

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

ROLES AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN DURING VEDIC AND POST-VEDIC AGE

Dr. Maitreyee Goswami

Asstt. Prof, Dept. of Sanskrit Vedic Studies, KBVS & AS University, Nalbari.

Dr. Maitreyee Goswami , Roles And Rights Of Women During Vedic And Post-Vedic Age , Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(8). ISSN 1567-214x.

Keywords: Brahmacharya- Celibacy or to stay true to one's self or one's own soul, Dharma- virtue or morality, Smṛti- recollection or a class of literature based on human memory, Ācāryya- is a highly learned person with a title affixed to the names of learned subject, Upādhyaya- is a Guru who taught students in Gurukula.

Abstract:

Every individual should have some amount of freedom in the society. Woman constitutes a half of the total population in a society. As such to ascertain how cultured and progressive the society is, it is essential to find out as to how is the status of women in that particular society.

In this paper an attempt is made to find out the roles and rights that women enjoyed from Vedic to post Vedic period i.e., the status that they enjoyed in different stages especially in Indian context. Here description is given of different women and their happiness-sorrows, pain-pleasure, status-position and different things which they experienced in their daily life.

Introduction:

Male and female, the two basic components of our human society, depend upon each other and each one of them constitute about half of our population. Both man and woman have been considered as the two wheels of the same chariot. By the word 'Right' – it denotes the position of an individual in a system with some status and duties. It is a position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her age, family, occupation, marriage and achievements. But, the actual rights that is enjoined by women is generally measured in the comparative amount of prestige and respect accorded to her with that of man. In reality for

human existence and evolution we need both men and women. So we can agree to this fact that one is not bigger than the other. Still, we have witness inhumane, unethical and immoral practice against women. In today's world we are discussing about gender inequality for women for many years but where does it start? In this paper, a comprehensive discussion on the social status, rights and positions and life of women in Vedic, post-Vedic, British and modern time are discussed. Several educationists, feminist, and other scholars have tried to assess the position of women and study the changes which are very shocking and enlightening.

- **Status of Women in Vedic India:**

To have an accurate picture of the position of women in ancient India – it is however not an easy task. Scholars are of different opinion yet the thoughts are almost similar. From overall study of the Vedic literature one can hold a considered view that the position of women in Vedic age was much satisfactory and much better than that of later ages. They received all rights to get education like boys, underwent Brahmacharya discipline, studied the Vedas and few of them are figures as the seers of the Vedic hymns.¹ The sacrifice was performed by the joint effort of the marriage couple. Even more, sometimes the wives can perform religious sacrifices by their own.²

The sacrificial rite performed by Kauśalya gives us scope for thinking that, the practice of offering sacrifices by women themselves was continuing down to the age of the Mahābhārata. Moreover, the free movement of the grown-up maidens, their selection of husbands, according to their choice³, the mention of love marriage, women's participation in public functions, teaching profession followed by woman – all these prove that in the Vedic age woman's position was of a high level in all the sphere i.e. cultural, religious and social.

According to the opinion of Dr. A.S. Altekar the status of women is that – ‘The history of the most know civilization shows that the further back we go into antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women. Hindu civilization is unique in this respect, for here we find a surprising exception to the general rule. The further back we go, the more satisfactory is found to be the position of women in more spheres than one, and the field of education is one among them.’⁴

There is a Vedic saying, where women are worshiped, there the Gods dwell or where the women are happy, there will be prosperity.⁵ A woman therefore must be honored and adorned by her father, brother, husband and brother-in-laws, for their own welfare. But, where the women are not honoured no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but where they are not in grief, they prosper forever.

Furthermore, it is found in the Vedas that when a woman is invited into the family through marriage, she enters, ‘as a river enters the sea’ and ‘to rule there along with her husband’, as a queen, over the other members of the family.⁶ This kind of quality is rarely found noticed in other religious scriptures. Added to it, a woman who is devoted to God is more highly regarded than a man who has no such devotion, as found in the R̥gveda: “many a woman is more firm and better than the man who turns away from Gods and offers not.”⁷ Due to this tradition, India's history includes many women who have risen to great heights in spirituality, government, writing, education, science or even as warriors on the battlefield.

In the matter of dharma, in the days of Vedic culture, women stood as a decisive force in spirituality and the foundation of moral development. There were also women Vedic seers who

revealed the Vedic knowledge to others. For example, the 126th hymn of the first book of the R̥gveda was revealed by a Hindu woman whose name was Romashā, the 179th hymn of the same book was by Loopāmudrā, another inspired Hindu woman.⁸ There are a dozen names of women revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Viśwavārā, Gārgī, Maitreyee, Apālā, Ghoṣā and Aditī, who instructed Indra, one of the mighty God. Everyone of them lived the ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the things of the world. They are called as Brahmavadinis, the speakers and revealers of Brahman.

