

Women in Rig Veda - Lesson drawn for Modern Women

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ABSTRACT-

There are many civilisations in the world where status and respect for women and their role in society are prominent . Yet the level of civility along with moral, social and spiritual standard in a society can often be perceived by the respect and regard it gives for its women, not that glorifies their sexuality but gives them freedom, honour and protection in the society. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a great revolution in the history of feminism. The evidences are everywhere. The voice for women reservation is mountaineering globally in general and particularly in Indian Parliament also. Since Pre-Vedic era the Indian women witnessed a high stature. They were great Orator, logically argumentative debater, Conquerors not in term of politics or wars but with the sense of administrator , wife , mother and instructor. They were treated as Goddess, the reflection of Laksmi, Annapurna, and as an ordinary human being, she was an Ideal daughters, a loveable companion, a determined mother and a dutiful daughter-in-law. But from enjoying free and esteemed position in the Post-Rigvedic society, women started being discriminated. The egalitarian era evaporates leaving the signs in term of Polygamy, Manipulation, Sexual harassment and deterioration . Child marriage, Widow burning(Sati), Purdaha Pratha has undergone some drastic changes due to commercialisation and Consumerization of the society.. keeping in view the present paper has the objectives-

1.To study the status and role of Indian women in Vedic period.

2.Why a woman who was having a respectable and equal status, now needs laws for protection and equal status? When and Why her status was deteriorated ?

KEYWORDS- Rig Veda, Vedic education , Spirituality, Commodification .

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I. INTRODUCTION

*“Tvamagne Manve Dhamvashaya Pururvase Sukritye sukrattarha,
Swahatrena yat Pitromurchayase Paryaha Tva Purvamanayanparam Punaha.”*

‘Rigveda, Ch-II(SuktaVII, sloka-4)vol.1’

This says, " The result of the elopement of man and woman comes in the form of fire on this earth which rise like a sun which rises in the East and sets in the West. O! Lord Agni, Blessed us the same strength."

Woman in Indian society enjoyed a stellar role not only in orienting her life in the family but also in society. Since the ancient era, male and female are considered as two wheels of the chariot (in human society) depending upon each other. The legacy was continued even till 1400. However, the hegemonic masculine beliefs and thousands of years of invasions, started demonising their equal and high status, which made them suffer a lot. The Egalitarian terms Feminism thoroughly changes the narrative for women. Indian woman, who was earlier considered as an apart of ‘Ardhnarishver rupa’, now started to commodify, marginalise, procrastinate, and suppress. Moreover, thus started a roar for women upliftment and homogenisation by the activists and feminists who are trying to access the problems faced by women around the globe in general and in Indian Society, in particular. Access to education has been one of the most urgent demands of these activists and the core motif of the feminist movements, along with the voice of women equality in a work area and the family substratum. Many legal and constitutional provisions are also made in this direction with the purpose to situate them equally against any injustice, male hegemony and the so-called patriarchal distinction of stature and to maintain the law of nature. There is a saying,

*"Yatra Naryantu Pujyante Bramante Tatra Devata,
Yatrataastu na Pujyante Sarvaastatrafalaha kriyaah"*

‘Manu Smriti 3.56’

Which means women are honoured where ,divinity blossoms there, where women are dishonoured, rejected or treated as commodity, all action no matter how noble remain unfruitful.

Nevertheless, the question is, "Why,"? Why the laws and Articles are required Especially in India where we adore earth as motherland, Country as Bharat Mata, and worship Goddess Durga in form of 'KanyaPujan'.

Why, the stretching list of gangrape cases across the nation has enraged people. According to a survey of 'The Thomson Reuters Foundation' who released its results on Tuesday, June, 26, 2018 of 550 experts on women's issues, "India to be the most dangerous nation for sexual violence against women, as well as human trafficking for domestic work, forced labor, forced marriage and sexual slavery, among other reasons."

Why the voice of human righters for entry in Shabrimala shook the entire world. Where this legacy disappeared, which Sita, Draupadi, Gargi Lopmudra, Aditi, Maitreya's iconoclast left the society mum and bored to their toe. The recorded evidence found in the Vedic period expressed women as Goddess Lakshmi of wealth and prosperity, Goddess Saraswati as Goddess of Knowledge, Goddess Annapurna as Goddess of nurture and Goddess Kali and Durga, as Goddess of power. In the words of 'Altekar,' "to ascertain the position of women in Hindu society, one should study their position, under different circumstances, like normal i.e., in peacetime and abnormal, i.e., in wartime. Because during wars, the attitude of the society towards women was very unsympathetic, particularly if the women had the misfortune of falling into the hand of the enemies. They found it impossible to get re-admitted into their family and society."

