

Gender equality and ancient Indian culture: A study

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ABSTRACT: This paper demonstrate notion of gender equality, and its nature as well as status of women in ancient Indian culture. Gender equality between men and women means that different behaviour; aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. But in ancient India specially, in Indus valley civilization, women had a respectable position in society. In early Vedic period, there was plethora of Goddesses to respect for women. In Vedic society women participated in religious ceremony and tribal assemblies. Widows could remarry and child marriages were unknown in society. But, in the later Vedic period, the position of women gradually deteriorated. The period clearly sees the growing tendency to stratify society along gender lines. Women lost their political rights. Child marriage, the system of Sati emerged in the shape of a formal custom during later Vedic period. But in Buddhist and Jain culture women were accorded respect and their rightful place in society.

KEYWORDS: gender equality, Indus valley civilization, plethora of Goddesses, religious ceremony Vedic period.

Date of Submission: 25-08-2018

Date of acceptance:08-09-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender Equality between man and women is the state of equal case of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economics participation and decision- making. It entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations.[1] Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It is fact that all over the world 50% of population is constituted by women. But in India, there is decreasing ratio of women. The situation of women decreasing ratio of men to women is the reason of unequal social status of women with men. To day as per our Constitution we provide that equal status to women on the basis of equality principle, such as equality, dignity and freedom from discrimination.[2] To achieve or gain these equality Indian women have to struggle for a long time. Although women in early Vedic age occupied a dignified place, they participated in outdoor life as circumstances and situations demanded and there were hardly any prescribed positions exclusively earmarked for men. But in the later Vedic period, the position of women gradually deteriorated. This paper demonstrate the status and position of women during the period of Indus valley civilizations, early and later Vedic period, epic period, period of Dharmashastra and Purana as well as position of women in Buddhism and Jainism in order to get a full picture of the status of women in ancient India.

II. WOMEN IN PRE-VEDIC AND EARLY VEDIC PERIOD

2.1 Women in Indus valley civilization

From the immemorial, women have played an extremely important role in shaping the history of India. Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period, surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome. In the Indus valley civilization, the evidence of female clay figurines is to highlight the social, cultural role of women in that society. The hair styles, ornaments dressing clearly indicate the important prominence assigned to women at that time in what appeared to be a nearly egalitarian society. Additionally, the bronze ‘Dancing Girl’ figurines suggest specific, public activities played by women at that time. Of extreme interest is also the occurrence of specific naturalistic goddesses and their priestesses, which suggest that the Indus people worshipped a goddesses whose domain was the forest.

2.2. Women in early Vedic period

Women during the early Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life.[3] In ancient India, through patriarchal system was highly prevalent – all male domination -women are enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. The Vedic Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded women as useful and productive member of the society. Women of kshatriya (warrior) caste received martial arts coaching and arms training. The condition of Vedic women was good. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to

instil respect for women. 'Ardhanareshwar' was the highly worshipped. Hindu considers that the man and women represent the two aspects of one person. Scriptures says that Lord Shiva consists of a body of a two halves one is of male and others is of female and he is called 'Ardhanareshwar'. Women was considered more powerful than men and treated as Goddess of "Shakti". The Shakta Hindu consider the Mother Goddess to be the supreme Creator; and even Vaishnavites and Saivites who worship Lord Vishnu or Lord Siva as the supreme Deity, affirm that God cannot be approach through His Shakti.

In Vedic society, women were participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. In spiritual field, wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife. Women even participated actively in religious discourses. There was no bar for women to read or study of any our sacred literature. So, in the area of spirituality women were not inferior to men. In Vedic society, women enjoyed marriage as well as domestic life. They were allotted to have multiple husband and they could leave their husbands. Widows could remarry and child marriage was unknown. There are indications of matrilineal influence in the society. The Rigveda says, the wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every aspect. Therefore, both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular. It also clearly proclaims that women should be given to lead in ruling the nation and that should have the same right as sons over the fathers property.[4] The Rigveda had rendered the highest social status to qualified women of those time Women choose their husbands through a type of marriage called 'Swayamvara' or live in relationship called 'Gandharva' marriage.[5] It is type of marriage, potential grooms assembled at the bride's house and the bride selected her spouse. Instances of Swayamvara ceremony can be found in Epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. This continued even in the later period in high class families. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives.

The Rigveda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of women with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge. Many of the Vedic rishies were women. Married and single women alike were acknowledging authorities on the Vedic wisdom. The prophetess Gargi composed several Vedic hymns questioning the origin of all existence. Others Vedic hymns is attributed to Vishwawara, sikta and others. The Rigveda identifies many women rishies; indeed, it contains dozens of verses accredited to the women philosophers Ghosha and to the great Maitreyi, who rejected half her husband Yajnavalkya's wealth in favour of spiritual knowledge.[6] It also contains long philosophical conversations between the sage Agasthya and his highly educated wife Lopamudra. The Rigveda says, the entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is symbol of prosperity and daughter of brilliance. We may respect her so that she destroys the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society. Atharva Veda states that women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society. When a bride enters a family through marriage, she is to "rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family."

