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Status of Women in Vedic Literature

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Abstract:

Vedas, Epics, Sutras, Upanishads, Aranayaks, Vedangas, philosophical-theological treatise form Vedic literature from which the references about Aryans are to be known. Due to various limitations in getting comprehensive view of the status of women in Vedic society, conclusion with regard to the importance of women in that society may only have a matter of personal choice, hence biased. The Vedic society was a patriarchal society with the preference as well as dominance of male child. This led to the degradation of the status of female in the family and society. Even then in such a state of mind the references indicate the equal social, religious and educational status for both boys and girls in Vedic society. The marriage and family life in the Vedas shows a very high degree of development. The tradition of child marriage cannot be traced to the Vedas. Three forms of marriages can be inferred from various hymns of the Vedas. The Monogamy, Polyandry, Sati, Niyoga and the custom of bride purchase was known in Vedas. Later Vedic literatures do not approve Polyandry, Purdah through legalize the polyandry. The Vedic literatures do contain some remarks and observations which are hurtful and degrade the very personality of women as such a part from lowering her status. The status of women in the Vedic society is assigned only when she attains marriageable age and established a home through marriage.

Keywords : Patriarchal Traits, Brahmacharya, Grahasth, Mono and/Polygamy, Widow Marriage Niyog/Levirate

1. Introduction

The society of the Vedic Aryans is known to us through a mass of literature called *Vedas*. The other sources to know about them, their culture, their religion, social structure, customs and traditions are found in the Sanskrit literature, such as *Sutras*, *Epics*, *Classical literature*, *Philosophic-theological treatise* and *Buddhist and Jain canons*.¹

There are certain limitations in getting comprehensive view of the status of women in Vedic society as a whole from the Vedic literature. Firstly, they are religious in nature, not a source book of history or sociology. There are not many direct evidences of contemporary life in the Vedic literature. Secondly, the correct and exact date of the different Vedic text is difficult to assign as they were composed and handed down orally and the written form came very late in time. The gap is more than thousand years between this transition, which has allowed much transformation, addition and interpolation, even some editorial clipping too. Thirdly, the Vedic literature presents us the religion of the upper class of people - both men and women.² lastly, the subject matter of Vedic prayer has individual reference, which can not strictly be applied to the society as a whole. One seer may pray for sons, another daughters and sons, while the third only for daughters. In such a situation, conclusion with regard to the importance of any one of them may only have a matter of personal choice, hence biased.³

1.1. Patriarchal Traits

The Vedic society was patriarchal society in its composition at family level as well as at the structure of societal governance. The family was undivided and headed by the father. It is evident from the number of prayers for the birth of sons - brave worthy and religious. The reasons for such a preference were that he would perform religious rights to the ancestors; he is a boat to salvation. This preference resulted into a kind of unhappiness at the birth of a female child and prayers for the boys here and girls elsewhere. The reason is found in the hope that boy brings for the family in contrast to the trouble and misery brought by the female child. Atharvaveda contains charms and rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter.⁴ This naturally led to the degradation of the status of female in family and society. Aitereya Brahman of Sam Veda places sister next to the wife of her brother, making her inferior to that of a married woman from other family. It means that female child has an inferior existence in her own home though born from the same mother as his brother. No doubt, the couple ceases to recite the Rigvedic prayers for many sons, daughters and long life. The ritual for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter, as recommended in the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad even lost its name and lost its popularity to the *Purusavana*, prescribed for the birth of a son.⁵

1.2. Brahmacharya

Even in such a state of mind just setting upon, there are references that indicate the equal social and religious status that was available to the boys and girls in the Vedic society. The girls were spending early years in *Brahmacharya* ashram as indicated in Atharvaveda. The Taittiriya Brahmana makes *upanayana* sacrament mandatory for a woman, non performance of which leads to

the automatic lowering of her status to that of a *Shudra*. Even after marriage they can continue their studies. This is indicated by the words *Sadyodvahas* for those pursuing studies after marriage and *Brahmavadni*, for those engaged in the lifelong studies. Many women are called *Rishi* (Seer) and Brahmadvadin (Knower of the Ultimate), and the composer of Vedic hymns.⁶ The names of Apala, Vishvavara, Lopamudra, Ghosha, Indrani and Shachi are clearly mentioned as the seers of the Mantra, which others, such as Kakhivati, Surya-Savitri, Shrudha Kamayani, Shrdarajmi and Urvashi are attributed with the hymns. The ancient upanishads - Chhandogya and Buhadaranya - provides women of any caste an opportunity to study the Vedas and mentioned female *rishis* such as Gargi and Maitreyi.⁷

