between the *grama*, *vis* and *jana* is nowhere distinctively stated. Still the *grama* was normally a smaller unit than either *vis* or *jana* appears probable from the fact that the *gramani*, the leader of the *grama* (head of village) who is usually a *vaisya* is clearly inferior to the king himself. The prevailing form of government among the *Rigvedic* tribes was monarchical (Majumdar, 1970). Family was the basic unit of the vedic society. Vedic tribal state was run by three major assemblies named as *Sabha*, *Samiti* and *Vidatha*.

III. Political Participation of Women during Rig-Vedic Period

Women attended popular assemblies like *sabha* and *vidatha* in Vedic period. The *Rigveda* informs us that *Yosa* (unmarried girl) went to the *vidatha*. She took part in the deliberations of the *vidatha* (Sharma, 1968) Women had right to speak in these assemblies. Women took part in the deliberations of the *vidatha*. R.S. Sharma added that a desire is expressed in the marriage ceremony that the bride may not only figure as a housewife but she may speak to the *vidatha* (Sharma, 1968).

But in the *later vedic* period position of women changed. They lost the right to the *Upanayana* ceremony (initiation of education) and sacraments, excluding marriage, were performed without the recitation of the vedic mantras. Despite that some women were highly learned in *later vedic* period, like Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. Women used to hold philosophic discussions with the male section (Hume, 2004).

IV. Nature of Assemblies during Rig-Vedic Period

The *Rigvedic* age institutions were either tribal or at the nascent stage of development, whereas their full growth and expansion is traced during *later vedic* period. The position of female was also changing accordingly. This change allowed historians to interpret with various dimensions. Nationalist historians more or less set *Rigvedic* age as golden period in the history of female by declaring *later vedic* period as declining phase. The present study not only tries to explore and re-analyse this fact, but also work on social and political reflections and tries to explore female space in it. Meaning thereby, that women's position in past needs a fresh look. In fact the position of women has been changing from time to time. Many scholar studied the position and status of women as depicted in the literary sources. Their interpretation and re-interpretation has successfully placed female position with several new explored dimensions.

V. Review of Existing Literature

The very exhaustive work authored by A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (1938)* has proved a base book for all the researchers. It provides a comprehensive view on the position of women in different phases of life, from childhood to marriage, to widowhood, her property rights, her religious position, her professional capabilities and her social status as a women from ancient to modern times. A.B. Keith also talks about ancient Indian political assemblies and female participation level in his book, *Vedic Index (1938)*. P. H. Prabhu's work, *Hindu Social Organization (1940)* also discussed the position of women in Hindu marriage institution and society. P.V. Kane's book, *History of Dharmasastras (1941)* has proved a landmark to study position of women from the available sources of post-Vedic to Smritis. Ramashankar Tripathi also tried to discuss in his book, *Ancient India History (1942)* the position of women in vedic and later vedic period. U.N. Ghoshal in his book, *A History of Hindu*

Public Life (1945) discussed the king's function, limitations of *Rigvedic* kingship, the popular assemblies and the king administration.

In 1946 came R.C. Majumdar's work, *An Advanced History of India*, that also explored the ancient assemblies. Majumdar observed that the business of the tribe was carried out in a people's assembly styled as *samiti* at which prince and people were alike present. We have also references to another term *sabha*, which some regard as a council of Elders. R.C. Majumdar in his book, *The Vedic Age (1951)* discussed the general view of vedic literature and also talked about the vedic assemblies *sabha* and *samiti*. In his next book, *Ancient India*, R.C. Majumdar discussed on vedic and later vedic family life, political organization, the king, growth of powerful states and women position.

Further R.S. Sharma has contributed a chapter on Vedic assemblies' *sabha*, *samiti* and *vidatha* in his book, *Political Ideas and Institutions and Ancient India (1959)*. It provided a comprehensive view on the position of women in ancient political assemblies. He also discussed in detail the functions and inter-relations of *sabha*, *samiti* and *vidatha*. Vidya Dhar Mahajan in his book, *Ancient India (1960)* tried to throw light on social and political conditions of *vedic* and *later vedic* period. Radhakumod Mukharji's work on, *Hindu Civilization (1962)* throws significant light on the participation of women in polity and social life of vedic period. K.P.Jayaswal has tried to analyse the ancient time assemblies in his book, *Hindu Polity (1967)*. K.A.Nilakanta Sastri and G. Srinivasachari in, *Advanced History of India (1970)* discussed the social and political changes during the *vedic* and *later vedic* period. N.C. Bandyopadhyaya also tried to reflect on ancient Indian institutions in his book, *Hindu Polity and Political Theories (1980)* where he has discussed in detail the character and constitutional position of those great public assemblies in which the people met and expressed their opinion freely.

