

Culture, Gender and Literature of Ancient Indian

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Abstract:

Abstract: 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 text and religious culture India. In this paper, we shall look also into the history and explore the status of Indian women from ancient times, Indian women's place in literature, and their contribution to literature. As revealed from ancient literature and original text by this study the women of ancient India were not so degraded as their position was degraded in medieval and modern era when women were start to face suppression, oppression, and the institutional practices like child marriage, bigamy, polygamy, dowry, pardah, sati and devadasi.

Keywords: Women, Equity, Literature, Religion, Polygamy, Devadasi.

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 For India we have been politically independent for 75 years ago and along with independence on socially and economically we have still a long way to go. Gender equality means that the different behavior, 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. Today 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. The task becomes all the more difficult since ancient Indian texts, often the only resources to be drawn upon are originating in the Vedas, Hindu religion has undergone transformation down the century. All ancient text basically deals primarily with religious topics. However life of the people in both its spiritual and secular aspects is reflected in it and much information concerning the life of women, their position and status in society incredibly though it may appear the women question has been discussed in India from remote times. To constructing this paper I have relied primarily on A. S. Altekar's most celebrated treatise entitled, *The Position of Women in Hindu Society*, which is widely acknowledged as the most authentic study in the area.

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 text and religious culture India. In this paper, we shall look also into the history and explore the status of Indian women from ancient times, Indian women's place in literature, and their contribution to literature. As revealed from ancient literature and original text by this study the women of ancient India were not so degraded as their position was degraded in medieval and modern era when women were start to face suppression, oppression, and the institutional practices like child marriage, bigamy, polygamy, dowry, pardah, sati and devadasi.

II. WOMEN IN PRE-VEDIC TO LATER VEDIC PERIOD

The Rig Veda is the one considerable documents that remains to us from the early period of human thought of which the historic Eleusinian and orphic mysteries were the failing rampant, when the spiritual and psychological knowledge of the race was concealed for reasons, now difficult to determine in a veil of concrete and material figures and symbols which protected the sense from the profane and revealed it to the initiate. There are passages in the Vedic text which state that a sacrificial act is to take place under a lot of astronomical information's, the idea of taking the astronomical data contained in the Indian literature for fixing the dates. In Vedic period some girls did received formal education. Parents wished and prayed for learned daughters and did not want them to marry young because learned and grown up girls were likely to choose educated husbands.³ The precept of Panini, Chatradayah, Salayam, indicating schools or boarding houses for girls students, is supposed to be a conclusive proof of girl's education. ⁴ The Rig Veda provides plenty evidence to demonstrate the concept of equality of women with men as looks access and capability to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge. Many of the Vedic rishis were women. Married and single women alike were allowing authorities on the Vedic wisdom.

The names of women scholars, probably of those belonging to the group of brahmabadinis show that they specialized in the study of philosophy, grammar and theology. We have two instances of such specialized sources of study pursued by women. Apisala was a grammarian and brahmana women specializing in her grammar were known as Apisala Brahmani.⁵ Similarly Kasakrtsna brahmani were those who studied the Mimangsha work of Kasakrtsna.⁶ Patanjali differentiated female teachers from the wives of male teachers from the wives of male teachers as acharya and acharyani, upadhyaya and upadhyayani respectively. Audameghya was an eponymous teacher whose student assumed the title of Audamegha.

Furthermore there were other learned women like Atreyi who studied Vedanta with Valmiki and Agastya. The philosopher Sulabha held wise discourse with Janaka and Siva was well versed in the Vedas.⁸ the women scholar Gargi was reputed philosophers whose wisdom was widely known from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. At least she was the female disputant along with other male philosophers present in the court of King Janaka to challenge Yajnavalkya's claim to superior knowledge.⁹ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions genealogies of teachers that bear mate references to women seers such as Gargi and Maitreyi. 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 teaching given by Yajnavalkya to Maitreyi.¹⁰ It also contains long philosophical conversations between the sage Agasthya and his educated wife Lopamudra. The instance of educated and wise women appeared to be show that the intellectual level of women was a fairly high standard.

Furthermore names like Ghosa, Lopamudra, Viswabara and Apala have come down the ages as composers of Vedic hymns. Gargi composed several Vedic hymns questioning the origin of all existence. Others Vedic hymns are attributed to Vishwawara, Sikta and others. There were also female rishis like Gargi, Vecaknavi, Vadava Pratitheyi, Sulabha and other who were distinguished enough to be remembered along with the male rishis like Viswamitra or Vasistha. The Rig Veda identifies many women rishis;¹¹ 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 favor of spiritual knowledge and moksha.¹² This is evident from example of Maitreyi, by her outright rejection of material wealth and acceptance of what she valued more, added a new dimension to the concept of Indian womanhood for all time to come.

The Rig Veda points to a highly organized society. Monogamy was the general rule, but among the princes, polygamy was also practiced. Polyandry was absolutely unknown to them. Child marriage was unknown. The marriage was a sacred bond which could not be broken by any human action; even widows were allowed to remarry. Seemingly this tradition was discontinued later. Women came to have no formal education and displayed no intellectual interest or activity whatsoever. Women during the early Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life.¹³ In ancient India, through patriarchal system was highly prevalent – all male domination -women are enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Women of kshatriya (warrior) caste received martial arts coaching and arms training. The condition of Vedic women was good. They were allotted to have multiple husband and they could leave their husbands. Widows could remarry and child marriage was unknown which are indications of matrilineal influence in the society.

The Rig Veda says, the wife and husband, 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.¹⁴ Women choose their husbands through a type of marriage called 'Swayamvara' or live in relationship called 'Gandharva' marriage.¹⁵ 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. Though monogamy was most common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage. After this period, in the latter part of the Vedic period, women started being discriminated against in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, purdah, and polygamy further worsened the women's position. The status of women depreciated very badly after the later period mostly in medieval and late decades.

