

Empowerment of Women in Ancient Indian Society

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Yatra naryastu puhyante ramyante tatra devatah
Yatrei tastu na puhyante sarba statra phalaha kriyaha.
Manusmriti, Ch.III, 56.

Introduction

Women have been tortured and exploited in the male dominated society of India since time immemorial. But there are some good points to discuss which had empowered the women in ancient days. Since the dawn of the civilization or even from the pre-historic period, women have been worshipped in the form of Mother Goddess (the prototype of power or Shakti) and Yoni worship. The empowerment of women goes back to ancient Indian society and particularly in the early Vedic period in which the women were held in high esteem and treated at par with men in all walks of life.¹ In fact, no religious rites or rituals could be performed without their presence. The Rig Veda contains a story of a grihapati who left his wife because of her impertinence and went away for practicing penance but he was told by the god that he could not perform the penance without his wife.²

The women during the Rig Vedic period were sufficiently educated and took part in philosophical debates and discussions. Legendary women of the Vedic period were epitomes of intellectual and spiritual attainments who both complemented and supplemented their male partners. Some of the notable women of this age were names - Ghosha, Lopamudra, Sulabha Maitreyi, Gargi, Visvavara, Apala, etc. were prominent.³

Ghosha, the Granddaughter of Dirghatamas and daughter of Kakshivat, both composers of hymns in praise of Ashwins, Ghosha has two entire hymns of the tenth book, each containing 14 verses, assigned to her name. The first eulogizes the Ashwins, the heavenly twins who are also physicians; the second is a personal wish expressing her intimate feelings and desires for married life.⁴

The Rig Veda ('Royal Knowledge') has long conversations between the sage Agasthya and his wife Lopamudra that testifies to the great intelligence and goodness of the latter. Lopamudra was a philosopher as per the ancient Indian literature. As the legend goes, she was the wife of the sage Agastya. Together with her husband she is credited with spreading the fame of the Lalita sahasranama (the thousand names of the Divine Mother). She is also called Kaushitaki and Varaprada. A hymn in the Rigveda is attributed to her.⁵

Maitreyi was a Vedic philosopher from ancient India. She was the second wife of famous sage and philosopher, Yajnavalkya, the first being Katyayane. Maitreyi was well-versed in Vedas and associated scriptures and was called brahmavadini or "an expounder of the Veda" by people of her time. About ten hymns in Rig Veda are accredited to Maitreyi.⁶

Gargi Vachaknavi was an ancient Indian philosopher and Vedic prophetess. In Vedic Literature, she is honored as one of the great natural philosophers. She is mentioned in the Sixth and the Eighth Brahmana of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where the brahmayajna, a philosophic congress organized by King Janaka of Videha is described, she challenged the sage Yajnavalkya with intriguing questions on the atman (soul).⁷ Gargi was named after the sage Garga, in whose lineage she was born; her last name comes from her father Vachaknu.

Gargi composed several hymns that questioned the origin of all existence. The Yoga Yajnavalkya, a classical text on Yoga is a dialogue between Gargi and sage Yajnavalkya.⁸ Gargi was one of the Navaratnas in the court of King Janaka of Mithila. She has composed several hymns and is an author of Gargi Samhita.

She challenged the sage Yajnavalkya with a volley of perturbing questions on the soul or 'atman' that confounded the learned man who had till then silenced many an eminent scholar. If some of the Vedic poets and philosophers were women, there were women warriors also. There was no parda system as it known even today, nor was the burning of widows on the pyre (sati) prevalent there. During this period women also took keen interest in music and dancing. The respectable position of women during the early Vedic period is also evident from the absence of system of child marriage. In the matter of selection of their husbands, the women were given complete freedom, though often the parents selected their partners. Dowry and bride prices were in vogue but these were generally resorted to only in cases where either of the partners had some physical defect. There were references in Vedic literature to prove that a bride price was given by a son-in-law who was not quite desirable. Similarly dowry was given by the parents of the girl who had some physical defects. Marriage was considered as a sacred and divine institution and performed with the recitation of Vedic hymns. Rig Vedic verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were free to select their own husbands with the consent of their parents. The swayamvara of later times was, thus, foreshadowed in the Vedic times. "The women gentle in nature and graceful in form, selects from among many, her own loved one as her husband." (Rig Veda).⁹

The hymns about marriage show the sublime outlook of the Vedic Aryans. The hymns are like:
The priest addresses the bride- "Enter, O bride, with auspicious signs the home of the husband. Do good to our male servants and to our female servants, and to our cattle.

"Free from the evil eye, thy husband hurting not,
Kind to our beast, be friendly, full of energy,
Bear heroes, love the gods, and live in happiness,
Bring welfare to our bipeds and our quadrupeds."
(Rig Veda, X, 85) ¹⁰

The marriage was indissoluble by any human action. They had honourable position in the house. The term "Dampati", used in the Rigvedic period, designates the mistress as well as the master of the house which describes about the gender equality. The wife was admitted to full religious rites and participated in all the major ceremonies and offerings of the husband. She acted as the queen of the home. There is no evidence in the Rigveda that women were isolated in social functions or gatherings. On the other hand, ladies trooped to festal gatherings "decked, shining forth with sunbeams". ¹¹

Besides that other sastras also mentions some good aspects of women.

Abrahmanah samgrahane pranantam dandamarhati
Chaturnamapi varnanam dararakshaya tamah sada.
Manusmriti, Ch.VIII, 359 ¹²

Manu has described in his Manusmriti that mother is thousand times more great than the father.
Sahasram ntu pritrnun mata gouravenatirichayate
Manusmriti. Ch. II. 145. ¹³

In the Taitreya Upanishad, the mother has been eulogized first as:

Matru devo bhava
 Pitru devp bhava
 Atithi devo bhava
 Acharya devo bhava.