- **Rights of Women during medieval period:**

As time rolled on, some changing features appeared in the history. In the age of the Smṛitis, some sort of changes in the position and status of women was found. As a result of this change the status of women, specially in the social sphere, but not in the religious domain, got degraded to a certain extent.

The Smṛitis are the scriptures describing and prescribing the injunctions for the betterment of human life and society. They seem to be more particular in regulating the social order. The liberty enjoyed by the women in the Vedic age, specially in some social affairs was tainted with some blemishes which seemed to break discipline in a changed society after several centuries. Manu, in his Manu-saṁhitā (MS) has certainly given an easy scope to the critics for explaining that women are ever dependent throughout her life.

pitā rakṣati kaumāre bharttā rakṣati yauvane/
rakṣanti sthavire putra nāstrī svatantryamarhati// MS., 9/3

The import of this verse indicates that such dependence is not wholly an imposition, it is rather based on the consideration of physical and temperamental aspects of women. It is also not that the mind of a woman doesn't bear a liking for dependence. It is more or less psychological sphere of Indian women. Hence, the same śloka is also accepted by Nārada, Vasiṣṭha and Kapila in their own words.

It is however, to be admitted that the birth of a girl, as a rule, is not the occasion for rejoicing. It is found even in the Vedic literature.⁹ However, they enjoyed all the rights like their necessary saṁskāras and education like that of boys. In many places of the smṛitis, the woman is no doubt highly honoured and given high status. It is mentioned in the Vyāsa-saṁhitā that – (13/18) an ācāryya is superior to ten Upādhāyas, one father is superior to one, hundred and one mother is superior to one thousand fathers.¹⁰ Regarding the rights of women, Atrī in his Atrī-Saṁhitā holds the view that – there is not best guru like one's mother.

‘Nāsti mātuh paro guruh’

Similarly, there is no difference whatsoever between the wife, who is the adornment of the house and worthy and the goddess of fortune residing in a house.

“strīyaḥ sriyasca gehesu na viseso'sti ka'scana”

Again, Brhatparāśara smṛiti remain men that their wives are no other than their mothers in as much as the husbands are born in their wombs in the forms of sons. Hence the wives are the savior of men.

deva ucurmanusyamsca svabharyya janani tu vah/
atmana jayate hyatma sa caiva patitarini//

(Bṛhad Parāśara Smṛti., 6/182)

The sacrificial rite performed by Kauśalya gives us scope for thinking that, the practice of offering sacrifices by women themselves was continuing down to the age of the Mahabharata. Moreover, the free movement of the grown-up maidens, their selection of husbands, according to their choice¹¹, the mention of love marriage, women's participation in public functions, teaching profession followed by woman – all these prove that in the Vedic age woman's position was of a high level in all the sphere i.e. cultural, religious and social.

- **Rights of women during Post-Smṛti period:**

As per ancient Hindu Scriptures and texts women enjoyed a considerable freedom and high status in the Indian society. However, in the next thousand years, the position of women deteriorated significantly in all spectrums. In the post-Smṛti age, the status of women had started deteriorated due to several factors. Child-marriage began in the Smṛti age and the self-immolation practice called Sati started in the mediaeval period. Till the time of Mughal period started, a number of problems arose for the Hindu women. We can clearly see that as the time passed, the conditions of women became worse.

During the first Muslim invasion in the eighthly century and the second invasion in the eleventh century, there was a gradual decline of social, political, economic and cultural life of women, particularly Hindu women. Practices like pudah prathā, sati prathā, child marriage, polygamy etc, were the biggest social evils of the post-Vedic period. At the same time, social reformers and revolutionaries like Kabir, Meera, Ramdas, Nayak and many others stood for equal rights for women. Due to their support, women achieved religious freedom and to some extent social freedom also. Again, on the economic status women were completely dependent upon the male members of the family. The status of women deteriorated from a divine being to an object of gratification as we approached the post-Vedic and Mughal period from the Vedic period.¹²

- **Rights of women during British period:**

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Britishers entered Indian as traders. For the first 100 years, the British east India Company ruled over India and then it came direct under the rule of the queen of British for the next 100 years. In this period, the practices like Sati, child marriage and several other social evils were banned and eliminated from the Indian society. They also encourage widow remarriage and they legalized it too.

However, the British Government only passed laws and bills. The main character behind all these social reforms were great Indian revolutionaries like Raja Rammohan Roy, Arya Samaj, Ishwar Chandravidyasagar, B.R.Ambedkar and several others. Several legislations have also contributed to the upliftment of the status of Hindu women in terms of marriage, inheritance and adoption. Some of them are the Hindu law of inheritance (1929), the Hindu Women's Right to property Act (1937), Hindu marriage Act etc.¹³ In this period women helped their male counterparts to fight against the British rulers and contribute extensively in the freedom movement.

