

Women in Early Vedic Society: A Socio-Economics Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history of women during early Vedic age, the position which the women occupied was much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been. The community as a whole was showing proper concern and respect for the women. During this period women were held in high esteem. They were greatly honored and respected and were given at par education with men. They could be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to Gods. The marriage of the daughter was not a difficult problem. The dread of the possible widowhood did not very much weigh upon the minds of the parents, as levirate and re-marriage were fairly common in the society. In every sphere of life they enjoyed equality with men. No religious rites could be performed without them. They occupied an important place in the social and religious gatherings and often took part in philosophical debates and discussions. They moved freely here and there without any objections. The girls were married when they had attained full maturity. The marriages were generally performed according to the wish of the parents, but the girls also had the right to choose their husband in Swayamvara. The woman gentle in nature and graceful in form, selected from among many their loved one's as their husband. Moreover the absence of Sati-system, Purdah-system, Child-marriage etc. confirms their respectable position in the society.

Keywords : Niyoga, Sati-System, Purdah-System, Child-Marriage, Prostitution

Introduction:

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitation is to study the history of the position and status of women in it. The best way to begin our enquiry is to study the condition of women during their childhood and to find out the general arrangement made about their training and education. This will at once disclose to us the concern of the society for women and the steps it was taking for properly starting them in life. In ancient India, the progress from pre-history to the Indus Valley Civilization did not reveal the decline in the status of women. Symbolic representation of the Lingam and Yoni – the male and the female principles which together constitute the hope of the human race, are seen in the cult of artifacts of this period. Other findings suggest that women had leisure and took time to adorn and enjoy themselves.

The early Vedic period was a golden age for women where they were accepted as human-beings in their own right. Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian women enjoyed a comparatively

high status during this period surpassing contemporary civilization in ancient Greece, Rome and early Christianity. The Indian society was, by and large, matriarchal during this period. Women enjoyed a position at par with men. The two were considered as “the two wheels of the same chariot”. In the Vedas a woman is portrayed as a person in her own right relatively free from social constraints. The stricter code of morality applied to women was really a compliment to them, for it accepted the natural superiority of the women. She played an important role in all religious rituals. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of women with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge. Education was allowed and given to the girls and they were encouraged towards scholastic pursuits. Girls were taught singing, dancing and other arts benefitting them. Some maidens even engaged themselves in the pursuit of life-long learning and remained spinsters. No Purdah and Sati existed. There was no different sets of restrictions for different sexes.

Girls were married after attaining puberty and were allowed to choose their marriage partners. The bride was asked to love her husband, beget his children, address his household and respect and rule over his relatives. The only thing which the women lacked during the Rig Vedic period was the right over the property.

Materials and Methods:

For the purpose of in depth study of the topic, both the primary sources such as archival documents, historical texts, inscriptions and artifacts and the secondary sources such as historical monographs, journals, textbooks and reference works have been used. The method used is analytical, research based and descriptive. The presentation of the historical events in chronological order to convey a sense of temporal sequence and causality have been kept in mind. The article is written in a clear and concise manner which is accessible to readers and conveys historical ideas and themes effectively.

Results and Discussions:

The birth of a daughter was not a source of consternation to the family in the Vedic and Upanishads ages. We find one of the early Upanishads recommending a certain ritual to a house holder for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. It clearly shows that the cultured parents were often as anxious for daughters as they were for the sons. Some thinkers have even pointed out that the talented and a well-behaved daughter may be better than the wicked son. In cultured circles such daughters were regarded as the pride of the family. In lower sections of the society where the custom of bride price prevailed, the birth of a daughter must have been the welcomed event.