Romila Thapar in her book, *From lineage to State (1984)* also discussed the vedic assemblies *sabha*, *samiti* and *vidatha* and the origin of state. Narendra Nath Law in his book, *Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity (1986)* also throws some reflections on the composition and functions of the *sabha* and *samiti* in vedic times. Upinder Singh tried to reflect on women position in her book, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India (2009)* by throwing some light on the birth and marriage of girl child and her participation in social and political life of *vedic* and *later vedic* period. She stresses the fact that male dominance and subordination of women is a feature of all known historical societies. The issue is one of the degree of dominance and subordination. Kumkum Roy has also tried to analyse the position of women during *vedic* and *later vedic* period in her book, *Looking with in Looking without (2015)*.

VI. Objective of the Research

Objective of present research involve the change in position and level of participations of female vis-à-vis *vedic* and *later vedic* period with the changing political scenario.

VII. Political and Social Structure during Later vedic period

The political life in the *Rigvedic* period was different from the *later Vedic period*. The basis of the political and social organization of the *Rigvedic* people was the patriarchal family structure. The family served as the foundation of the community in Vedic time. During *Rigvedic* time there was no big kingdom and people lived in tribes or small kingdoms. King was powerful, but he was

not despotic, because *vidatha*, *sabha* and *samiti* controlled his powers. These were the important assemblies in Rigvedic times. Women were integral part of these assemblies (*sabha* and *vidatha*). R.S. Sharma opines that the women attended the Vedic assemblies, *sabha* and *vidatha*, and they not only used to attend the *vidatha* but also ensured their participation in its deliberations (Sharma,1968). But K.C. Shrivastava holds contrary opinion that that women only attended the Vedic assemblies but she had no political rights (Shrivastava,2015). His opinion is closer to Greek women participation in assemblies where she had no voting rights because she was not considered as citizen.

Some historians try to present Vedic age as golden age in the history of development of position of women. R. S. Sharma opines that women attended the Vedic assembly *vidatha*, and also used to participate in its deliberation (Sharma,1968). R.K. Mukharji refers to the names of other women of Rigvedic period who composed the hymns. This list includes *Apala*, *Visvavara*, *Lopamudra*, *Shikta*, *Pulom-putri Shachi*, *Shurya* and *Gorabati*. *Ghosha* also composed the hymns of Rigveda (Mukharji,1962). This list proves that there were educated women and women education was not neglected during Vedic period. But a close look at the reference list of these females tend to indicate that the great part of the hymn writer women of the Vedic age is of elite women. One can easily sense the neglect of the less privileged members of the fair sex. The proportion of hymns attributed to women in the Rigveda is miniscule (just 12-15 out of over 1000) as is the number of women sages (*rishi*). This suggests that women had limited access to shared learning. There are no women priests and sages in the Rigveda. So conclusion can be drawn that during the Rigvedic period women attended the assemblies and composed the hymns of Rigveda, but this fact cannot draw a general conclusion for overall condition of all the women.

Later Vedic period people enjoyed the settled life. In this period, besides development of political and social life, composition of these later vedic-samhitas namely the Samveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda, as well as Brahmanas and the Upanishads took place. R.C. Majumdar holds the view that in the later Vedic period, with the growth of large kingdoms, further extension of the political and cultural sway of the Aryans towards the east and the south took place (Majumdar,1967). During the most part of the later Vedic period the Kurus and their neighbours, the Panchals were the greatest of Indian people and afforded models of good form of Government (Nilakantasastry and Srinivasachari,1970). Other states in the later Vedic period were Kosala, Kasi, Videha, Magadha, and Anga. It was mostly monarchy existing where the king was head of state (Mahajan,1960).

