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STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND VEDIC INDIA: DEPENDENT OR INDEPENDENT OF GENDER NORMS

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ABSTRACT:

Gender equality in ancient civilisation has been a debatable subject throughout the world. The central question that arises is whether the gender inequity in ancient civilisations was influenced by the social norms of patriarchy that impacted women's rights to bodily integrity, decision-making and independence or it should be attributed to other factors such economic and political. The paper makes an attempt to examine the literature available on ancient Egyptian and Vedic women to identify their status in their respective societies through the agencies available to the women.

INTRODUCTION :

Egyptian and Vedic societies transited rich cultural legacies that demonstrate great contributions in the field of art, architecture and literature. The two developed civilisations vociferously proclaim human advancement. However a study of the inclusion and exclusion of people in social, economic and political systems is required to understand the existence of agencies and equality amidst the groups, communities, societies and genders. Gender inequality proclaims women as weaker sex hence expects them to self-abnegate in terms of their roles as a daughter, wife and mother, bodily integrity, independence and self-identity. Simultaneously it also deals with the economic and political agencies available to women. The research paper undertakes a study of women's status in the ancient Egyptian and Vedic civilisations that will provide an understanding of the agencies available to women and the factors that controlled women's lives in the two great ancient civilisations.

Status of Women in Ancient Egypt:

According to the recent literature available it seems that scholars have a lot of ambivalence related to women's status in Egypt "stemming not only from the individual predilections of Egyptologists, but from the ambiguities, tensions and gaps in the sources" (Meltzer, 1990). Baines and Malek are far more circumspect about both the status of women and the limitations of the evidence (1980) significantly, with regard to matters of property involving marriage and inheritance, they conclude that "[i]n all of this the woman's role was important, though not equal to that of her husband" (ibid, 1980). Susan T. Hollis (1987) notes that "it is necessary to ask how to define the position of women legally, politically, economically, sexually, and socially". Though many scholars have discussed ancient Egypt and its changing rulers and borders over the years yet we come to know a lot about the history of Egypt through hieroglyphics that provide us credible evidence of the ancient Egyptian society. The writers of the middle age also wrote a lot about Egypt and its socio-economic and political systems. "The Egyptians developed three forms of writings: hieroglyphic, hieratic-based on hieroglyphic and demotic- a popular and simplified type of hieratic" (Bardis, 1966). These written evidences serve as sources for the researchers to explore the ethnography, social, political, economic and cultural realms of ancient Egypt.

The first name given to Egypt was Ghemi or Kamit, which meant 'Black Earth' (Proia, 1955). Aristotle's *Meteorologica* mentions Egypt as Thebes (Bardis, 1966). Homer in *Odyssey* refers to entire country as Egypt. The ancient sculptures and monuments exhibit equality between the genders in ancient Egypt (Edward, 2005). The ancient Egyptians considered women as one of their emblems and to them "Justice, Liberty, Modesty, Purity and the Three Graces are always women" (Dickerman, 1894). Egyptian women not only actively participated in state affairs but they also played an important role in ecclesiastical matters (ibid). Hence women's active participation in religious and political arenas cannot be denied. Skilled women actively engaged in weaving, music etc (Khali et.al., 2017). It reflects upon the active participation of women in economic activities of the society.

A few scholars have also written about the status of women in family and society. Lysander Dickerman in *The Condition of Woman in Ancient Egypt* (1894) proclaims that women had right to property and enjoyed freedom of movement with no restrictions of *purdah* (veil).

Egyptian women of the common and middle classes were more independent than women of the same rank elsewhere. Daughters inherited from their father's fortune a share equal to that of their brothers. The wife was the mistress of her house, and the husband was there only as a privileged guest. She came and she went at her pleasure.

Unlike the women of Syria, she entered the society of men with face uncovered. With us it is in good taste for a woman to be arrayed in gay colours and be decked with ornaments; not so for men; but in Egypt it was just the reverse (Dickerman, 1894). But the above explanation doesn't prove that women had

the right to bodily integrity. Women have always been perceived as an object of sexual pleasure. Sexual exploitation not only denies them right to live with dignity in society but also impacts their self-esteem.

Dickerman observes that from XIX dynasty onwards women served the temple in myriad ways: vocalists, musicians etc (1894). The establishment of this office is interesting in consequence of the ideas with which it was associated in the Egyptian mind. Priest and Prince were compared to God.

Therefore, the women who performed before them, as musicians or dancers, did it as a gesture contributing to please almighty, “just as the women of a harem did to that of the priest or prince” (Dickerman, 1894). The custom highlights women being treated as a commodity to please Princes and Priests. Portraying men of high rank, both political as well as religious, as equivalent to God, exhibits them possessing divine power that granted men supremacy over women. Breasted (2021) describes ancient King of Egypt as a man, “who takes women from their husbands whither he wills and when his heart desires”. This proves that women lacked agency over their body in ancient Egypt. The right to bodily autonomy and integrity was denied to them.