1.3. Grahasth

The marriage and family life as presented in the Vedas shows a very high degree of development. It represents a social and religious institution, most important and sacrosanct. For Rig-Veda, marriage is necessary for becoming a house-holder, performing sacrifices and procreation. Aitereya Brahmana takes away the right of completion from one who is not married. It is regarded as a sacred religious union brought about by divine dispensation and never considered as a contract. The marriage is indissoluble and places husband and wife on equal footing and provides an acceptable ground for lasting mutual loving relationship. It is in this aspect of marriage and married life that the revelation of status of women in idealized Hindu family and society takes place.⁸ The tradition of child marriage cannot be traced to the Vedas. The marriage hymn in Rig Veda shows that brides are fully matured and quite grown up at the time of marriage. The parting words of parents to the bride are "go to the house to be a mistress there and rule over all the members of the family as ocean rules over all the rivers", which can only be spoken to an adult and mature women as the bride.⁹

Three forms of marriage, though not mentioned by name as later writers did, can be inferred from various hymns of the Vedas. They are: *Kshatra/Rakshasa* marriage in which the victor carries away the bride and marries here. This is mentioned in Rig-Veda where Vimada is described as having won his bride in battle. *Svayamvara* type of marriage allows the bride to choose her own partner in life. This form is inferred from the Rigvedic hymn of marriage. Surya married A shrines by such a choice. *Prajapatya* is the third type of marriage, reference of which we find in Rig-Veda with elaborate rituals. In this form of marriage, which one can still observe at any Hindu marriage, daughter is offered by the father to the bridegroom with an injunction that they should be always inseparable companions in the discharge of their religious duties.¹⁰ It is, however, to be noted that the custom of bride purchase was known in Vedic times, though not held in high esteem. The son-in-law in such cases was described as *Vijamata*, disreputable son-in-law as Rig Veda records.¹¹

1.4. Mono and Polygamy

The Vedas present a society in which monogamy was generally and normally practiced. The Rigvedic marriage rituals does not provide for the association of more than one wife in normal sacrifice. Yet there are instances where polygamy is distinctly recorded. The rich, kings and ruling section of the society were practicing polygamy. Aitereya Brahman admits that a man can have more than one wife. The Atharvaveda prescribes a number of charms to enable the wife to monopolize the love of the common husband. The famous philosopher of Brahadaranyaka Upanishad Yajnavalkya had two wives indicating the acceptance of polygamy by the society.¹²

1.5. Polyandry

One can only grudgingly admit that there are few references of polyandry in the Vedas. In the marriage hymn of Rigveda, Surya is married to Aswins. The marriage of Rudasi with Maruts is also find place in it. There are some passages in which the wife is mentioned in connection with husband in plural. It is interesting to note that later Vedic literature do not approve polyandry though legalize the polygamy.¹³

1.6. Widow Marriage

As in the case of a widower, the widows are allowed to marry again. It may sound strange, but the funeral hymn in Vedas exhorts widow to marry the one who holds her hand is willing to marry. It also shows that the brother of the deceased took charge of the widow. Atharvaveda too mentions of women marrying second time. The passages do not suggest that the women should marry only her brother-in-law.¹⁴

1.7. Sati

Atharvaveda however, shows a strange funeral ritual of the Vedic age, which has preserved some formalities similar to the custom of Sati. It depicts a widow lying by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral pyre and being asked to come down. A prayer was offered that she should lead a prosperous life, enjoying the bliss of children and wealth.¹⁵

1.8. Niyog/Levirate

Women's right to have children was granted by the practice of *Niyoga/Levirate*. As there are few instances of remarriage of widows, and in the absence of clear injunction of widow marriages, one can safely assume that this practice was more popular than remarriages.

1.9. Religious and Social life of Women

The Vedic society was quite free and did not pose much restriction upon the free movement of their women. They were educated along with boys of their own age, free to move with them, approach them for marriages and took part in sports and extracurricular

activities, of course within the accepted norms and customs of the society. We do not come across the system of purdah in the Vedic society.¹⁶ even the life after marriage does not change much in their social interaction. The marriage hymn itself requires the bride to be shown to all the assembled guests at the end of the marriage rituals. The practice still continues in Hindu marriages. It is also hoped that the bride will be able to speak with composure in public assemblies down to her old age.

