



Status of Woman Reflected in Vedic Literature

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Abstract – The status of women in Vedic literature reflects the societal norms and values of ancient India. These texts, dating back to the Vedic period (1500–500 BCE), depict a complex and dynamic portrayal of women, including their roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and even rulers. Despite being considered subordinate to men in some regards, women were also held in high esteem for their contribution to religious rituals and their ability to maintain the social order. The Vedic literature sheds light on the diverse and evolving attitudes towards women in ancient India and provides insights into the cultural and historical context of the time.

The article "Status of Women in Vedic Literature" provides an overview of the position and role of women in ancient Indian society, as reflected in Vedic texts. The analysis focuses on the depiction of women in the R̥gveda, the oldest and most revered Hindu scripture, and explores the various aspects of their lives, such as their role in family, society, and religion. The article highlights the restrictions imposed on women in the Vedic era, including restrictions on their education and mobility, as well as their exclusion from certain religious rituals and ceremonies. At the same time, it also notes instances where women were praised for their intelligence, beauty, and spiritual attainments. The article concludes by discussing the evolution of the status of women in Hindu society and the impact of Vedic literature on contemporary gender roles and expectations in India. The article explores the status of women in Vedic literature, examining various texts and sources to gain insight into the role and position of women in ancient Indian society. The study highlights the social, cultural, and religious practices and beliefs that shaped the status of women during the Vedic period. The analysis reveals that while women were accorded certain rights and privileges, they also faced significant limitations and restrictions in various aspects of life. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and emphasizing the need to understand the historical context in which these attitudes towards women developed.

Keywords: Vedic literature, Ancient India, Women's rights, Gender equality, Patriarchy, Social norms, Caste, Religion, Class, Female figures, Portrayal of women, Society expectations, Freedom and autonomy, Gender empowerment, Struggles for equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ – 'The gods dwell there where the woman are worshipped'.
jananī janmabhūmiśca svargādapi gariyasī – 'Mother and motherland are greater than the Heaven',
kupuro jāyeta kvacidapi kumātā na bhavati – 'There may be a bad son but never a bad mother'. There are many such illustrations in Sanskrit which state the importance and high respect for women in the society. Man and woman are like the two wheels of a vehicle and without proper harmony among them the society can never run smoothly. Women have been looked upon with high regards and reverence in our Indian culture. They have played various roles in different capacities from the very beginning of the creation till date. Contribution of woman to the different spheres of life of the man can never be ignored. Woman as a beautiful creation of the Supreme Power plays a significant role in fulfilling the four goals of



human life (dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa). Thus, keeping in view of woman's role in different spheres of life in the society the Vedic seers have presented us different pictures of woman reflected in various texts of the Vedic Literature.

Now, Vedas being the oldest and the most ancient literature of the world, record a lot of things and incidents of the past. A developed and civilized society had existed in those times which give us an account of the position of women of the Vedic age. However, in this paper, an attempt is made to highlight those sides by providing some interesting data's humble especially regarding the marital and social, along with the spiritual status of women in that hoary past, on the basis of the hymns and lines available so far in different Vedic texts.

2. MARITAL STATUS

Hence, as regard to the marital status of woman, we find both polygamy (Rv.I. 62.11; 71.1; 104.3)¹ and monogamy system (Rv.I.124.7; X.71.4)² as reflected in R̥gvedic verses. Whether monogamy developed from polygamy or polygamy was secondary cannot be decided. But it is believed that polygamy though allowed, was practically confined to the Rājanya class only. Polyandry has not been referred to anywhere in the R̥gveda. Female morality was maintained a high standard, but the same degree of fidelity was not being expected from the husbands.

The unmarried girls used to grow in the houses of their parents (Rv. I. 117.7; X.39.3; 40.5)³. The maidens were wearing ornaments at festive occasions in order to win lovers (Rv.I.123.11; VII. 2.5)⁴. There are references of mutual love (Rv. I.167.3; IX. 32.5 etc.)⁵ and the spell (Rv. VII.55.5)⁶ by which a lover hopes to lull the whole household to sleep while he visits his beloved. All these evidences speak in favour of the custom of girls normally marrying long after they had reached puberty.

