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WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In every era the status and position of women is one of the most fundamental matter to study. Without any hesitation the Vedic women in India enjoyed high position in society and their situation was quite satisfactory. In high spiritual and intellectual ground their participation was very spontaneous. Even that period was also free from social superstitious rituals like sati system, early marriage etc. The aim of this paper is to analyze the status and position of women in Vedic period in India. In account of wide narrative it represents and pursues to analyze women's situation in various areas like social, religious, educational, legal etc.

Index Terms

Women Status, Vedas, Religious, Rights.

Introduction

“Divine souls take birth in such houses where the women are respected, where they are not respected, all works become useless there” (Manusmriti 3/56).

Men and Women are two fundamental element of our human community, where both of them depend upon each other. Around the world in generally and especially in the context of Indian society socio-political philosophers and others have try to evaluate the issues faced by women over the years. We know that men and women are two wings of a bird, and it is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. Same as, a society never improved without women.

Women's endeavor plays the key role to en-strength the dynamism of human civilization by dint of their superiority and confinements to make a rapid progress of it in all spheres on this globe since ages. Although the tale of women's accomplishment remained subdued in history, yet the ancient Indian texts symbolizes women's visibility in this regard where women's status had varied with space and time (Chakravarti & Roy, 1988).

Without study the status and role of women in society, any kind of improvement of civilization is incomplete. Women represent the keystone in the arch of Indian culture. Indian culture constructs on the spirit that women's cause in men. In connection with social role structure, privileges, right and duties refers the status and position of women in society. It also refers to her right and responsibilities in family and social life. The position and reputation of women is normally evaluated in the account of honor and appreciation accorded to her with that of man.

The Vedic society was a liberal and humanistic society. In this period the Aryans distinctly favor male child to female child. However, females were as liberal as their male fellow. In Vedic era the women in India consumed high position in society and their

condition was also very good. Education was parallel distributed for both boys and girls. The Vedas and fine arts studied by the girls. In society women can join in high intellectual and spiritual ground. Women were considered to be supreme in domestic life and they enjoyed freedom in their everyday life. Women were considered as having a parallel major share in the communal and religious ground because a man without woman was regarded as an insufficient person.

Role and Position of Women in Vedic Era

Vedic period left the lifestyle of hunting and gathering food for livelihood and the society and lifestyle of people change a lot in this time. Women get a high status of respect and honor because of her contribution in society and everyday life. Her participation was mandatory in production procedure. According to this husband and wife are named as "Dampati". "Ardhanreshwar" was the hugely worshipped. According to Hinduism it denotes that the male and female represent the two angle of one person. From scriptures we come to know that Lord Shiva consists of a body of two parts. Which of them one is of male and other is of female, and thus he named "Ardhanreshwar". Women were evaluated more powerful than men and represented as Goddess of "Shakti".

In Vedic period women often connected with folk assembly and engaged themselves in its deliberations. In later samhitas period, women stay on a high satisfactory position. Women were evaluated as an equivalent partner in connection with man in the rules, regulations and responsibilities at home. In religious duties and ceremonies presence of women is surely necessary in this period and they never be judged as an obstacle in the way of religion. Women participation in productive action like cultivation, production of clothes, war materials were spontaneous and it took place freedom for them. These are indicates higher status of women in the Vedic era.

Traditional Indian culture inaugurated and enriched with the Vedas. The Vedic era is spread over from 300 B.C. to 600 B.C. Some common observations discussed in this paper concerning with the status and position of women throughout this vast era.

Education

The status and position of women were much better in Vedic era than any other contemporary period. Without any boundaries and restrictions women can get proper education without getting married. Many women who belongs from well to do families had the privilege to achieve education. They can take part in spiritual and intellectual ground in this period. After getting upanayana women took a vital position in education system as well as man. They dedicated their time to specialize in Vedic theology and philosophy, until their marriage. After getting married both husband and wife took equivalent part in the sacrificial rituals.

In Vedic period we noticed many women scholars and who were very well-versed in holy texts and Vedas. Their knowledge was not limited in composing hymns and chants, but also they learnt various types of music and dancing. Women who are belonging from lower community learnt spinning, weaving and needle work. In Vedic period educated women's are broadly divided into two groups, namely- Brahmadinis and Sadyodvahas. Those who are Brahmadinis were the lifelong pupil of philosophy and theology. On the other side, Sadyodvahas continue their studies on the age of 15-16 years until they got married. Many of them who were highly scholar became teachers or upadhyayinis. There were several women poets and philosophers in this era. Many proficient and wise women like Apala, Ghosha, Visvavara who used to compose hymns and chants born in this period. It is believed that, one of them was Lopamudra, who was a renowned female preacher of Vedic era, who preached one hundred and seventy nine hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda along with Rishi Aasthya. Various types of arts like dancing, music, garland making, painting, sewing etc. were teach by special teachers in higher families of that community. So it cannot be denied that women of that period were given same opportunities in education along with the men candidates. So they can prove their potentiality and ability in the area of education along with any social procedure.

Social Status

Women were fellows of their husbands in every sphere of life. In every aspects of their life they tied each other firmly. In their personal life women used to enjoy freedom. They also took part in social meeting along with men. Their participation in social and political fields was very active. In public assemblies they took part in debates. In public meeting they generally occupied a notable place. But they did not entered into the “Sabhas” because they were not so safe in these places. Besides meeting and taking major political decisions these places also used for gambling, drinking and such others offensive intentions. But in later Vedic period, women’s participation in public assembly and other political grounds gradually lesser than previous period.