VIII. Political Participation of Women during Later Vedic Period

Successful monarchs set up claims to the rank of universal king (*raja*, *visvajanina*), lord of all the earth (*sarvabhum*) or sole ruler (*ekarat*) of the land down to the seas and celebrated sacrifice befitting their status like the *rajasuya* (royal consecration), the *vajapaya* (drink of strength) and *asvamedha* (horse sacrifice)(Majumdar,1967). V.D. Mahajan holds that the ideal set before the kings was, to win all victories, find all worlds, attain superiority, pre-eminence and supremacy over all kings (Mahajan,1960). The king increased their royal power. With the establishment of the large kingdoms, the need for an elaborate and efficient administrative system was naturally felt. Therefore we come across a number of new officers who were in the cabinet of the king. These officials were called *ratnins* and included *purohita*, *rajanya* (noble), *mahisi* (chief queen), *vavata* (favorite queen), *parivrikta* (descended wife), *sute* (charioteer), *senani* (army commander), *gramini* (village headman), *kshatri* (chamberlain), *samagrabitri* (treasurer), *akshavapa* (superintendent of dicing) and *bhagdugha* (collector of taxes) (Tripathi,1942).

E. J. Rapson (Rapson,1968) R.S. Sharma, (Sharma,1968) Upinder Singh , (Singh,2009) also elaborate the names and the functions of these *ratnins*. Surprisingly, these include even females (chief queen, favourite wife and descended wife) who were part of royal families now. It seems that in this case one fourth of those whose voice and support counted in the consecration of the king consisted of women. U.N. Ghoshal holds the opinion that besides the *mahisi* (chief queen,) *vavata* and *parivrkta* in the list of *ratnins* also included *palagali*, the fourth wife (Ghoshal,1945).

The inclusion of females in royal cabinet indicates on the one hand, their importance in the cabinet and their visibility at higher platform of decision making. On the other hand, she is not assigned with specific responsibility like *purohit* or *senapati* are assigned. Thirdly, perhaps it was a step towards the exclusion of female from political assemblies as the royal clans replaced common clans as superior representatives in the king's cabinet. Still the *vidatha* tradition of woman's share in public affairs can be traced in the place given to her in the list of *ratnins*.

Tripathi opines that the popular assemblies like the *sabha* and *samiti* were not quite defunct yet, rather rarely heard of during this period. The growth in the size of the kingdom must have made then frequent meetings difficult and in consequence their control or check over the ruler must have progressively decreased (Tripathi,1942). Also perhaps people from *sabha* and *samiti* were given cabinet positions, which weakened these assemblies. If we consider Tripathi's opinion, then also it can be concluded that women who used to participate in *sabha* and *vidhatha*, later on during later Vedic period became part of the cabinet. Obviously, they might be either influential or elite women.

IX. Observations from Literary Sources

The complexity in political institutions is a proven fact of later Vedic age. Also the expansion of various cabinet posts not only redefine but try to put restrictions on the political position of female in these institutions. The disappearance of *vidatha* and *sabha*, disabled common female to attend assemblies where they could put forth their issues. If considered in the form of king's cabinet the role of females at different positions is not defined, but can be assumed to be there. Like *mahisi*, who was the chief queen used to appear in the court and sit next to the king. Quite possible that she was given political and administrative training so that she may understand the court affairs. Also in case of king's death she could rule-after the kingdom. Secondly, *vavata* and *parivrikti* are the posts created for favourite wife and discarded wife respectively. Quite possible this favourite wife used to manage palace, kitchen and maiden affairs. While discarded wife was always a threat to a life of king and safety of kingdom. Thus her name also appears in the list of *ratnins*. The *Parivrikti* was perhaps the wife who could not maintain correlation with the king, but because she was a secret holder of king and thus was given an important place in the cabinet. It also shows that kings were polygamous and used to hold more than one female as their life-partner. Perhaps such practices adopted by king, encouraged society to go bigamous or polygamous.

X. Conclusion

From the above discussion, overall picture comes out that vedic political institutions were tribal in nature, providing equal space and participation to female. Contrarily, later vedic political institutions were expanding, were more complex in nature and had tendency to demolish the institutions of public interests like *sabha* and *vidatha*. So on the one hand, female was getting defined

place in the cabinet but on the other hand, her open participation in the assemblies, especially of common female got vanished due to political stratification in the institution of ruling.

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