Why-

The present scenarios portray a different picture of women as a victim of rape, domestic violence, female foeticide, and many other types of molestations. The need of the hour is to look back and find out the actuality which somewhere started with the invasion of our land during 16th century by Arab, Turk and Mughal invaders who brought outstanding architecture, literature, language and a different culture which refashioned to some extent somehow the food, clothing and living style of Indians. However, along with that degradation of Indian women, especially of Hindu Women started in terms of 'Sati pratha, Purdha pratha, child marriage, women illiteracy, polygamy, and many other issues.

The literature of Indian history abounds with contradictory and conflicting views on the status of women. The concept of 'Ardhangini' suggests that there was equality between man and woman. Which later on, because of Barbarous practices, during the 'Dark age' metamorphosed the rank of Indian women. As a result, while the 'Idol' was worshipped, the 'real' was neglected. Polygamy was a norm for these invaders to beautify their 'Harams.' Original Indians started to shield them, especially from barbarous Invaders, and marked a low watermark in women's condition in India. As a result where Purdah Pratha, Sati, Child marriage affected their freedom and drew a wall in between of them and their education and put them at the back of the house, at the bottom of society, as well as equality, liberty, a life of dignity seemed like philosophical terms for them. While discussing their pathetic condition, 'R.N.Tagore' once says,

"O, Lord! Why have you not given women the right to conquer her destiny? Why does she have to wait head bowed, by the roadside, waiting with tired patience, hoping for a miracle in the morrow?"

Women in Hindu scriptures-

Women had a very significant position in our ancient Indian society. They were superior to men. There are literary pieces of evidence to suggest that women had power, which could destroy kingdoms and mighty rulers. Veda Vyasa in Mahabharata writes how Kauravas fell because they humiliated Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas. Valmiki's Ramayana depicts the sad state of Ravana for abducting Sita Devi forcibly. As said in Manu smriti also -

"Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire their welfare. Where women are honoured, the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are happy ever prospers. The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare should always honour women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes, and (dainty) food." *Manusmriti*

In a similar way that would foretell the future if women are no longer honoured, Grandfather Bhishma explained: "O ruler of the earth (Yuddhisthira) the lineage in which daughters and the daughters-in-law are saddened by ill-treatment, that lineage is destroyed. When out of their grief, these women curse these households, such households lose their charm, prosperity, and happiness." *'Mahabharata, Anushashanparva, 12.14'*

What Rigveda says about Women-

Ancient India was liberal, not in terms of morals but in terms of right. The compartmentalisation did not marginalise the society in the name of man and woman. Both enjoyed equal status. Women accorded great respect not only as 'Vidushies' but even as great worriers and rulers. "The home has, verily, its foundation in the wife"-The Rig Veda.

Status-

The word status denotes the position of a person in the family as well as in society. As per Vedas and other Hindu scriptures are concerned, the texts magniloquent and emplace man and woman at equal status.

*"Ushstyamshayam Yaslasam Suveeram Daspravanam Rayemashvabuddhyam,
Sundasassa Sravasa Ya Vibhasi Vajprasuta Subhanga Vrahantan."*

'Rigveda, Chapter 5,(sukta92, sloka-8),vol.-1'

Which says, "O woman! You are the owner of good fortune, good deeds, fame, producer of Grains, and other foods, O Usha! Bless us, good child, servant, horses, wealth, and fame." Which means women are honoured not only as a reproducer of a new life but the nurture, preserver, and sustainer of the children and family also.

*"Ya Subahu swanguri sushshuma bahusuvari
Tase vispatneye have sinivalyahe juhota"*

'Rig Veda ,Mandal -1, chapter-7, sukta 32,shloka-7'

Which says, " Devi Siniwali, who has beautiful fingers, nurturer, mother of eligible children and persevere and sustainer of the kingdom(family), we should adore her and honour her."

*"Aa badmane ushasa uptake ut smayate tanva virupe,
Yatha no metro varuno jujoshdindro marutvam ut va mahobhi."*

'Rig Veda, Mandal -3, chapter-2, sukta-4, shloka-6'

Which says, "O! Devi, as you administered different gestures, you can illuminate everything as bright as sunup and as calm as dusk, emplace here also in the same manner and accept our offerings. As God Varun and God Indra empowered us, capacitate us with the same propensity."

