

A Historical Study of the Socio-Economic Condition of Women in the Later Vedic Age

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of women during the Later Vedic Period, there was considerable decline in all the spheres of their life as compared to the women of the Rig Vedic period. She was not honoured and respected as the women of the Rig Vedic age. The chief reason in the decline of women was polygamy and polyandry. The growing complexity of the Vedic sacrifices was another factor that tended to make the wives association in religious rituals a more formal affair in course of time. The discontinuation of Upanayana, the neglect of education and the lowering of the marriage age produced adverse effect on the status of women. Early marriage put an effective impediment in the higher education of the girls. Brides being too young and inexperienced, ceased to have any voice in the settlement of their marriage. The prevailing view that the daughter was less desirable than the son was not accepted by all social thinkers. There were some among them who realised that it was causing great harm to the society and felt that it ought to be counteracted. They, therefore championed the daughters cause and pointed out that, to the cultured parents both should be equally welcomed.

Keywords: Sacred Initiation, Widow-remarriage, Women Slave, Puberty, Property Right.

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Introdution

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.

In the Later Vedic Age women enjoyed some freedom and received Vedic education. But the status of women during this period was much lower as compared to the Rig Vedic period. Epic Literature though, written much later reflected the social life of the people of their time. Rama, the hero of the Ramayana was looked upon by the people as a God and a model of a male behaviour. When Sita was abducted, Rama fought not so much out of love (no indication of this is mentioned) but more to rescue his property and save his honour. On her return Sita walked on fire to prove her chastity. Then there was Draupadi, the princess of Mahabharata who was calmly gambled by her husband in payment of debt.

The lessons derived from the Epic about the behaviour of men and women, were soon accepted as truth and codified by Manu, the Hindu law giver and others, whose philosophy for the men and women was different as indicated in the following quotations: Skandapurana says, "Women before going on a pilgrimage should wash her husband's feet and drink the 'washed water' because her husband is higher than Vishnu and Shankara". Skandapurana adds "A wife should eat only after her husband has eaten. If he is standing, she should not sit. She should not sleep till he sleeps. She should rise in the morning before he does. If he treats her with contempt, she should not retaliate. If he assaults her, she should not lose her temper. According to Manu Smriti, to a woman, her husband was almost a god, she could not leave him, but he could throw her out if she was dishonest and disobedient.

Values changed, men took more wives, particularly if the first was childless. Girls were married even before puberty. Widow-marriage was forbidden by Manu who stated, "No where is a second husband permitted to a virtuous woman". Cremation of the living wife on the funeral pyre of her dead husband was glorified. Leading towards her further sub-ordination and helplessness, she continued to fall lower and lower in the scale till the code of Manu summed-up her position as thus, "The father protects a woman in her childhood, husband during her youth, her sons in her old age; a woman is never fit for independence". It was Manu Code which became a part and parcel of the Hindu Law.

Materials and Methods

For the purpose of in depth study the contents have been taken from relevant books, articles, journals and websites. The methods used are analytical and descriptive. Both primary and secondary sources of information have been taken.

Results and Discussions

It is right to say that during Rig Vedic Age, the condition of women was praiseworthy and satisfactory and they were kept in high esteem. But after this period, the situation began to change adversely and the main reason behind this was social and religious instability¹. The chief reason in the decline of women was polygamy and polyandry. The study of the epics confirms this fact. Dasratha, the king of Ayodhya, had three wives. The number of queens of Ravana was not known and Draupadi had five husbands. The birth of a daughter was regarded as a source of misery and sorrow and women were supposed to be the root cause of all evil².

Some centuries before the beginning of this period, the Aryan rule had become well established over the greater part of India. The Brahmins and the Epics, however supply ample evidence to show that the Aryan chiefs were freely marrying non-Aryan princess in the later period. Arjuna married Udupi, a Naga princess regent. Bhima married Hidimba, a sister of Rakhshas chief. The sage Kavasha, who played an important part in the Aitareya Brahmana, was the son of a slave girl. It is important to note that

the early Dharmasutras writers had no objection to an Aryan marrying a Sudra woman, provided he had another Aryan wife³.