A woman is identified primarily with her body functions, seen essentially as a vehicle for male sexual satisfaction and reproduction and its natural corollary, child bearing, rearing and nurturing. Her entire life, her roles, her position and status in society, are defined by this primary bodily function (Mathur, 2008).

Position of women in matrimony also defines their status with respect to men. Monogamy was followed in ancient Egypt though concubines were common (Baldwin, 1965). However Bardis is of the opinion that polygamy was also practiced in ancient Egypt. Both men and women were equally punished for infidelity (Dickerman, 1894). Although a lot of emphasis was laid on marriage, free choice of mate also existed (Bardis, 1966). There was one legal wife and the women of the harem could not make any legal claims (Breasted, 1921). Priests were expected to follow monogamy whereas other men had freedom to keep more than one wife. It is also observed that as polygamy was expensive, it was practiced by affluent class. The legal wife was treated as the mistress of the house who dominated the concubines (Bardis, 1966). According to some researchers, even in the cases of plurality of wives, conjugal affection was not always absent (Dickerman, 1894).

On the walls of the rock-hewn tomb of Beni-hassan, in the inscriptions of the glorious XIIth dynasty, the wife Nebit has two sons and three daughters, and the woman Hamat has one son and three daughters. Their names are all cut in the solid rock; and what is especially noticeable, is that each one of these wives has a daughter named after the other wife (Dickerman, 1894).

Though many scholars eulogise the rights and privileges enjoyed by women in their marital life and society (Dickerman, 1894; Bardis, 1966; Saadwi, 1993; Smock & Yusuf, 1977), many customs prevalent in ancient Egypt highlight women being exploited sexually. Child marriages existed that led to health complexities in women. “Married young, a mother at fifteen, a grandmother at

thirty, her family grows without respite, swarming around her” (Dickerman, 1894). Child marriage impacted the health of females and restricted their roles to family and children. According to Reynolds (1914) though immorality was strongly condemned yet “gross immorality flourished”. It cemented in the society as a culture that exists till today. “Cultural norms are common and powerful drivers of child marriage in both Egypt and Sudan. Cultural norms of Egypt and Sudan encourage girls to marry young and stigmatize those who try to delay it. Moreover, many customs hold that a girl is ready to marry once she has hit puberty, regardless of her age” (Robic, 2019). The ancient practice of child marriage is still a prevalent issue in Egypt.

Besides child marriage as an impediment in the growth of females, the presence of dowry system also relegated secondary position to them. Bride price was very common in many ancient civilisations such as Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hebrews, Aztecs and Incas (Anderson, 2007). Bride price is the money given to the bride by groom’s family at the time of marriage. However, dowry is the price paid by the bride’s family to that of the grooms. At the time of marriage. Baber talks of the existence of dowry system in ancient Egypt. According to him the father of the bride gave corn, silver in huge amounts to the groom (1939). Ancient Egypt had a dual dowry and dower system because both the bride and groom's family invested financially in the new relationship (Anderson, 2007).

The abandoned women were not treated with respect in ancient Egypt. The hieroglyphics admonishes the people of women who are disowned by their family and has no guardian. Such women were not treated with respect as it was believed that they suck down men into the vortex of lust and evil.

The hieroglyphics uniformly speak disparagingly of her who has been abandoned by her husband for cause and who therefore tramps the streets. "Beware," says the wise man, in the Boulaq Papyrus, "beware of an out-of-doors woman, who has no protector. Do not look at her when she approaches thee. Salute her not. She is an eddy of deep water, whose whirlpool no man can resist (Ibid.).

Women became an object of contempt in the absence of a male protector. The existence of women was fruitful under the male sheltering tree as the preservation of their integrity and respect were considered as men’s responsibility. Hence an abandoned women was looked down with disrespect and disgrace. On one hand women’s bodily integrity was defiled by men whereas on the other hand they posed as the protector and saviour of women who followed the prescribed norms of the society. The attitude of society towards the abandoned women exhibits a biased approach.

Widows were dependent on their male family members. Sons took care of their mothers after the death of their father. “[...] the responsibility of the support of women of the family fell on the son, in first instance, and on the grandson after” (Rivas, 2008). Depla (1994) discusses three texts belonging to Old Kingdom (2628-2134 BC) the Instruction to Kagemni, the Instruction of Hordjedef, and the Instruction of Ptah-hotep. Depla identifies four groups of women in these texts: wives, women belonging to other households, mothers and maids. “The

unifying themes in the instructions are the establishment and maintenance of the household, and living in peace with the community at large. While women are generally portrayed in a positive light, they are also shown to be in need of male protection and support” (Depla, 1994). Hollis (1987) concludes that the world of ancient women was defined by men. It was a man’s world. “Women may have had more rights and possibilities than their contemporaries elsewhere, but they did not have total equality with the men of their cul- ture” Hollis (1987).