There were few restrictions in the field of choice in marriage. As for instance, marriage with the dasyu-varṇa people with whom the Aryans came into conflict was probably prohibited. Among Aryans, only the marriages of brother and sister (Rv.X.10) and of father and daughter were banned.

There was considerable freedom on the part of young persons concerned in the selection of a wife or husband, as they generally married at a mature age. There is no clear evidence that the consent of the parent and brother was essential. The later appeared in the scene after the parties concerned (i.e. the vara & kanyā) had come to an understanding and their participation as well as that of the (vara) in the former 'wooing' was a mere formality. Of course, it is also a fact that, this was an essential preliminary to the marriage ceremony.

We find some uncomplimentary references to some sons-in-law in the eighth Maṇḍala of the R̥gveda (11.20.1; 109.2)⁷ which suggest that in some cases, a bride-price was paid by a not very desirable son-in-law. Similarly, when girls had some physical defects, dowries had to be given with them, the reference of which is found in some R̥gvedic verses (VI.28.5; X.27.12)⁸. The wedding hymn of the tenth Maṇḍala of the R̥gveda (X.85) gives us some ideas of the oldest marriage ritual. The bride groom (vara) and the party proceed to the bride's house (X.17.1) where the well-adorned bride remains ready (IV. 58.9) for the related functions. The guests are entertained there with marriage feast. This system is followed now in the Hindu marriage ceremony and widely accepted by the people. There the bridegroom grasps the hand of the bride and leads her round the fire (X. 85.38). These two acts constitute the essence of the marriage and the bridegroom is now the husband who takes her by the hand (hastagrābha - X.18.8). The bridegroom next



takes the bride home in a car, in a wedding procession (X.85.7, 8 & 10). Perfect harmony and happiness are prayed for a long conjugal life to be blessed by sons and grandsons. (Ṛv. VIII. 31.5–9; X.34.11) 9.

There is little evidence of prevalence of Satidāha-prathā or window-burning in the Ṛgveda. In Ṛgveda X. 18.8,10 the widow is asked to descend from funeral pyre of her husband on which she was first made to lie. So the safe conclusion may be like this, that though the practice was known, it was not widely prevalent, or at best was confined to the Rājanya class only. Because at the same time, the Ṛgveda (X.40.2 & x.18.7)11 also refers to the practice of requiring a childless widow to co-habit with her brother-in-law (devara) until the birth of a son. From these two contradictory verses, one thing is clear that the remarriage of widows was permitted in certain circumstances, though there is no clear or definite reference to it in the Ṛgveda. However, the Atharvaveda (IX.5.27 & 28)12 bears the testimony of remarriage of widows in those time.

3. SOCIAL STATUS

The poetic picture of an ideal family life in which the newly wedded wife becomes the mistress of her husband's home, as depicted in the Ṛgveda, holds true for the later Vedic period also, and this ideal was realized. The term 'patnī' regularly applied to the wife in the Brāhmaṇas is indicative of her equal share in the social and religious side of the husband's life, while the term 'jāyā' refers only to her conjugal position. Gradually, however she lost this important position, as a priest was more and more employed to offer the oblations in certain ceremonies instead of the wife. This deterioration of her status and dignity went so far as to result in women being classed with dice and wine, as one of the three chief evils described in the Maitrāyaṇi Saṁhitā (III.6.3)13. On the whole, judging from references in the Taittirīya (VI.5.8.2)14 and the Kāṭhaka Saṁhitā it appears clearly that woman, who held a high position in the age of the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā, had fallen on evil days in the later Vedic age.

It is true that sometimes high praise is showered on her in the texts of this period. Thus, it is said that she is half her husband and completes him (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa V. 2.1.10)15. But in spite of this praise, she is not allowed to take part in political life by attending the assembly like men. According to the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (III. 24.7)16 a good woman is one who does not talk back. In the Śatapatha, there is actually the rule that the wife should dine after her husband. The relative position of the two sexes is reflected in the keen desire for male progeny. This may be regarded as natural in a patriarchal society where relationship was recognized through father. But this natural predilection exceeds all bounds of propriety or morality when we read in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (VII.15)17 that a daughter is a source of misery and a son alone can be the saviour of the family. In addition to this, the Atharvaveda (VI.11.3)18 also deplores the birth of daughters.