The introduction of non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household is the key to the general deterioration of the position of women. Very often the non-Aryan wife may have been the favourite one of her husband, who may have often attempted to associate her with his religious sacrifices in the presence to her better educated but less loved Aryan co-wife. This might have naturally shocked orthodox priests. The first remedy they must have thought of was to declare the non-Aryan wife to be unfit for the association with her husband in religious rituals. "The black non-Aryan wife may be her husband's associate in pleasure, but not in religious ceremonies" say several authorities. But the mighty kings mad in love with his non-Aryan beloved insisted upon having his own favourite wife by his side at the time of sacrifices, no matter her caste or race⁴. How then the situation be retrieved? Eventually it was felt that the object can be gained by declaring the whole class of the women to be ineligible for Vedic studies and religious duties. There would be then no question of rejecting admission to a non-Aryan wife and granting it to an Aryan one; all would be ineligible and none need to be offended.

The growing complexity of the Vedic sacrifices was another factor that tended to make the wives association in religious rituals a more formal affair in course of time. The sacrifice became a very complex affair, and the slightest mistake in its performance or in the recitation of its hymns was regarded as fraught with very grave consequences⁵. The differential treatment was due to the simple fact that women were no longer able to oppose these absurd theories and claims, most of them being uneducated and quite ignorant of their former status and privileges⁶.

The age of cities or small states had gone and the Hindu kingdoms in this period fairly became extensive. The splendour of the royal courts naturally increased and the kings began to keep a much bigger harem. The growing harems of the mighty kings

naturally made them jealous and some of them sought to keep their wives in seclusion. The Purdah-System was however yet confined only to a very small section of the royal families; majority of the kings did not care to adopt it⁷.

It is true that the Vedas have declared that the son was necessary for securing heaven; the childless widow, however, should not think of re-marriage in order to get heaven through a son. She ought to aim at the higher ideal of salvation and not at the lower one of heaven. This advice was, however, one sided one; the Smritis do not offer it to the widower and on the other hand permit men to remarry immediately after the death of the first wife, 'lest the sacred fire should remain unlit'⁸.

A greater calamity that over took the widow in this period was the revival of the Sati System. It began to spread wider in the society in course of time as the action of Sati began to be considered as a great religious sacrifice which deserved to be emitted. A school of rationalist opposed the custom vehemently, pointing out its utter futility and stupidity. Its effort partly checked the spread of the custom for a while⁹. A loose kind of association existed at times between the Aryan master and his female slaves. At the time of marriage, these slave girls in certain cases were given away along with the bride for sexual needs¹⁰. In this Age women had no right to offer obligation and sacrifices in order to praise their ancestors. The son alone could perform this religious ritual. But in spite of all these shortcomings, if a daughter was born, she was not totally rejected in the family. In Atharwaveda, there is clear evidence which proves that the girls were also allowed to live in Brahmacharya Ashram¹¹.

According to Prakash Ojha, the birth of a daughter began to be considered as a source of sorrow, suffering and misfortune for the family and son alone began to be recognised as the creator and protector of the family¹². After going through a prolonged study of the condition of women during the Later Vedic

Age, A.S. Altekar has remarked that later on the position of women was not as important and remarkable as it was during the Vedic Age¹³. In Later Vedic society the condition and position of girls were low as compared to the son. In Taitriya Samhita, it is mentioned that the girl had no right over her paternal property¹⁴. In some Brahmamana grantha also the son has been valued more than the daughter. In Aitareya Brahmamana, the girl has been termed as a miser, illiberal and narrow-minded¹⁵. Sayan has also supported this view and has made his remarks that the girl gives pain to her relatives at the time of birth, takes away a huge wealth at the time of marriage and brings disgrace to her clan during her adulthood. In Gautam Dharmasutra, it is mentioned that if the father did not have his son, he would offer sacrifice to the fire god(Agni Prajapati) and fulfilled his wish of a son by asking his daughter that 'for me you give birth to the son'¹⁶.