Religious Status

In Vedic culture women were took part in various religious rituals and tribal ceremonies. With their spouse women regularly participated in various social religious rituals. In spiritual ground they enjoyed full right. Various religious ceremonies and sacrifices were jointly performed by both husband and wife. Women were sincerely participated in religious discourses. They were easily able to read or study of any sacred literature. There was no religious limitation or bonding for women to read such type of books. So in religious field they were not inferior to men.

In the case of acquiring highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge women were not far from the position of a man which properly proved by many sayings in Rig Veda. There were numerous examples of Vedic rishies who were female. Both married and unmarried women recognize same authority to gaining knowledge on the Vedic wisdom. Various Vedic hymns composed by prophetess Gargi, Which were composed through questioner about the creation of all existence. Several Vedic hymns is attributed to Visvavara, Sikta and many others. In Rigveda we recognize dozens of verses accepted by the women philosopher Ghosha and by the great Maitreyi. Maitreyi rejected half her husband Yajnavalkya’s wealth in favor of spiritual wisdom. There also contain a large philosophical conversation between Rishi Agastya and his highly educated wife Lopamudra.

In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad there are several examples of highly educated women who played a great role for society achievement. Gargi one of the eminent participants, who challenged Rishi Yajnavalkya with various questions about the soul which confounded that learned human being. From same Upanishad another incident noticed that spiritual teaching given by Rishi Yajnavalkya to Maitreyi. Gargi and Maitreyi both were distinguishing between themselves about Brahmagyda, the absolute knowledge. Another highly educated women like Apala and Atreyi suggested women that marriage was not compulsory. Julia Leslie noted that, many hymns in Vedas were composed by women who were usually performed sacrifices to the Aryan Gods. She thinks that the three most important hymns of Vedas which were composed by women. These are by Ghosha (Rigveda x, 39 and 40), by Apala (Rigveda viii, 80), by Visvavara (Rigveda v, 28). So in this ground this vidushis had a great contribution for society. Apala sacrificed to king of God Indra, the God of storms and monsoons, telling him, “drink thou this soma pressed with teeth, accompanied with grain and curds, with cake of meal and song of praise”. To the fire of God Agni, Visvavara offered sacrifice to him, pouring oil on the fire and chanting, “Thy glory, Agni, I adore, kindled, exalted in thy strength”. (Leslie 1983, 91-92). These examples notify us that in the Vedic era women enjoyed equal rights in social, religious field.

Right to Property

Right to the property for women in Vedic era is very instructive and also very crucial. Because before the economic independence happened in society women holds a vital position in the matter of property rights in this era.

In Vedic period daughters had the right to their father’s property until they got married. Daughters having no siblings had the full rights on their father’s property. After death of parents, property equally distributed between son and unmarried daughter. But married woman had no right on their parent’s property. Both husband and wife were the joint owners of the whole property. Husband clearly declared at the time of marriage that he never violates the rules and regulations. These systems gives women a proper right of maintains in society.

In the account of inheriting property rights were very restricted. In the case of property rights for women liberty was limited. However married daughters had no right on their parent’s property. But each unmarried daughter was able to hold one fourth proportion of total patrimonial property. Women had the control on gifts and other materials which they received at the time of their marriage. But the major part of property was under the control and management of male members in family. As a wife, women had no right to share or sell their husband’s property. But in case, where a wife left by her husband, had the right to get one third share of her husband’s property. Widow had no right in her husband’s property. It was expected that she will live a lonely life. So it could be summarized that in Vedic era in the case of right to the property women’s situation was not totally favor on them but protection and proper assurance was given to them as daughters and wives.

Marriage

Indeed the virtues of the loyal and virtuous (pativrata) wife are comparable to only those of Agnideva. “. . . this Agnideva is pure and worthy of worship just as pativrata women”. – Rigveda Samhita, Part-1, Sukta-73, Sloka-829.

Women are the prior origin of purusarthas, not only dharma, artha and kama but even the most valuable and highest purusartha moksha. So in this era girl child are evaluated as path of moksha in family.

In Vedic era marriage was considered as a social and religious duty. In an equal platform this system unites couple. In their life women had the right to remain spinsters. In this period marriage cannot be forcefully suppressed by society on women. Sati system, child marriage and other superstitious rituals were unknown in this era. After crossing their puberty period girls were eligible for marriage. After finished their education women had the right to choose their life partner. IN Vedic sutras we got the proper evidence for permitting anuloma system (male of higher cast marrying a lower community female). Such marriage is considered as legal on Smritis. In this period marriage was usually arranged by parents of the couples. Though there were also several examples of love marriages. In marital life ideal harmony and proper pleasure was always assumed.

Prostitution

In earliest Indian society one category of women who fraternize openly with men. They were free from many social boundaries and restriction but observed by matrons. They are named as ganikas (courtesans) and vesyas (prostitute). In various literatures they were portrait as a charming, attractive and wealthy. These women's were enjoying a position of eminence. They were properly trained in sixty four kalas (arts). Dancing, music, acting and others various arts are included in it. The courtesans bear a wide social standing. Their status was not as same as of common people of modern cities. For their communal welfare and their deserving experience in various arts they were honored by society.

Conclusion

Throughout this study we must be conclude that in Vedic period women had some contribution in human and social development. They took part as a major role in the human race. But in society they never got proper respect. In all cases they were not treated with well behaved and respect in ancient Vedic period. But it can't deny that, women were very lucky because of the privilege and opportunity to determine their decision in several fields of their life in contrast to any other contemporary periods. They were given same status in education and other major fields in their life along with the men ones. In earliest period, the Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures give several examples of female teachers, philosophers, politicians, administrators etc. So we can say that ancient Vedic era is one of the most developed and enriched periods mostly for the proper improvement on the basis of status and position of women.

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