The reason why the daughters were relatively popular during the Vedic period was that they could be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to the God's; the son was absolutely not necessary for this purpose. The marriage of the daughter was not a difficult problem; it was often solved by the daughter herself. The dread of the possible widowhood did not very much weigh upon the minds of the parents; as levirate and re- marriage were allowed by the society and were fairly common.¹

During Vedic age women were held in high esteem. In every sphere of life they enjoyed equality

with men. No religious rites could be performed without them. They occupied an important place in the social and religious gatherings. R.C Mazumdar has observed – “There is no evidence of the seclusion of women, and the ladies trooped to the festal gatherings.” Absence of Purdah and Sati also indicates their respectable position in the society. Women were not deprived of the right of education. They received similar education as men and often took part in philosophical debates and discussions. The Rig Veda mentions the names of some learned women like Lopamudra, Sikta, Nivavasi, Vishwavara, Ghosa and Apala who composed hymns and attained the titles of ‘Rishis’. Women also had the sound knowledge of music and dancing.

The girls used to marry when they had attained full maturity. The marriages were generally performed according to the wish of the parent. But the girls also had the right to choose their husband with the consent of their parents in ‘Swayamvara’. The women gentle in nature and graceful in form, select from among many their own loved one's as their husband (Rigveda). Marriages were performed for money and love both, in the house of bride's parent.

Ordinarily, a man used to marry one wife, but polygamy was also in practice amongst the kings and royal families and great chiefs. Widows were permitted to marry again. The word “Dampati” was used for the mistress as well as the master of the house during the Vedic period²

The position which the women occupied in the Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been.³ There are no doubt a few indications to show that the brides were sometimes sold in the marriage or even carried away by force. But the better conscience of the society had already begun to assert itself and condemn these practices as unholy and unworthy. The ideal marriage of the Vedic period was a religious sacrament, which made the couple the joint owners of the household.

Ordinarily girls were no doubt less welcome than boys, but we must add that there were also some parents in the society who would perform special religious rituals for the good luck of getting learned and capable daughters. Girls were educated like the

boys and had to pass through the period of “Brahmacharya”. Many of them used to become distinguished poetesses. The marriage of the girls used to take place at a fairly advanced age, the normal time being the age of sixteen or seventeen. In religious and social gatherings they occupied a prominent position. Women had an absolute equality with men in the eyes of religion. They could perform sacrifices independently and were not regarded as an impediment in religious pursuits. Marriage in fact was a religious necessity to both men and women and neither could reach heaven without being accompanied by his duly married consort. The position of a wife was an honored one in the family. In theory she was the joint owner of the household with her husband, though in actual practice she was the sub-ordinate partner.⁴

In rich and royal families, polygamy prevailed to some extent but ordinarily monogamy was the rule. If a wife had the misfortune to attain widowhood, she had not to ascend her husband's funeral pyre. The Sati custom was not in vogue at all. The widow could, if she liked, contract another marriage, either regular or either under the custom of Niyoga. Women were obviously unable to do this and so could hold no property.⁵ It would appear that the general freedom and better status which women enjoyed in the Vedic age were largely due to men being engrossed in the works of conquest and consolidation. Women used to take active part in agriculture and the manufacture of bows, arrows and other war materials. They were thus useful members of the society.⁶ The community as a whole was showing proper concern and respect for the women, allowing them considerable freedom in the different activities of the social and political life.⁷

In order to understand better about the life of women during the Vedic age, we have to undergo their three stages of life i.e. daughter, wife and mother. The woman in her first stage is a daughter. In Vedas different words have been used for the daughter. For ex- Duhitar, Kani, Kaninka, Kanya, Kanyata, Naruti, Yoshna, Yosha, Yoshita etc.