The presence of ladies in social and public gathering therefore, was a normal feature in Vedic time they were quite free to associate themselves with others on the occasion of festivals and rejoicing.¹⁷ The Vedic Aryans were mostly occupied in military activities as they were engaged in the task of carving a homeland for themselves. They had, therefore, to rely upon a greater degree of cooperation from their women folk. Women are depicted in Vedic literature as taking part in agriculture and in manufacture of bows, arrows and other war materials. They were also engaged in weaving cloth, dying, embroidery and basket-making. They were also engaged in teaching, independent of their man-counterpart. The cultivation of fine arts like music, dancing and painting was the domain of the women only. Musical reciting of the Sama-hymns was the special function of ladies.¹⁸ The Vedas regard women as untouchable during her monthly period. This temporary impurity is assigned to their taking over from India one third of the sin of brahmana murder, which he incurred when he killed Vritra. Child bearing is regarded as the special function of women, and evil spirits are believed to be very of anxious to visit them during their periods to prevent conception. They may also harm her husband. One stanza in Vedic hymn prays that the bride should have no evil eye and hopes that she would not be the cause of the sudden death of her husband. During the time of confinement, the women are regarded as impure as the phenomenon of menstruation is considered to be repeated at the child birth.¹⁹

Apart from this, women are not regarded as impure. There is a ceremony to purify a woman before her participation in Vedic sacrifice. There is nothing special about it, as similar purification has been prescribed for men also. Women enjoyed all religious rights and privileges which men possessed. Vedic education, Mantra writing, reciting of mantras, Vedic sacrifice, Vedic samskaras. The women were not an impediment in the path of religion; her presence and cooperation is absolutely necessary in religious rites and ceremonies. This naturally increases her religious value. Man is not a spiritual whole unless accompanied by his wife, gods do not accept the oblations offered by a bachelor and husband alone cannot go to heaven. A son is indispensable for spiritual well-being in life to come. These circumstances are enough to ensure women a religious status as high as that of her husband.²⁰ It is interesting to note that they had their own hut in sacrificial compound and her own cow to provide milk for sacrifice.

She too had a special *upanayana* on the occasion of some sacrifices. Chanting of mantra from Samaveda was her exclusive right. One of the women, Indrani, claims that she had started some rites and rituals. Many of them, as earlier pointed out, were the seers and authors of the Vedic hymns. Many religious practices and rituals could survive because they were preserved and practiced by the women.²¹

1.10. Proprietary right of women

In early times, proprietary rights were hardly recognized in almost all civilizations. In early Vedic time, the case was not different: they were regarded as chattel. They were given away as gifts as none appear from several hymns, which glorify the gifts of generous donors. In the famous gambling hymn of Rigveda we find the wife being staked away by the husband. However, women have been given certain rights over the material possession under Vedic law. They can be classified as follows.

- Women's right to property vis-a-vis her husband.
- *Stridhana*
- The right of inheritance.²²

1.11. Women's right to property vis-à-vis her husband

As per the marriage hymn of Rig Veda, the wife is the co-owner of the family property along with her husband. The husband takes a vow at the time of marriage that the rights and interests of his wife in economic matters shall not be transgressed. But this concept of joint property of wife and husband soon became a legal fiction during the Vedic period itself as expressed in the famous gambling hymn, neutralizing such a noble concept.²³

1.12. Stridhan

It is difficult to define *Stridhan*. The term is used to denote property over which women are allowed to have their own absolute right in normal times. Hindu society has not been willing to invest the wife with full or exclusive ownership right over immovable property. But far as movable property like ornaments, jewellery, costly apparel etc are concerned; women's right to own it is recognized from a very early date. This, in essence, is *stridhan*. *Stridhan* has origin in a practice of marriage by paying bride-price (*Shulka*). The practice is non-Vedic, but not unknown to the Vedic people, who held this practice in low esteem. Rigveda describes the son-in-law in such cases as a *Vijamata*, disreputable son-in-law.