Taitreya Brahmana, 1-11-2.14

In Sastras it has been mentioned that “a home is not a home where there is no wife. A good home exists only with a wife.

“Na grham grhamityahugruhin gruha muchyate”

In the pre-Mauryan age, there were women students designated as Brahmabadinis who became the lifelong students of the sacred texts. There were other types of women called Sadyodvaha. They prosecuted their studies till their marriages. Most of the Buddhist nuns were maidens who devoted themselves to religion and philosophy and carried on discussion on abstruse questions of philosophy.

In the Mauryan period, women pursued the study of philosophy and lived a life of continence. As the nuns, both Buddhists and Jain, were freely access to palaces and cottages, it seems that considerable freedom was permitted to women. There is a reference that the protections of Chandragupta Maurya’s personal bodyguards were the armed women. These bodyguards wearing military uniforms appeared mounted on chariots, horses and elephants. It appeared as if they were going on a military camping. The fact that the wife took a prominent share in religious activities by the side of her husband is clear from the records of the benefactions of Karuvaki, one of the queens of Ashoka himself. The offence of killing a woman was equal to that of killing a Brahmana.

Women enjoyed the right to property and were permitted to keep personal property (Stidhana) in the form of jewellery and clothes. According to Arthasastra, the women could have personal property to the tune of 2,000 silver panas. Property in excess of this amount was to be held as a trust on behalf of the wife. Under normal circumstances the husbands were not to use the property of the wife. However, they could use this property in case of dire necessity. After the death of the women the property passed on to the daughters and not to the husband or to the sons. If a husband did not have any son, the entire property was inherited by his widow. Thus, we can say that by and large women continued to enjoyed position of respect during the ancient times. They were well fed and cared for by their husbands according to their capacity. The husbands could not maltreat or beat the wives because gods did not accept the sacrifices and offerings of such husbands.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal’s Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman’s husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa’s Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki’s Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instill respect for women. Ardhanarishwar (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped.

In case of Rajput women, the Rajput society had great honour and respect for womenfolk. Rajput women enjoyed complete liberty. They were not compelled to confine themselves within four walls of the house and had the right to select their husbands through “Swayamvara Pratha”. Proper attention was paid to the education of women.

Alberuni has pointed out: “Women were all educated and took active part in public life. Girls could read and write and understand Sanskrit. They learnt to play, dance and paint portraits. Women participated in various subjects with men and there are references where they defeated men in the discussions. The wife of Madan Mishra had defeated the great Brahman scholar Sankaracharya in discussion. The famous Sanskrit poet, Raja Shekhar’s wife Avanti Sundari was a great scholar.”¹⁵

Rajput women were also well-versed in warfare. They learnt how to use sword and spear. In fact, Rajput women were capable of holding pen with much facility as the sword. Some women controlled the administration efficiently. Akkadevi, king Vikramaditya’s sister proved to be a great administrator. She led a military campaign and proved her worth on the battle field.¹⁶

In the Bhaumakara dynasty of present Odisha, women rulers like Tribhuvana Mahadevi I, Prithivi Mahadevi alias Tribhuvana Mahadevi II, Tribhuvana Mahadevi III, Gauri Mahadevi,, Dandi Mahadevi, Vakula Mahadevi and Dharma Mahadevi etc have enriched the administration and society through their good governance. ¹⁷

The political history of Bhaumakara dynasty took a new dimension with the accession of throne by Tribhuvan Mahadevi I by assuming the imperial title “Tribhuvana Mahadevi” in 845 A.D.¹⁸ Her glory has been sung in the Talcher plate of Subhakaradeva IV as such “She took upon the burden of the entire kingdom and shone like Sesanaga, holding up the entire earth on her hoods.” Perhaps, her accession to the Bhauma throne was not without any opposition and she quelled the rebellion with an iron hand. A faint echo of it has been preserved in her own record in which she has been described to have “ascended the throne like Katyayani”. She took up the title Paramavaishnavi which is mentioned in her Dhenkanal plate.¹⁹

She maintained an effective hold over her vassals who showed her their devoted loyalty. She had given an efficient administration to her subjects by appointing officers ‘of pure character and clean hands’. Highlighting her glories, the Talcher plate of Subhakaradeva IV mentions, “ During her rule the country advanced in three branches of administration, the foes were exterminated, the glory spread abroad and there was harmony among the people.” ²⁰ The Hudud-al-Alam describes that “the royal power belongs to a woman who is called rayina (rani or queen) and that the “Dhauma (Bhauma) does not consider any one superior to herself.”. She was instrumental in maintaining social harmony. She patronized Vaishnavism and was a great patron of Hari. She set an example by taking the reign of administration of the Bhauma family for the first time. This gave inspiration to the subsequent women ruler of the Bhaumakara dynasty.²¹

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that though the women folk of the Indian society have been exploited and tortured through the ages. The Sati system, Parada system, child marriage, girl child infanticide, dowry death, neglected life, gender inequality, etc had covered the life of women. But in spite of that the above discussion clearly shows that women held high esteem and were treated at par with men in all walks of life in early part of ancient period and after. Looking into the above facts, it can be said that the modern man should give respect the women of the present day and there should not be any kind of gender biasness. Thus, women in ancient Indian society were also empowered and they have proved their talents by performing outstanding achievements in various field.

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