In Rig Veda, the word ‘Duhitar’ is most commonly used for the daughter. Max Muller has defined the word Duhitar as “Extraction of milk”.⁸ According to Mc Donald and Keith, the word Duhitar means “the girl who looks after her younger brother

and sister”.⁹ In Vedic Index, S.C. Sarkar has defined the term as “Feeding a baby with her own milk”.¹⁰

Kana, Kani, Kaninka, Kanya are the words most popularly used for the adult unmarried girls. In Rig Veda the word ‘Kana’ has been used as both noun and pronoun.¹¹ The word ‘Kanyana’ has also been used once in the Rig Veda which is defined as an unmarried girl.¹² In Vedas there are many references which show that the parents desired for the birth of the children. In that context it is possible that they wished for the birth of a daughter as they wished for the son. In Rig Veda, there is a reference that the parents prayed for the long life both for the son and the daughter.¹³

In the family, a girl generally lived under the guidance and the supervision of her mother and learnt many household activities. She learnt the art of threading, stitching and weaving of the clothes. She also brought water from the wells and rivers in the clay pots and also cared for her younger brothers and sisters.¹⁴ The Vedic girls also helped their father in the agricultural works such as sowing seeds, cutting corns, tilling soils etc. They are also shown praying to God Indra for plenty of rain and good crops. If a daughter was born in the family she was treated as a son. In Vedangas, both the son and the daughter were equally welcomed in the family and the society. There is no source available which proves that the girls were disrespected in the society. In the Vedic period women had the right to go to the Brahmacharya Ashram and receive both moral and physical education. Prabhu and Desai also had the same viewpoint. I.S.P.C Dharma has also supported this judgement.¹⁶

The parents generally felt proud to have a learned daughter. The girls who were not married, lived at their father's house. Apala and Ghosa were the example of such women. In the absence of a male child, a married daughter could also reside in her paternal house and exercised full control over it. She also had the right to light the funeral pyre of her dead father. In Yajur Veda, it is mentioned that the girl had the right of sacred initiation (Upanayan Sanskar) and to offer evening prayers. It was believed that if the girls were not given the sacred initiation, their life would be similar to those of the sudras.¹⁷ In Atharva Veda, it is also mentioned that the girls used to have

Upanayan Sanskar and studied the Vedic literature.¹⁸ In Rig Veda, the girls are found playing with Veena and other musical instruments along with singing and dancing. The various Suktas in the Rig Veda have been composed by the women themselves. For ex-Brahmavadini Ghosa had narrated 39th and 40th Suktas of the tenth Mandala. Ayopa Mudra with her husband composed 1, 179 Suktas.¹⁹ Savitri²⁰ along with Agastya, Apala and Romasha²¹ composed Vedic mantras and the hymns. Indrani, the wife of Indra is also credited for composing one Sukta of the tenth Mandala in the Rig Veda.²²

After marriage, a girl enters her second stage of life i.e. a wife. In Rig Veda, a wife is known by various names such as Vadhu, Jani, Maina, Patni, Jaya etc. In Rig Veda, a word “Vadhu” has been profoundly used for a married woman. William Monier has defined the term Vadhu as ‘taking away of the bride’.²³ It is evident from the Vedic literature that a wife participated in all the religious ceremonies along with her husband and no ceremony was considered complete without her presence. That is why both the wife and the religious sacrifices were complementary and supplementary to each other. During this period, the wives also helped their husbands in the battle-field. For ex- Vishchala had gone to help her husband in the battle ground where she broke her leg. Mudgalani, the wife of Mudgal also fought with the dacoits and after defeating them, brought back the livestock of her husband. We also come across the fact that, Namuchi had the armies of skilled women. There are also several other references of women soldiers in the Rig Veda. These women perhaps belonged to the Kshatriya class.

After wife, a woman enters the third stage of her life i.e. that of a mother. A mother during the Vedic age was held in high esteem. A woman perhaps attained the top most position in this stage of her life. She was given all the respect and comfort in the family and society. She was known by various names such as Matar, Jin, Janani, Prabhu, Su, Amba, Jana etc. A mother was generally a symbol of purity, immortality and strength. She was rather a confluence of sacrifice, devotion and love for the family.