*"Ut gna vyantu devpatnirindranyagnayashini raatta
Aa rodasi varuni srorotu vyantu deviya rituarjaniyaam"*

'Rigveda, Mandal-5, Chapter-4, Sukta-46, Shloka-8'

Which says, "Be a source of strength to us Goddess, God wives, Indrani, Goddess Agni, Deeptamati, Aswini, Rodasi, and Varuni. Preventing in between nature the other Goddess who are the creators, perseveres, and owning the seasons accept our offerings and bless us.

Education-

Vedic society deemed the birth of a girl child as the incarnation of the goddess, and that is why the family and society was never restrictive for their education. Women who desired could go for the sacred thread ceremony or 'Upanayana Sanskara.' If they wanted to pursue knowledge without getting married, their ways were never hindered. The particular Vedic term 'Amajur' (an unmarried woman) used for them. The seers were sectionalise into two sections-'Brahmavadinis' (who dedicated their whole life to the pursuit of truth and knowledge)and 'Sadyodvahas'(who decided to be a student of Theology and Philosophy until their marriage at the age of 15-16) Rigveda contains the hymns composed by the women seers: Ghosha, Apala, Godha, Vishwavara, and by many more. There are several references of Vedic women, exploring martial pursuits. Vadhrimati and Vishpala are the examples of female worriers in the hymns of Ghosha(10.39,40), who fought actual battles.

Marriage-

Women today are considered half-intelligent and unworthy by many conservatives and so-called progressive societies. However, Hindu society's concepts were different from them. This means that a woman can choose her husband after attaining maturity. If her parents are unable to choose a deserving groom, she can herself choose her husband. Thus Manu provides a girl the right to choose her husband.

The girls were free to choose their groom either by choice or through 'Swayamver.' Pre-puberty marriages were given a chance to select their partners. Instances of love marriage were also there. Both, husband and wife, constituted the 'Griha' or home and she was considered as 'Grihini'(wife), 'Ardhangini'(one half of her husband's being) or 'Samrajini'(queen or mistress).when a woman is invited into a family through marriage, she enters "as a river enters a sea" and "to rule there along with her husband as queen, over the other members of the family." Manu Smriti, III, P-55,56

In ancient Sanskrit titles used for the wife are-

Patni- who leads the husband throughout life.

Dharamapathni- who guides the husband to do Dharma .

Sahadharmacharini- one who moves alongwith her husband on the path of Dharma, righteousness, and duty.

Though the society was patriarchal and household was ruled by house lord who exercised almost absolute control over all other members of the family and to him his wife was bound with strict tie of lifelong duties and obedience yet as Pathni or sahadharmacharini, a wife has fullest right to participate in all social and religious ceremonies with her husband. She was the subordinate partner and joint owner of the house.

Motherhood-

*“Adinamatravishad yeshiva Suchirahinsyaman UrviyaVivadhrate,
Anu Yat Purva Aruhat Sanajuvo Ni Navayasishvavarasu Dhavate.”*

‘Rigveda,Mandala-1, Ch.II,Sukta-141, sloka-5’

Which says,"

Motherhood is a spiritual transformation of wifhood. The wife may and does demand, but the mother feels it is her privilege to give. If a woman as a wife is socially significant, woman as mother is spiritually glorious. The Vedic culture trains every man to look upon all women as forms of the one Divine Mother. The mother is more worthy of reverence than father or teacher according to our scriptures.

*“Tanno fatto mayobhu vate bheshaj tanmana praviya tatta pita dhyu,
Tad gravanah somsuto mayobhustadashivana shrurutam dhigshyana yuvam.”*

‘Rigveda, Mandala-1, chapter-5, Sukta 89, shloka-4’

It represents Earth as mother and sky as a father who is a producer, preserver, and source of filling sector in our life. As a prime foundational stone, the duties of a mother were stressful as she had to raise the children tenderly, fulfilling the social and religious responsibilities. She was treated as Mother Earth for carrying a child within her womb till nine months and Mother Nature for nourishing the child and assisting her child in growth Physically, mentally, religiously, socially, and humanly. Bhismispatamaha also said in Mahabharata,

"The teacher who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such teachers of true knowledge, and the mother is more important than such fathers. There is no greater guru than mothers." Mahabharata, Shanti Parva,30.9

Mother is the first guru of a child through this means before a child learns hatred or aggression, they first know humanity and love through the mother who can install ways of forgiveness and kindness in the child. Other also considered path-decider because of her decorating and inspirational nature, she balances the aggression and holds moral and spiritual principles.