Hence a lot of contradiction stems from the discussions by the scholars on the position of women in ancient Egypt. Authoritative archives such as those recorded over appear that ladies had a degree of financial autonomy and may start one-sided activity to manage, disperse, protect, or increment their individual property. On the other hand, Pedantic writing, which was composed by men, for men, suggests reliance on the portion of the females and diminishes women to auxiliary performing artists within the headway of the male career (Hollis, 1987).

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be concluded that ancient Egypt lacked equity in gender. A patriarchal society existed wherein majority of women were dependent on men. Dependency of women on men as daughters, wives and mothers demonstrate the supremacy of males in the society. Women were promoted to inculcate feminine traits that assisted in the smooth functioning of the society. Women were also deprived of bodily integrity.

The patriarchal footprints of the past have cemented in the social structure of Egypt. Women are un- able to unleash themselves from the discriminating cultural norms that consider women subservient to men. According to OECD in ‘Women’s Political Participation in Egypt. Egyptian Society’ Egypt, like that of many other countries, has been impacted by strong cultural factors that prohibit women from participating in public life (2018). In Egypt, according to Hala Kamal, major opposition to gender equality changes is based on the claim that “women are recognized as the source and mo- mentum of cultural values and social norms” (Kamal, 2004). Thus, it can be concluded that patri- archy was rampant in ancient Egyptian civilisation that leashed women to the feminine roles and described them as weaker sex to be protected by men.

Status of Women in Vedic Society:

Ancient Indian society has two distinct periods: the Vedic Period (c.4000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.) and the age of the Smritis (c.800 B.C. to 300 AD). Aryans were the inhabitants of Vedic period and their literary works, Vedas, give us immense knowledge of the people, culture, customs, practices and social structure. “The Aryan culture, based on the Vedic culture, remained the centralizing factor” (Burrow, 1975). The Vedas are the prominent texts written in Sanskrit and are considered as the oldest texts associated with Hindu religion that discuss the religious rituals, life style, roles and responsibilities of men and women in a family and society. “When civilisations begin to write down their laws, this is when the patriarchy becomes enshrined” (Foreman, 2021).

Many scholars conclude that women in Vedic age enjoyed equality and freedom. They had access to education and they were allowed to chant hymns and participate in religious ceremonies. Many women sages such as “Sulabhā Maitreyī, Gārgī Vāchaknavī, Lopāmudra, Ghōṣa, Visvavārā, Vadavā Prāchiteyī, and Sikatā Nivāvarī represented renowned female authors of the Vedic mántras (hymns), as well as being persons of intelligence due to their learning during that era” (Pal, 2019). According to Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan education for girls involved several stages: Up- anayana, Brahmacharya to marriage. Sarvanukramni (1975) discusses twenty women seers exhibits that girls were not restricted to formal education. ‘Upanayana’ means initiation to learning (Devi, 2021). Unmarried female teachers were known as ‘*upadhyāyās*’ whereas married female teachers were called as ‘*upadhyāyānīs*’ (Pal, 2019). Some scholars are of the opinion that girls were encouraged to get trained in fine arts as it was considered as feminine in nature (Deshpande, S. and Seth Sunit 2009; Man Mohini Sehgal 1951). Vikas Nandal and Rajnish (2014) reiterate the existence of female scholars in Vedic era. They refer to Puranas and Bhagvata in which two daughters of Dakshayana are mentioned as the scholars of theology and philosophy. “This high note about the education of women was not to continue for long. After 300 B.C. the situation changed and the right to study came to be denied for women” (Nandal, Vikas and Rajnish, 2014).

The Vedic rituals were jointly performed by husband and wife (Altekar, 1959). Bhattacharya quotes Rig-veda that mentions women as brave warriors. Mudaglini, Vishpala, Vadhrimat and Sasiyasi are mentioned for their heroism on the battlefield (Bhattacharya, 1992). Marriage hymns of Atharvaveda proclaims equality between husband and wife. The precepts do not address women as secondary to men but they are addressed as *Saraswati* (Goddess of Knowledge) and *Laxmi* (Goddess of Wealth). Women were considered as ‘*ardhangini*’ (better half) and ‘*sahadharmini*’ (equal partner) (Pal, 2019). Women enjoyed the right to choose their husband. Bride price existed and was paid by the husband (Tharakan, Sophie M. and Michael Tharakan, 1975). Early Vedic period perceived women participating in myriad economic pursuits such as *Siri* (female weaver), *pesaskarf* (female embroider), *bidalkarf* (female split bamboos) and *upalapraksini* (women corn-grinder) (quoted in Saxena, 2016).