Even this custom was not Vedic; it seems to have been making room for itself, since there was a practice of *Parinahya*, whereby the bride used to receive some wedding gifts. The term denotes these gifts, which the Vedic text declares to be the sole property of the bride. This may be the original Vedic practice as the superstition of using women's personal property still persists in Hindu Society. Later law-makers have taken much trouble in defining and enacting satisfactory codes, as Vedic literature is silent on the issue of the disposal of *Stridhan*.²⁴

1.13. The right of inheritance

The view that women have no right of inheritance is expressed in many places in the Vedas. The developing concept of *Stridhana* during this period shows that women could normally get property only by way of gifts from their relations at or subsequent to

their marriage. Daughter's case was different than the wife or the widow. As there was a strong prejudice against adopting a son in the Veda itself, it was natural that a brother-less daughter will be the first to get her right of inheritance. It may sound strange to us now that a brother-less women found it difficult to marry and often had to remain spinster, as not many were willing to allow their first born son to revert back to the families of their maternal grand-father. A special word, *Putrika*, is coined for such a purpose. Some claims that Vedas do not lay down any rule unfavorable to the succession of women and find some support in the text.²⁵ Yet the general bias remains against the women members within the family, even when she remains unmarried and claims her share in patriarchy. Rigveda advises the brother not to give any share to his sister; she is after all to migrate to a different family. Generally speaking, daughters - married or unmarried, do not have any right to inherit or share in patrimony. It is interesting to note that there are references of partition of family inheritance by the father during his life time in the Vedic literature. However, it is not clear whether women used to get a share.²⁶

1.14. General attitude towards Women

The best possible way to ascertain the attitude of Vedic society towards women may to look for the instances where women are overtaken by misfortune of falling into unfortunate situation. Such a situation may give us, glimpses into the genuineness of society's sympathy towards the weaker sex. It also enables us to find out how far man is prepared to rise above the prejudices of his gender and judge the women by an equitable standard.²⁷

Hindu society, as any other society, has laid down a much higher standard of sexual morality for women than men and has framed rules which are harsh and unsympathetic to them. The Vedic thinker, however, have shown a fair amount of sympathy and consideration towards the lapses of women from the marriage vows. They were allowed to take part even in religious service, provided they confess their error. Being a fighting race and trying to establish their foot-hold in the region, yet they regarded killing of women a very disgraceful offence. We, therefore find in injunction in Rig Veda that a woman ought not to be killed. This dictum is followed in letter and spirit throughout the history and literature in India.²⁸ The women as Dancers and Courtesan do not seem to have respect of the people as it is indicated in the Vedas. The profession of prostitution is mentioned in the Vedas and the prostitute is termed as *Sadharini* (commoner). The society treated them with scant regard, even though many have acquired name and fame on account of their learning in literature and music and have cultivated and preserved fine arts and dance. The Rigveda, in a passage, present them on those willing to break away long and established bond even on some flimsy grounds.²⁹

1.15. Un-charitable remarks against women

One cannot deny the fact that the Vedic literatures do contain some remarks and observations which are hurtful and degrade the very personality of women as such apart from lowering her status. One cannot, however, take refuse, in generalizing that such remarks are common in world religion and literature and throw the blame to a few men in the throes of bitter disappointment. Mere presence of them makes them gospel truth that warrant a change in attitude. Rigveda states that women are very fickle by nature. In another passage quotes Indra's observation that women cannot control themselves. Satpath Brahmana, on the other hand, has its own observation and holds that women can easily be won over by one who is fair in form and expert in singing and dancing. Such as these were enough for the later law-givers to shackle the women to the best of their legal genius in their respective regions and times.³⁰

2. Conclusion

The picture which is attempted here to present, may not be exhaustive, but clear enough to give us some ideas about the status of women and her position in the Vedas and Vedic literature. Aryans considered themselves 'cultural ones' and other un-cultured. How far this egoistic subjective one-sided, boastful, tinted with superiority complex, claim can be justified has been a subject of fiercely argued, intellectual and academic exercise. The result of such an exercise has always been colored by the school of thought to whom one belongs. The statuses of the women, in Vedic society, are assigned only when she attains marriageable age and establishes a home through marriage. It is at this time, the man accept her as the joint partner of his house-hold, in presence of his kith and kin, invoking the witness of the super- natural through a ceremony which is regarded as sacramental. This is repeated for thousands of years by everyone who is married according to Hindu marriage sacraments and imbibed in those who belonged to that tradition, but it has seldom been successful in providing the ideal state of joint partnership in the family situation in India. The theory of joint-partnership needs to be refocused, revived and expanded to include of women as such, not merely a wife - in order to emphasize and regain the rightful place for the women in the manmade society.

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