Wife-

*“Aagdhita Paridhita yaa Kashikev Jangahe,
Dadati maham Yaduri Yashunam Bhojaya Shatha.
Upop me Para Mrasha Maa Me Dbhrani Manyatha,
Sarvahamashmihi Romashaha Gandharinamivaveenka.”*

‘Rigveda,Part-II, Ch.1(sukta-126,sloka-6,7)vol.1’

Which says," The wife who always stays with you, under any circumstances, who is the processor of properties, companion, serviceable, avail every comfort to us. She is not rigid but free to express her desires. That's why a lascivious wife urges her husband to touch her everywhere and not to misunderstand her. As she is also driven by lust and filled with desires. "

Veda says, "The wife should do 'Agnihotra'(yagna), Sandhyavandana, and all other religious rituals. If for some reason, her husband is not present, the women alone have the full right to do Yagna." 'Rigveda Samhita,part-1,Sukta 79, Shloka-872'

Dharma-

In early Vedic civilization, women were always encouraged to pursue 'Dharma' without hindrances. Women stood as a decisive force in spirituality and the foundation of moral development. "O, bride! May the knowledge of the Vedas be in front of you and behind you, in your center and your ends. May you conduct your life after attaining the knowledge of Vedas. May you be benevolent, the harbinger of good fortune and health, and live in great dignity and indeed be illuminated in your husband's home." Atharva Veda,14.1.64

There is another example from Rigveda about the Dharma powers for a married woman, which says,"O, women! These mantras are given to you equally(as to men). May your thought to be harmonious. May your assemble lies be open to all without discriminations. Your mind and consciousness should be harmonious.

I (The Rishi) give you these equal power to absorb (full power) of these mantras." Rigveda, Part-10, Sukta-191, Shloka-3

The Dharmashastra has raised a chaste wife to the rank of a Goddess. She is like the blossom, and without her, home is like a dark forest. Polygamy prevailed to some extent among the royal families, but ordinarily, monogamy was the rule.

In case a girl remained unmarried, she was expected to live under the umbrella of her father and later of her brothers. However, the position did not suffer much from authoritative interference. She was socialized with a high degree of modesty. Though marriage was of great social and religious significant and Mandatory it depended on the choice of a girl to marry or to remained unmarried. There is no reference to child marriage provides in Rigveda.

"The frequent mention of unmarried girls like Ghosha, who grew up in the house of their parents (I.117.7; X.39.3, 40.5), the references to the ornaments worn by maidens at festival occasions in order to win lovers (I.123.11; VII.2.5), to the youth's courtship of the maiden he loves (I.115.2), to the lover's gifts (I.117.18), to their mutual love (I.167.3; I X.32.5, etc.) all this evidence speaks in favour of the custom of girls marrying long after they had reached puberty"

The particular Vedic term 'Amajur,' (which means unmarried women) shows that several women preferred a life of single blessedness. Women were freely entitled to Upanaya and Brahmcharya, initiation and Vedic studentship was equal to men.

II. CONCLUSION

The above description of women's status and Vedic intellectual Rishikas shows that Hindu society was modest for both the sects of the society and divisions or differences were never initiated or imposed in name of the male or the female. The sacred books, which are considered the constitution of Hindu society, never situated male hegemony or patriarchy. Women were independent for performing religious rituals, were free to grasp desired education, were the owner of their life and spend it on their terms. The decision of marriage was of their own, and they were very open even to express their sexual desires also. When the Supreme power created men and women equal, who are we to create this distinction? It is not the Rig Veda but later in other Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Skandapurana and other Puranas also, plenty of examples certify this equality. Lord Krishna in Bhagwat Gita(2.13) says, "we are neither man nor woman, but we are souls. As a soul presently, we are occupying a man's body or maybe a woman's body. In the next life, a man can become a woman, and a woman can be a man."

Which shows that no one is eternal. So rather than to egoistically spend your life. To maintain the balance in between, it is mandatory that we eschew all our material desires of worldly positions and possessions, and along with this, it is required that we give up the attraction for the opposite sex. Because as long as a man is attracted to a woman or a woman is attracted to a man, there is no possibility of liberation. Furthermore, this is why Vedas recommend four ashrams – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyas. As a Brahmachari strict vow of celibacy is observed, as a Grihastha a Brahmachari, if he so desires he can enter into a householder life, after that both husband and wife are supposed to enter into vanaprastha ashram where they both dedicate their life entirely in practicing spiritual life. They do not have any physical relationship between them, and finally, there is sanyasa ashram where both men and women decide to dedicate their life in the service of the Lord entirely and want to make sure that neither of them becomes a cause of bondage to each other in this material world. This material world is temporary, and all relations of this world is temporary, our eternal relationship is only with the Supreme Lord, and so we have to get detached from this temporary relationship and develop an everlasting permanent relationship with the Supreme Lord. Vedas focus on this aspect of life and continuously asks all humans to adhere to it.

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