The women were respected in all the three stages of her life during the Vedic age. They were considered

the soul mates to men in the religious sacraments. They independently participated in all religious and social gatherings.²⁴ As the qualification of marriage, the education of a woman was considered necessary.²⁵ Hence special attention was paid for their education. There were many renowned women during this age such as Lopamudra, Vishawavara, Sikta, Nivavari, Ghosa etc. who were teachers, intellectuals, poets, writers and philosophers of great merit.²⁶ According to P.N. Prabhu, education is the basic need of an individual and hence the society is benefitted in various ways.²⁷ In Vedic India, education was meant not only for self development but was also meant to attain Brahma as their final goal. That is why, the Vedic Rishis gave special attention to the spiritual knowledge rather than materialistic or physical knowledge.²⁸

In this period, the girls were married when they had attained full maturity. Probably they were married between sixteen to twenty years of age.²⁹ Marriage ceremony was generally considered as pure and everlasting and there was no place for separation. Marriage was important both for the individual development and the social development.³⁰ Basically, a kshatriya used to marry more than one wife. Yaagvalkyas, had two wives – Gargi and Maitreyi.³¹

In Rig Veda, there are many examples which show that the girls were married when they had attained full maturity. At the time of marriage both were adult and choose their partners on their own. The main motive of the marriage was the birth of a male child. In Vedas, the word “Dampati” has been used both for the husband and the wife which means that both were equal head of the family.³² In Satpath Brahman, it is mentioned that a man is incomplete without a wife. Even the religious sacrifice is worthless without the intervention of the wife.³³ In Aitreya Brahman, a wife has been termed as a friend. There was no general dislike between a husband and a wife simply because both had similar viewpoint and ideology over a subject.

Every father of a family was in fact a Rishi on a small scale and worshipped his God in his own house in his own humble fashion and the woman of the family joined in the worship and helped in the performance of the ceremonies.³⁴ In ancient period, the life of the Indian women were devoted towards the religion.

The importance of religion was to fulfil all their responsibility towards her family. From birth to death their life was totally religious in character.³⁵

Meanwhile when the Aryans came to India, they had to undergo a prolonged war against the inhabitants in order to establish their dominion. As the population of the Aryans was small as compared to the inhabitants, it was difficult for them to establish their control. It therefore became necessary for the Aryans to increase their population by giving birth to their children.³⁶ As a consequence, the importance of women certainly grew in the society. They were thus treated with great care and given special attention by their male companion.³⁷ Due to continuous battle and low population, the Aryans could not afford to limit their women in the household activities only. It now became the duty of every woman to come out of their house and participate in all social, economic, religious and political activities along with men. The women as a symbol of mother attained the most respectable position in the society in that community who was consistently engaged in order to increase their population.³⁸ The Aryans who gave the utmost respect to their female companion is mentioned in Sanskrit Literature.³⁹ In Indian social organization women held an important position in the society. From ancient times, in Hindu society women were greatly honoured and respected and were given all the comforts.⁴⁰ In 'Brahmayagya' the names of learned women such as Sulbha, Gargi, Maitreyi etc. were taken with the great Rishis of those times. In those times, women also participated in debate and discussion and proved their intelligence.⁴¹ In the Rig Vedic period, the father was generally kind, polite and respectful towards the members of the family. After the death of the father, the eldest son took the charge of the family. There was complete discipline in the house and the head of the house had the right to punish his family members for their wrongs. In the family, women had an important role to play. The entire household work was under her control. If a woman was unable to give birth to her baby she could adopt a child. This inheritance of a child was acceptable and was prevalent in the society.⁴² In 'Brihadaranyaka Upnishad' there are many evidences which show that, the father was pleased to get a learned daughter. The girls could study Vedic

literature and could also perform religious sacrifices to praise their lords. Their marriage was not a difficult problem. They did not marry until they got their favourite life partner. In Vedic age both men and women talked to each other freely.⁴³