The prevailing view that the daughter was less desirable than the son was not accepted by all social thinkers. They, therefore championed the daughters cause and pointed that no father is ever known to have been killed by a daughter either to history or to the legend. There are cases on record where daughters like Kunti and Lopamudra have saved their parents from dire calamities. In marriage it is the daughter, and not the son, who enables the father to get the great merit of Prithvidana or the gift of the earth. One should not be, therefore, elevated by the birth of a son and depressed by the birth of a daughter. To the cultured parents both should be equally welcomed¹⁷.

There had been some very influential ladies like Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Sikta, Nivavari, Visavavara and Ghosa. It is stated in Vashishtha's Dharmasutras, "a wife shall not be abandoned even though she be quarrelsome or strained by incest or has left the house or has suffered criminal force or has fallen into the hands of the thieves". It is referred to as in Manu Smriti, "where women are worshipped, the gods shower their

blessings, but where they are not honoured, all acts are fruitless". The "Brihadaranyakopanishad" describes about the two philosophical discussions between Yajnavalkya and Gargi and the other between Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi on philosophical subjects. Dr. R.C. Mazumdar has remarked, "these two incidents eloquently testify to the high position, bearing and mental equipment of women in ancient India to which it would be difficult to find a parallel in the history of the world"¹⁸. It is evident from some example that the girls were proficient in music and dancing. Taitriya Samhita and Maitreyi Samhita supports this view¹⁹. It is referred in the Satpath Brahman that the girls had the sound knowledge of rites and rituals and recited Vedic mantras very proficiently. Thus, it shows that the girls were well educated and trained in their childhood age²⁰.

Vrihadaranyak Upnishad mentions the names of two great learned women i.e. Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya and Gargi²¹. In Ashwalayan Grihasutra, there is a mention of Samavartan Sanskar of the girls, a Vedic rite which is performed on the return of a disciple to his/her household after finishing his/her studies at his/her preceptor's residence²².

According to Ashwalayan Grihasutra, the girl should be obedient, respectful, intelligent, smart, trustworthy and should be beautiful in appearance²³. Generally the girls with broad chest, thin waist and beautiful look has been recognised as auspicious and of good fortunate in Vishnu Dharmasutra and Satpath Brahmana. The girls were also given special instructions to keep themselves smart and to be well-dressed and to decorate their hair with flowers and ornaments²⁴.

In Ashwalayan Grihasutra, it is mentioned that, after marriage, the wife becomes an important part of her husband in commemorating religious sacrifices. According to Apastambha Dharmasutra, after marriage, the bride and the groom should perform the religious rites and rituals together because they both are equally responsible for the holy reward of performing virtuous actions²⁵.

In Satpath Brahmana, it is mentioned that the wife should be loyal and faithful towards her husband, respect her in-laws and give alms and charity to the Brahmans. In upper section of the society, the women received good education similar to men and the system of sacred initiation also prevailed among them²⁶. After wife, the woman enters into the most important phase of her life i.e. as a mother. The woman in the form of a mother was greatly respected and was held in high esteem during the Later Vedic Period. In Dharmasutra also the women was praised because she was a mother, who gives birth to the son. In Paraskar Grihasutra, a mother has been imitated as Goddesses Saraswati. In comparison to the Rig Vedic Age, in the Later Vedic Age the term "Bharya", "Jaya", "Jani" etc. for the women were meant only for the purpose of breeding of the child²⁷.

In the Later Vedic Period, the widows were not ill-treated in the society. This evidence can be supported by the following references. In Taiteriya Arayanka, it is referred that the widow takes away all the favourite items of her husband such as bow and arrow and leaves the house and prays for her husband's well-being in the next world²⁸. Apastamba Grihasutra mentions that the widow was taken back home after the cremation ceremony by her brother-in-law or by the disciple of her husband or by an old slave²⁹. It is also depicted in the precepts of the author that the widow should undergo Niyoga only up to getting two children³⁰.