However many scholars believe that gender stratification existed during Vedic age. Prostitution was rampant in Vedic age. ‘*Vesyavisesah*’ and ‘*Ganikas*’ were considered as “the highest in the rank of prostitutes” (Saxena, 2006, p.8). Prostitutes, especially Ganikas, were highly respected. Many women chose to become prostitutes in ancient India if their social status permitted (Singh, 2007, p.162). According to Sukumari Bhattacharji, the emergence of prostitution might have been slow, from one region to another, from one era to another. In the late Vedic era, around the 8th or 7th century BC, we mentioned a more standardized form of prostitution, which was considered as a social system (1987). Practice of *Devdasis* was also prevalent wherein women were psychosexually dedicated to Gods. They were lifelong bound to the temple and had to serve the priests (Das, 2017). These practices exhibit women having no agency over their body. It also demonstrates women being sexually exploited by men.

Right to property was given to the girls under special cases. Unmarried girls and married girls who had no brothers were given the inheritance rights in Vedas. However married girls with brothers had no share in the property (Jain, 2003). This proves that male progeny had a superior position as compared to females in a family. Male progeny was given preference during Vedic era. Many hymns of Vedas proclaim women to be bestowed with sons that confirms existence of patrilineal society. Majumdar concludes that Rig Veda, in the marriage hymns, is rife with prayers for ten sons (Majumdar, 2001). Many Vedic texts advocate the preference of male progeny (Kakar, 2012). Due to the cemented notion of male supremacy sons have become a welcome reprieve to the most of the families in contemporary India.

The status of women deteriorated with the preachings of 'Manusmriti'. Manusmriti stated, "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent"⁶. Many scholars are of the opinion that with the introduction of 'Manusmriti' women's status declined in Vedic society (Halli et.al, 2016; Thakaran et.al, 1975; Rukmani, 2009). Thus women were expected to be dependent on men throughout their lives. This imparted them secondary position in society where they had agency within the four walls of their domestic life.

The concept of 'Streedhan' is also a matter of debate. 'Streedhan' was given to brides at the time of marriage. Rigveda and Atharva-Veda discuss about gifts being given by bride's father at the time of marriage. This bride's wealth can be divided into three categories: 'pana' which is used to purchase the bride; 'yautaka', gifts given to the girl by her relations and friends at marriage and 'saudayika', gifts received by bride or the couple either at bride's or at groom's place (Bhattacharji, 1991).

Many researchers believe that streedhan was given for assistance to the bride or to equip her with the right to property but the custom clearly confirms the existence of gender inequality as the burden of sending gifts was on the bride's family and not on the groom's. This exposes the vested interests of the patriarchal society which made a huge profit through the matrimonial alliance. Moreover, the marriage hymns of Atharva-veda nowhere encourage the matrimonial family to accept the bride without streedhan (Thakur, 2019).

As the Vedic society was patrilineal, women were supposed to live with their matrimonial family after marriage. The concept of 'Streedhan' is also responsible for despising the birth of a girl in the family as the parents have a dual responsibility towards a girl-child: upbringing and marriage with no support and assistance from the girl in their old age. Ancient concept of 'Streedhan' with the passage of time has taken an ugly facet in the form of dowry. Dowry is expected by most of the groom's family before the consummation of marriage. Infact majority of marriages are solemnised after negotiations on dowry are agreed upon by both the parties.

CONCLUSION:

A comparative study of the ancient women of Egypt and India makes us understand that in both the civilisations the society was patriarchal. Though women had ample rights related to education and economic independence yet they had no agency over their body. They were encouraged to develop feminine traits as it assisted them to serve their family and society. Serving of women as dancers, musicians and vocalists in temples in both the civilisations exhibits societies advocating feminine skills and using women as sexual objects. As the norms of society were delineated and implemented by men, women's life got circumscribed by tradition and feminine roles ascribed to them. They were expected to be dependent on men in all the stages of their life. The impact of the crystallised and cemented notions of patriarchy thrived in the social structure and impacted the life of ancient women in both the civilisations. The secondary status designated to women in both the societies reflects its shadow on the status of contemporary women. The seed of woman as a 'weaker sex' was implanted in the womb of ancient societies where it was nurtured and passed on to the subsequent generations. Patriarchy has its roots in ancient civilisations.

Notes

1. Rigveda X, 71.9.
2. Vajasaneyi Samhita, XXX 9; Taittiriya Brahmana, III, 4.5.i.
3. Vajasaneyi Samhita, XXX 8.
4. Rigveda, XII, 112.3.
5. Rigveda, XI, 17,7.
6. Percival Spear, India, chII, p.47

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