Coming to the Sūtra literature, it is seen that the Dharmasūtras take a more lenient attitude towards woman than the Smṛtis of a later age or the customs and practices of the present day. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras (II.4.6)19 quotes the injunction which also occurs in the Manusmṛti (IX. 81) with a slight modification, that a barren wife should be abandoned in the tenth year, one who bears daughters only in the twelfth, one whose children (all) die in the fifteenth, but she who is quarrelsome without delay. But Āpasthamba (II.5.11,12-14)20 forbids the husband to take a second wife unless the first wife has no male child or neglected her religious duties. On the contrary, according to the Vaśiṣṭha Dharmasūtra (XXVIII 2-3)21 a wife shall not be abandoned "even though she is quarrel some or tainted by sin, or have left the house, or have suffered criminal force, or have fallen into the hands of thieves". Even a wife, who has committed adultery, becomes pure and is taken back by her husband after she has done proper penances (Vaś. Dha. XXI. 8-10)22, Āpasthamba (I.10.28.19)23 imposes severe penalties on a husband "who unjustly forsakes his wife. On the other hand, a wife who forsakes her husband has only to perform a penance (Āp.



Dh. 1.10.28.20). This is a singular instance where the law or custom accords more favourable treatment to the wife than to husband. Again, a father who has committed a crime by loss of caste must be cast off, but a mother does not become an outcast for her son (Āp. Dh. 1 10.28.9)²⁴. Further, it is interesting to note here that according to the Baudhāyana (IV.1.15)²⁵, if a damsel has been abducted by force and has not been wedded with sacred texts, she is to be treated like a maiden and be lawfully married to another man. The Dharmasūtra also accepts this general agreement that a grown-up maiden if not given in marriage in proper time by her father, she may choose her own husband after waiting for three years.²⁶

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, in the conclusion, it can be safely said that women were endowed with high ethical values which are reflected in the sacred Vedic texts. From the close observation of some R̥gvedic verses, it is ascertained that the socio-religious status of women was quite in a high position in the Vedic age. Some kinds of freedom were also given to them in selection of their life-partners. Widows had never been discarded in the society. Women were also allowed to take part in the dance and song programmes of various festive occasions. Though some hard rules are found prescribed for the women who deviate from the normal womanly qualities in some Vedic texts, still in some others it is advised that women should be treated leniently with regard to their misconduct if any. In the Post-Vedic texts like in the Manusmṛiti, a number of restrictions were laid down for the woman for whom Manu is misunderstood and criticized by some people of the present time. So in spite of Manu's opinion that women do not deserve freedom, they had to be under the protection of some guardians i.e. in the care of their fathers until marriage, and of their husbands after marriage and of their sons in their old age²⁷, it can be advocated that, this was a Post-Vedic picture of women, which is actually misunderstood and so criticized by some of the sections of the society now-a-days. In fact, the woman of the Vedic age had enjoyed much freedom in those days.

In conclusion, the status of women in Vedic literature varied greatly and was influenced by various factors such as social, economic, and religious norms. The Vedas depict women as being equal to men in certain aspects such as education and spiritual pursuits, but also reflect a patriarchal society where women were often subordinated to men. Despite this, some powerful female figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi appear in the Vedic texts and challenge patriarchal norms. In general, the status of women in Vedic literature reflects the complexities of ancient Indian society and the evolving position of women in different eras and contexts.