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions genealogies of teachers that bear mate references to women seers such as Gargi and Maitreyi. The aforementioned Gargi, one of the eminent participants, challenged the sage Yajnavalkya with questions about the soul which confounded that learned man. Another incident in the same Upanishad relates the spiritual teachings given by Yajnavalkya to Maitreyi.[7] The Upanishads clearly declare that we individual souls are neither male nor female. Hinduism teaches that each of us passes through many lives, both male and female. It further teaches that the law of karma, which informs us that what we do to others, will in turn to be done to us and that ahimsa, non-hurtfulness, must be guiding precept of our lives. Thus Hinduism gives no justification for the mistreatment of others, whether in the basis of gender or for any other reason. Comparing the general position of women in our scriptures with those of any others faith, we will immediately discover their status in Hinduism.

III. WOMEN IN LATER VEDIC PERIOD

At the time passed the position of women is underwent changes in all spheres of life. The status of women fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. In this period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriage also came into existence. According to Aitrreya Brahman, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharava Veda also deplores the birth of daughters. Yet, certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. However during this period, we see that growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. In this period, women were not treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal rights and privilege as compared to men. Though the women participated in each family ceremony with men, but they only played a role as silent observer, not an active person. Women started being discriminated on the ground of education and others rights. Child's

marriage emphasis on physical chastity of women and their unquestioned obedience to husband lead's to progressive deterioration of their position.

3.1 Women in Epic period

The women of Epic period in ancient India enjoyed an honourable position at home. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata had given a respectable place for women.[8] Women had been called root cause of ahimsa as well as cause of dharma, prosperity and enjoyment in both Epics. We find vast references of the expression of courage, strong, will power and valour of women, like Sita, Sabitri, Draupadi and others. The Epic Ramayana is a glorious illustration for the Hindu ideals womanhood, it glorifies the value of 'Patibratya' and idealises womanhood as one of the most venerable aspects of our heritage.[9] The Epic Mahabharata also outlines the duties and the attitude of wife to the husband. Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. But there are evidences to suggest that women power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. 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. Two incidents from the Ramayana are frequently cited to indicate the subjugation of women: Sita's 'Agni Pariksha', trial by fire, and her banishment to the forest. As Rama and Sita were to become king and queen of Ayodhya, they were obligated to prove, through the 'Agni Pariksha', that Sita had remained chaste while held in captivity by Ravana. Although these instances are mythological, their influence on society and culture cannot be overlooked.

3.2 Period of Dharmashastra and Purana

During the period of Dharmashastras and Puranas the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The Manusamhita, written long after the Vedic period, is one of the Dharmashastras. Its derogatory statements about women have been highly publicized by those who would denigrate and destroy Hinduism. During the period of Smritis, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty.[10] The girls were deprived of formal education. Daughters were regarded as second class citizens. Freedom of women was curtailed. Sons were given more weight age than daughters. Girls were prevented from learning the Vedas and becoming Brahmacharinis. Manu, the law giver of Indian society gave the statement that "women have to be under father during childhood, under her husband during youth and under her son during old age".[11] At no stage shall she deserve freedom. This was the attitude of a typical patriarchal society based on private property. She lost independence and became lifelong dependent on male- dominated society.

Due to the various restrictions imposed on the freedom of women some problems started creeping in. In the social fields, pre-puberty marriage came to be practiced, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of God for a woman, education was totally denied to woman, custom of 'Debdasi', custom of 'Sati' became increasingly prevalent, purdah system came into vogue and practice of polygamy came to be tolerated. In the economic field, Women came to be regarded as a sort of property. She could be given away or loaned as any item of property. The Brahmanical law did not allow any proprietary rights to women. As the women lost her property right; she was totally denied a share in her husband's property by maintaining that a wife and a slave cannot own property. In the religious field, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers, practise penance and undertake pilgrimages.

Some sociological thinkers argue that, there are some reasons for the low status of women in later Vedic period. These reasons are imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society, rigid restrictions imposed by the caste system and joint family system, lack of educational facilities for women, introduction of the non-Aryan house hold and foreign invasions. As a result, the social, cultural and religious backbone of Indian society is based on patriarchal structure which gives comprehensively secondary status to women.

IV. STATUS OF WOMEN IN OTHERS RELIGIOS CULTURE

4.1 Women in Buddhism

Women in Buddhism have become an important topic because it is associated with their theology, history, anthropology and feminism. The status of women improved during the Buddhist period though there was no tremendous change. Some of the rigidities and restrictions imposed by the caste system were relaxed. Buddha preached equality and he tried to improve the cultural, educational and religious statuses of women. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, permitted women to join his monastic community and fully participate in it. The traditional view of women in Early Buddhism is that they are inferior.[12] There are statements in Buddhist scripture that appear to be misogynist, such as the presentation of women as obstructers of men's spiritual progress or the notion that a woman's birth is an inferior one with less opportunity for spiritual progress. Buddhist attitude is to women as deeply ambivalent.