- **Rights of women during Modern period:**

The post- independence India has a democratic government and a constitution that mentions women as legal citizens who have equal rights. If we analyze the contemporary times from several parameters then we can understand the current position of women in India. The law protects women, her fundamental rights, and her existences in general.

Every year new policies and laws are enacted to protect women from crimes, discriminations, gender equities etc. So we can say that, we are conscious of the fact that women deserve equal rights. However the ground reality speaks a different truth. In modern society, everyday, several rape cases, harassment cases, dowry cases and several other gender-based crimes are reported across India. It clearly depicts that, the society has not accepted women as equal counterpart in India yet.

On the other hand, women have the right to education, right to property, right to practice any religion, right to marry parents' consent and so on. Still women lack acceptance from the male-dominated society. We cannot deny that, we live in a patriarchal society and men mistreat women on several occasions. Men are greatly revered and little girls have little respect in the social hierarchy. Social workers, social activities and reformers are trying to bring gender equality in India through laws, bills and policies. However we must strengthen women from the core. We must work on 3E-s i.e., Education, Empower and Enable.

There are several provisions for women's protection from physical, psychological and sexual abuse. In the Indian Penal code (IPC), section 304B deals dowry death, section 375 deals with the rape of women, section 498A deals with cruelty by a spouse, section 312-318 deals with the protection of the unborn child etc. In different countries various act, provision, program, law, policies, and constitutions provides protection to women. All of these factors have definitely improved the current positions and rights by building trust among victims, promising justice, spreading awareness etc. However with the help of 3E-s we can achieve gender equity and it will definitely reduce the crimes against women by enabling women to fight and win.

- **Conclusion :**

Women constitute more or less half of the population in the whole world, but the masculine beliefs made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. The rise of feminist thoughts has however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition all through the world in modern times. Access to education has been one of the most urgent demands of these women's rights movement. Women's education in India has also been a major pre-occupation of both the government and the civil society as educated women can play a highly remarkable role in the development of the country.

In India, during the Vedic period there was no gender discrimination. The women were respected by the male members in the family. The women also took part in the teaching procession just like the male members. The gender discrimination against women started in the Mohul period. The discrimination was highly dominant in this period even the minimum freedom was also denied to the female members in the family. This situation continued unchanged even in the British period. But after the independence, the leaders in India thought of women and framed the constitution to eradicate this gender discrimination. They strictly

implement the various constitutional setups to bring gender equality between male and female and try to improve the rights of women through the means of education and awareness to get them equal status. However in the post-independence era, the position of women in India changed significantly and they secured several fundamental rights. The law protects rights of every person. Still, women on ground level continued to suffer due to evils like gender inequity, unethical and beliefs etc. things have Vedic to contemporary times. We still live in a patriarchal society. As a society we have to work together for the upliftments of the rights of women and 3Es – empower, education and enable.

References:

1. Atharvaveda, II-5-18
2. kanya varavayati soma'pi srutavidat/
astam bharantyaavryavidindraya sunavai tva sakraya sunavai tva//(RV., 8/91/1)
3. kiyati yosa maryato vadhuyoh pariprita panyasa varsena/
bhadra vadhurbhavati yatsupesah svaram sa mitram vanute jane cit// (RV.,10/27/12)
4. Education in Ancient India., ch.ix
5. India through the Ages of the Smrtis, p.103
6. Ibid.,p.114
7. Life in Ancient India, p.103
8. Rgveda.,10/27/12
9. India through the Ages of the Smrtis, p.103
10. Sixteen Minor Smrtis, vol-I, p
11. Sixteen Minor Smrtis, vol-ii, p
12. Life in Ancient India, p.45
13. www. Wikipedia.com

• Bibliography:

1. Daloi Sarma Dr. Harianth: India through the Ages of the Smrtis, Saraswati press, Nalbari, 2013, January.
2. Dutt, M.N: Sixteen minor Smrtis, Vol-I, Parimal Puublications, Delhi, 2nd edition, 2010.
3. Dutt, M.N: Sixteen minor Smrtis, Vol-II, Parimal Puublications, Delhi, 2nd edition, 2010.
4. Edt. by Dutt, Rameshchandra, Rkveda Samhita, Vol-I, Haraf Publication, Kolkata, 2000
5. Edt. by Dutt, Rameshchandra, Rkveda Samhita, Vol-I, Haraf Publication, Kolkata, 2000
6. Edt. by Dutt, Rameshchandra, Atharvaveda Samhita, Haraf Publication, Kolkata, 2000
7. Mahendra Pratap, Life in Ancient India, Viswavidyalaya prakasan, Varanasi, 1981