In conclusion, the social status of women in Vedic literature was a complex and multifaceted issue that reflected the beliefs and values of ancient Indian society. The Vedas present both positive and negative portrayals of women, ranging from powerful female figures who challenged patriarchal norms to those who were expected to conform to strict societal expectations. The status of women was also influenced by factors such as caste, religion, and class, with higher-status women enjoying greater freedom and autonomy than their lower-status counterparts. Ultimately, the social status of women in Vedic literature provides a glimpse into the diverse and evolving position of women in ancient India, and highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. सनायुवो नमसा नव्यो अकैर्वसूयवो मतयो दस्म ददुः ।



- पतिं न पत्नीरुशतीरुशन्तं स्पृशन्ति त्वा शबसावन् मनीषाः ॥ (Rv.1.62.11)
2. अभ्रातेव पुंस एति प्रतिची गतरुगिव सनये धनानाम् ।
जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासा उषा हस्त्रेव नि रिणीते अप्सः ॥(Rv.1.124.7)
- Also
उतो त्वस्मै तन्नं विसस्त्रे जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासा ॥ (Rv. X. 71.4ab)
3. घोषायै चित् पितृषदे दुरोणे पतिं जूर्यन्त्या अश्विना वदत्तम् ॥ (Rv.1. 117.7cd)
- Also
युवां ह घोषा पर्याश्विना यती राजे ऊचे दुहिता पृच्छे वां नरा ॥ (Rv. X. 40.5ab)
4. सुसंकाशा मातृमृष्टेव योषाविस्तन्नं कृणुषे दशे कम् ॥ (Rv. I. 123.11ab)
- Also
स्वाध्योऽवि दुरो देवयन्तोऽशिश्रयु रथयुर्देवताता ॥ (Rv. VII. 2.5ab)
5. गुहा चरन्ती मनुषो न योषा समावती विदथ्यैव सं वाक् ॥ (Rv.1.167.3ab)
- Also
अभि गावो अनूषत् योषा जारमिव प्रियम् ।
अगन्नाजिं यथा हितम् ॥ (Rv.1.32.5)
6. सस्तु माता सस्तु पिता सस्तु श्वा सस्तु विश्वतिः ।
ससन्तु सर्वे ज्ञातयः सस्त्वयमभितो जनः ॥ (Rv. VII. 55.5)
7. मोऽष्वद्य दुर्हणावान् त्सायं करदारो अस्मत् ।
अश्रीर इव जामाता ॥ (Rv.VII.2.20)
- Also
अश्रवं हि भूरिदावत्तरा वां विजामातुरुत वा घा स्तालात् ॥ (Rv.1.109.2ab)
8. गावो भगो गावो इन्द्रो मे अच्छान् गावः सोमस्य प्रथमस्य भक्षः ॥ (Rv. VI. 28.5ab)
- And
कियती योषा मर्यतो वधूयोः परिप्रीता पन्यसा वार्येण ।
भद्रा वधूर्भवति यत् सुपेशाः स्वयं सा मित्रं वनुते जने चित् ॥ (Rv.X.27.12)
9. या दंपती समनसा सुनुत आ च धावतः ।
देवासो नित्ययाशिरा ॥ (Rv.VIII.31.5)
10. उदीर्ष्व नार्यीभि जीवलोकं गतासुमेतमुप शेष एहि ।
हस्तग्राभस्य दिधिषोस्तवेदं पत्युर्जीनित्वमभि सं बभूथ ॥ (Rv.X.18.8)
11. कुह स्विद् दोषा कुह वस्तोरश्विना कुहाभिषित्वं करतः कुहोषतुः ।
को वां शयुत्रा विधवेव देवरं मर्यं न योषा कृणुते सधस्थ आ ॥ (Rv.X.40.2)
- And also
इमा नारीरविधवाः सुपत्नी राज्जनेन सर्पिषा सं विशन्तु ।
अनश्नवोऽनमीवाः सुरत्ना आ रोहन्तु जनयो योनिमग्रे ॥ (Rv.X.18.7)
12. या पूर्वं पतिं वित्तथान्यं विन्दतेऽपरम् ।
पञ्चौदनं च तावजं ददातो न वि योषतः ॥ (AV. IX. 5.27)
समानलोको भवति पुनर्भुवापरः पतिः ।
योऽजं पञ्चौदनं दक्षिणाज्योतिषं ददाति ॥ (AV. IX. 5.28)
13. मैत्रायणी संहिता - III.6.3
14. तैत्तरीय संहिता - VI.5.8.2
15. अर्धो ह वाऽएष आत्मनो यज्जाया तस्माज्जावज्जायां न विन्दते नैव तावत्प्रजायतेऽ सर्वो हि तावत् भवन्त्यथ यदैव जायां विन्दतेऽथप्रजायति तर्हि हि सर्वो भवति । (शतपथ ब्राह्मण - V. 2.1.10)