The various schools and traditions within Buddhism hold different views as to the possibilities of women's spiritual attainments. One significant strand emphasizes that in terms of spiritual attainment, women and men have equal spiritual capabilities and that women not only can, but also in many cases have attained spiritual liberation. Such a perspective is found in a number of sources of different periods, including early Buddhist literature in the Theravāda tradition, Mahāyāna sūtras, and Tantric writings. There are stories of women and even children who attained enlightenment during the time of the Buddha. Furthermore, Buddhist doctrines do not differentiate between men and women since everyone, regardless of gender, status, or age, is subject to old age, illness, and mortality, thus the suffering and impermanence that mark conditioned existence apply to all. Gautama Buddha speaking to the fact that a woman can attain enlightenment,[13] it is also clearly stated in the Bahudhātuka-sutta that there could never be a female Buddha. In Theravada Buddhism, the modern school based on the Buddhist philosophy of the earliest dated texts, Buddhahood is a rare event. The focus of practice is primarily on attaining Arhatship and the Pali Canon has examples of both male and female Arhats who attained nirvana. In Mahayana schools, Buddhahood is the universal goal for Mahayana practitioners. The Mahayana sutras maintain that a woman can become enlightened, only not in female form. Some Theravada suttas state that it is impossible for a woman to be a bodhisattva, which is someone on their way to Buddhahood. A bodhisattva can be a human, animal, serpent, or a god, but never a woman. [14] These suttas do not deny women to become awakened, but they are unable to lead a Buddhist community. If the aspiration to Buddhahood has been made and a Buddha of the time confirms it, it is impossible to be reborn as a woman. An appropriate aim is for women to aspire to be reborn as male. They can become a male by moral actions and sincere aspiration to maleness. Being born a female is a result of bad karma.[15]

4.2 Women in Jainism

Jainism is a religion of religious equality. According to the Tattvārtha-sūtra, all beings - save for infernal beings, one-sensed beings, or gods - possess one of three genders: female, male, or hermaphroditic[16] These genders are produced by a specific "body-making karma" that is attached to the soul of an individual being. In the process of achieving spiritual liberation, this karma is shed in order to free the soul from the cycle of rebirths known as saṃsāra. As such, all beings that have the potential to achieve spiritual liberation can do so, regardless of gender. Although Jainism is in many ways dedicated to equality, for some Jain woman's very femaleness creates spiritual inequality.

One of the most fundamental distinctions between Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains is their respective views on women as mendicants, or nuns that originated over their debate regarding nudity. Digambara Jain claims that it is necessary for all mendicants to conduct their renunciation without clothing. For them, this represents the idealized practice of aparigraha, in which a mendicant renounces all property and possessions, including clothing. For Digambaras, women cannot become ascetics as they could not be naked, which was seen as "an essential component of the path to liberation".[17] Women were also seen as essentially immoral - and therefore unsuited to become a Mendicant - because their bodies "generate and destroy life-forms within their sexual organs... thus repeatedly infringing non-violence".[18] Women were exempt from spiritual liberation because their bodies consistently broke the cardinal rule of ahimsā. The Digambara Jain believes that women cannot achieve liberation without being reborn as men first. The Svetambara disagrees Digambara Jain hold this view because they do not believe that nakedness is an essential element of the way to liberation.

Since women are not allowed to be naked in public, they cannot achieve liberation directly, and so are seen as second-class citizens. This ban on female nakedness is partly intended to protect both men and women: If women went around naked it would cause men to experience sexual desire and the desire produced would hinder the man's progress to liberation. Digambaras also believe that women are harmful. This comes partly from a belief that menstrual blood kills micro-organisms living in the female body. Some Jain texts say that menstrual blood is a sign of impurity. Women are spiritually impure. Digambaras present another argument is that a woman's nature is to care for children and other dependants, she will find it much more difficult to break free from these earthly attachments, and unless she does this, she cannot achieve liberation.

V. CONCLUSION

It is to be sure that, except Rig Vedic Age, women are sometimes egregiously mistreated in ancient India, later Vedic Age, medieval and modern Indian society as well as elsewhere in the world. In India, it is a violation of the Santana Dharma. Every religion looks to its scriptures and its holy men and women for guidance. In ancient era, the Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures give numerous examples of women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators and saints. In modern age, western countries women's in reality are equal with men. But in India the situation is not so. All aspects of Indian male dominated society, women were suffer by unequal social status with men. Our ancient era is the witness of this inequality. It is evident from our culture that at one side we treat woman as goddess in the form of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali and very next movement all the heinous and illegal offences being committed against them like sexual

exploitation, rape, kidnapping child marriage, dowry system, and most importantly nowadays 'Female Foeticide'. But we believe that one day has come in future, when we will be over come of this problems, and set up a ideal society where women once again be accorded respect and their rightful place; whether she chooses to focus on the role of wife, good mother, friend, philosopher guide, scholar, doctors, scientist, author, artist as well as a good human being.

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Atasi Mahapatra "Gender equality and ancient Indian culture: A study "International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention(IJHSSI), vol. 07, no. 8, 2018, pp. 22-26