Purdah-system was not prevalent during the Vedic period. Women could move independently here and there without purdah and could communicate with anyone without any restrictions. In those times, women freely participated in the social gatherings and religious festivals.⁴⁴ When a newly married wife came to her husband's house for the first time, every member of the family could see her face. According to Yaask, in order to get judgement she herself used to go to the courts. All these show that the Purdah-system was not in practice at that time. On the other hand, widows during the Vedic age had the right to practice Niyoga and remarry with her brother-in-law. When the dead body of the husband was about to be cremated, her in-law used to hold her hand gently and requested her that she should no longer feel sorry for all these, as he is ready to accept her as his wife. Thus, according to the tradition prevailed in the Vedic society, the widows were not looked down upon. They were not recognised as a handicap or a curse to the family and the society. They were given the same respect as those of other women in the society. Their life was smooth and flexible and led a happy and peaceful life.⁴⁵

The only thing that the women lacked during the Vedic period was the right to property. She was not entitled to any property nor she was given any share in her paternal property when it was being divided among the sons.⁴⁶ Rig Vedic society was generally a patriarchal society and hence she was considered worthless to hold any property. But only those women who did not have any brother were entitled to the father's property. In Brahmana literature, it is depicted that if a woman earns any sort of money, then that money too was considered as the property of her husband or the father.⁴⁷ According to A.S. Altekar, women were given the right to property. Generally the unmarried woman lived in her father's house and exercised full control over the property. Childless widow was entitled to inherit a share of her husband's property. But a married woman was in no way entitled to either her husband's property nor to

her father's property. Thus, a married woman could possess no property except for her 'Stridhan'.⁴⁸

There was another important class or institution of women during the Vedic period i.e. that of the prostitute. The people who loved music and dancing were always attracted towards them. These prostitutes were beautiful and attractive in appearance. This class had always been the centre of attraction. They were not looked down upon and led a very respectable and honourable life in the society. They were very popular and important members of the society. They not only entertained common people but also had their full sway over the members of the royal families. The kings always looked for their development, betterment and well-being. Thus, these prostitutes led a luxurious and peaceful life in the society.

We also come across the existence of the women slaves in the Vedic society. These women slaves were generally given away by the tribal chiefs to the kings and the Rishis as gift. Moreover, these women slaves also possessed a respectable position in the society. In reality, they were not treated as the servants but looked as an important member of the society. These women slaves were also sometimes accepted as "Vadhu" or appropriate for marriage.⁴⁹

Thus in the words of Sangeeta Sharma, we may conclude that the Vedic period has been recognised as the most significant event of the Indian women. From both the primary and the secondary sources we come to know that in the social life, the women took active part with great zeal and zest. These women had the religious right and freely participated in the political affairs. They also had the control over the economic resources. They were free to move here and there without any objection. In this period, women were greatly respected in the society. Thus, the flexibility in social, economic, religious and political set-up helped a lot both for physical and moral development.⁵⁰ Generally it is seen in the culture of other countries that the women were not given that much respect in ancient times which they began to get later on. But in India the case was slightly different. Women got full respect in the society during ancient period and as the time progressed, there was general decline in every aspect of their life.⁵¹

Conclusion:

After delving deep into the theoretical studies of the references discussed above, it could be concluded that the socio-economic condition of the women during the Rig Vedic period was respectable and satisfactory. During this period women were highly regarded and held positions of power in society. Women were considered the mistresses of the house and held a high position in the family. They were allowed to participate in both home and religious rites. Women were required to attend school, and education was considered essential for performing Vedic ceremonies correctly. Women of this time had the access to education and could attain high scholarly status by composing Vedic hymns. Marriage was a personal choice and they could choose their life partners and participate in Swayamwars to select their husbands. Child marriage was unheard of, and Sati pratha was rare. They independently earned income from activities like weaving and assisting with agriculture. The widows had respected roles they could choose rather than being socially ostracized. Moreover, the absence of Purdah-system, Sati custom, dowry, child-marriage and the prevalence of widow re-marriage indicates their respectable position in the Rig Vedic society.

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