16. ऐतरेय ब्राह्मण-III.24.7
17. ऐतरेय ब्राह्मण VII.15 -17
18. अथर्ववेद - VI. 11.3
19. अप्रजां दशमे वर्षे स्त्रीप्रजां द्वादशे त्यजेत् ।
मृतप्रजां पञ्चदशे सद्यस्त्वप्रियवादिनीम् ॥ (वौधायन धर्मसूत्र - II. 4.6)
- CP. वन्ध्याष्टमेऽधिवेद्याब्दे दशमे तु मृतप्रजा ।
एकादशे स्त्रीजननी सद्यस्त्वप्रियवादिनी ॥ (मनुस्मृति - IX. 81)
20. आपस्तम्ब धर्मसूत्र - 11.5.11 & 12-14
21. स्वयं विप्रतिपन्ना वा यदि वा विप्रवासिता ।
बलात्कारोपभुक्ता वा चोरहस्तगतापि वा ॥
न त्याज्या दूषिता नारी नास्यास्त्यागो विधीयते ।
पुष्पकालमुपासीत ऋतुकालेन शुध्यति ॥ (वसिष्ठ धर्मसूत्र - XXVIII. 2-3)
22. व्यवाये तु संवत्सरं घृतपटं धारयेत् । गोमयगर्तं कुशप्रस्तरे वा भुञ्जानाधः शयित ।
(That means - if she has committed adultery, she however, should wear a garment smeared with ghee, eat in a trough of cow-dung or in a spread of Kuśa grass, and sleep on the floor for one year.)
उर्ध्वं संवत्सरादप्सु निमग्नायाः सावित्र्याष्टसहस्रेण शिरोभिर्जुहुयात् । पूता भवतीति विज्ञायते ।
(At the end of the year, the husband should offer ghee on the fire reciting the Sāvitrī Mantra eight thousand times together with Śiras formula while the wife remains immersed in water.)
व्यवाये तीर्थगमने धर्मेभ्यस्तु निवर्तते ॥
(If she commits adultery with an elder, however, she is excluded from ritual activities.)
चतस्रस्तु परित्याज्याः शिष्यगा गुरुगा च या ।
पतिधनी च विशेषेण जुङ्गितोपगता च या ॥
(These four are to be abandoned: a wife who has sex with one's pupil, a wife who has sex with elder, especially a wife who tries to kill her husband and a wife who has sex with a degraded man.) वसिष्ठ धर्मसूत्र - XXI. 8-10
23. दारव्यतिक्रमी श्वराजिनं बहिल्लोम परिधाय दारव्यतिक्रमणे भिक्षामिति सप्तागाराणि चरेत् ॥ सा वृत्तिः षण्मासान् ॥ (आपस्तम्ब धर्मसूत्र - 1.10.28.19)
24. माता पुत्रत्वस्य भूयांसि कमण्यारभते ॥
तस्यां सुश्रूषा नित्या पतितायामपि ॥ (आपस्तम्ब धर्मसूत्र - 1.10.28.9)
25. बलाच्चेत् प्रहृता कन्या मन्त्रैर्यदि न संस्कृता ।
अन्यस्मै विधिवद्देया यथा कन्या तथैव सा ॥ (वौधायन धर्मसूत्र - IV. 1.15)
26. त्रीणि वर्षाण्यनुमतो काङ्क्षेत पितृशासनम् ।
ततश्चतुर्थे वर्षे तु विन्देत सदृशं पतिम् ॥ (वौधायन धर्मसूत्र - VI.1.16)
27. पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने ।
रक्षन्ति स्थविरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति ॥ (मनुस्मृति - 9/3)

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