In Ramayana there is no evidence of sati. There is no example of any queens of Dashrath i.e. Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi and the queens of Ravana committing sati. Though Kaushalya tried to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, but she was stopped from doing that. In this epic there is a reference of Vedavati committing sati³¹. Kaikeyi, being a widow was told by the king Dasrath to rule the kingdom, shows that sati-system was not in vogue in Ramayana. Among the monkey clan (vanara), there was the tradition of widow re-marriage in the society. After the death of Bali, his wife Tara married Sugriva and loved him. Among the demons also the widow could choose her husband freely. For example—

Suparnakha, agitated by lust, put the proposal of marriage to Rama. Ravana had also killed many demons in the battle-field and had kept their women in his harem.

The sati-system was prevalent mainly among the kshatriya class. In this period there are many examples of a woman committing sati on her own sweet will. After the death of Pandu, his wife Madri committed sati³². After the death of Vasudeva, the father of lord Krishna, his four wives Devaki, Bhadra, Rohini and Madira burnt their selves on the funeral pyre of the dead husband³³. After the death of Sri Krishna, his wife Rukmani and others committed sati. Revati, the wife of Balram also committed sati on the death of her husband.

In Mahabharata, the woman was mostly adorned and respected in the stage of a mother “Bharya Mulam Trivargasya”³⁴ (foundation of three aims of life – Dharma, Artha and Kama). We do not find traces of widow re-marriage and the marriage was performed when the girl had attained full maturity. There was no sign of child-marriage in the society³⁵. In this period Purdah-system was not compulsory. It was just a part of a tradition. In upper class of the society, the Purdah-system was prevalent among few women just as a decorum³⁶.

The institution of the slaves was well established and developed during the Later Vedic Period. They were often given away as a gift to the king, big landlords, etc. to work for them throughout their lives. In Taittiriya Samhita, it is shown the women slaves dancing with the pots placed on their head³⁷. The tradition of giving slaves along with the cattle had started during the Later Vedic Period³⁸. In Aitereya Brahmana, there is a mention that the king at the time of his coronation, gave one thousand slaves along with one thousand elephants to the priest³⁹. In Chhandogaya Upnishad also there is a reference of giving women slaves as a gift.

During the Later Vedic Period, prostitutes formed a recognised social group and often skilled in music and dance. They enjoyed a relatively comfortable life, participated in social ceremonies such as child birth celebrations and received gifts and

charity from families. The people often visited their place as a source of favourite pastime. These prostitutes were beautiful and attractive in appearance.

The status of women generally declined during this period, but there was some improvement in the area of property rights. Society gradually discouraged widow remarriage and the practice of Niyoga. As a result, many young widows were left without support. To provide them with financial security, women gradually gained recognition of certain property rights, which had not been acknowledged during the earlier Rig Vedic Age. Thus, despite reduced social freedom, women's economic rights saw some advancement in the Later Vedic Period.

Manu, in his Manu Smritis has devised six different types of Stridhan. According to Yajnavalkya, the property which the daughters inherit at the time of marriage by her father, mother, husband and brother is termed as Stridhan¹. Narad in his Smriti has also defined the term Stridhan as, “At the time of marriage ceremony, whatever property the daughter gets by all the six different forms by her near and dear ones is called as Stridhan”². Katyayan has also presented the similar view and ideology as referred above regarding Stridhan in his Smriti³.

Conclusion:

After delving deep into the theoretical study, I came to the conclusion that the condition of women had deteriorated during the Later Vedic Age as compared to Rig Vedic Age. She was not honoured and respected as the women of Rig Vedic Age. The chief reason in the decline of women was polygamy and polyandry. The growing complexity of the Vedic sacrifices was another factor that tended to make the wives association in religious rituals a more formal affairs in course of time. The discontinuance of Upanayana (sacred initiation), the neglect of education, dislike for widow re-marriage and the practice of Niyoga and the lowering of the marriage age produced adverse effect on the status of women. Early marriage put an effective impediment in the higher education of the girls. The only direction in which the position of women really improved during this period as compared to the Rig Vedic Age was in the sphere of proprietary rights.

But in spite of all these shortcomings, there had been some very influential ladies in the society like Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Sikta, Nivavari, Visavavara and Ghosa. They were free to choose husband from among several suitors and take part in the debate and discussions. They had not yet fallen victim of early marriages, sati and Purdah system. Music, dancing and fine arts were taught to them.

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