At the time passed the position of women are suffered changes in all spheres of life. The eminence 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. The situation of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to disappear through the passage of time. In later Vedic period, 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. Widow remarriage was prohibited, Child's marriage emphasis on physical chastity of women and their unquestioned obedience to husband lead's to deterioration of their position, from this time gradually women became a social and political animal those who protect the religious rule and regulations in society.

The Upanishads clearly declare that individual souls are neither male nor female. Hinduism teaches that each of human are 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. During the Vedic period there was no caste system at all, there was Barnasram system which was the division of work/ Srama, which was became an identity of individual caste.

III. PERIOD OF DHRMASASTRAS AND PURANAS

The women of Epic period enjoyed a noble position at home. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata had given a respectable place for women.¹⁶ Probably a faint echo of this spirit could still be detected in some epic heroines like Draupadi or Tara, who were celebrated for their knowledge and learning. Shakuntala was a courageous and learned woman in the Mahabharata; when repulsed by Dusyanta, from her discourse in the court of Dusyanta it seems that her knowledge was the result of study and training and she was not a woman to be brushed aside by anyone. We find vast references of the expression of courage, strong will power and valour of women, like Shakuntala, Sita, Sabitri, Draupadi and others. The Epic Ramayana is a glorious illustration for the Hindu ideals womanhood, it glorifies the value of Patibratya and idealizes womanhood as one of the most revered aspects of our heritage.¹⁷

The Epic Mahabharata also outlines the responsibilities and the approach of wife to the husband. 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 disgraced Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the total destruction of Ravana when abducted and seized tried to marry Sita forcibly. Two incidents from the Ramayana are frequently revealed to indicate the suppression of women; Sita's '*Agni Pariksha*', trial by fire, and her exile to the forest. As Ram and Sita were to become king and queen of Ayodhya, they were obligated to prove, through the '*Agni Pariksha*', that Sita had remained innocent while held in confinement by Ravana. Sita set an example to the future women that illegitimate illegal plea of the Praja's or public of the Ayodhya which could not be fulfilled frequently, so that she was preferred to leaved husband and family than to prove her chastity. She also set an instance that self-respect for a woman is very much substantial than for her king husband and his family. Although these occurrences are historical, their impact on society and culture cannot be overlooked.

The study of Dharma Sastras gives us a lot of useful information regarding the social, economic, religious and political life of the people. In Hindu Dharma there were four important Dharma Sastras are those of Manu, Vishnu, Yajnavalkya and Narada. The Manusamhita, is the most authoritative work on Hindu Law, written long after the Vedic period, is one of the Smriti Shastra refers to the Dharma Sastras of Atri, Gautam, Shaunaka, Yajavalkya, Vishnu and Vasistha.¹⁸ Its deprecating statements about women have been highly shown by those writers, historians and authors who would malign the status of women in society and Hinduism by the text of Manu. Women were not entitled to inherit any property except Stridhana and forbidden to study of Veda, stated by Manu. But in Parasar Samhita stated that women had been right of remarriage, inheritance right of father property, right to education and dignified position in society. Obviously, there were valid reasons behind such makeover and deterioration of women, sinking them from bold women to submissive living being. Women lost many of their social and economic rights, particularly those that contained elements allowing them possibility for deciding their own future. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion

to husband is their only duty.¹⁹ Daughters were regarded as second class citizens. Freedom of women was truncated. Sons were given more weightage than daughters. Girls were disallowed to learning the Vedas and becoming Brahmacharinis. At no stage shall women deserve freedom stated by Manu which was mostly known to the historians and public.

Even Buddhism did little for women. Though the Maurya kings often employed female bodyguards, spies, and 'Stri- adhyaksha mahamatras', their status was still quite bad. Upper caste ladies had to accept the purdah. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without their husbands' permission. The remarriage of women and their right to hold property independently were allowed to all women in the Arthashastra, although with reservation.

They became worse off in the Gupta period. The Smriti Shastras abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth, and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and sati, prostitution and the Devadasi system became prevalent. Learning about the status of women folk in Indian society was needed to have enlightened knowledge about their inclination toward status and empowerment up to medieval age and pre Modern period too.

IV. WOMEN IN CULTURAL SOCIETY

This was the attitude of a typical patriarchal society based on private property. She lost independence and became lifelong dependent on male- dominated family and 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, 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 craze and practice of polygamy came to be endured. 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. Some intellectuals argue that, there are some reasons for the low status of women in later Vedic period. These reasons are imposition of Brahmanical rigors on the entire society, stiff restrictions enforced by the caste system and lack of educational facilities for women, introduction of the non-Aryan house hold and foreign invasions. As a result, the social, cultural and religious strength of Indian society is based on masculine structure which gives systematically secondary status to women.

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. 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.²⁰ Buddhist attitude is to women as deeply ambivalent. Gautama Buddha talking to the fact that a woman can achieve enlightenment,²¹ 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. A bodhisattva can be a human, animal, serpent, or a god, but never a woman,²² an appropriate aim is for women to desire to be reborn as male. They can become a male by moral actions and sincere objective to maleness. Being born a female is a result of bad karma.²³

Jainism is a religion of religious equality. According to the Tattvārtha-sūtra, all beings - save for internal beings, one-sensed beings, or gods - possess one of three genders: female, male, or hermaphroditic.²⁴ One of the most fundamental distinctions between Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains is their particular 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 Digambaras, women cannot become celibates as they could not be naked, which was seen as "*an essential component of the path to liberation*".²⁵ 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*".²⁶ 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. Digambaras present another argument is that a woman's nature is to care for children and other dependents, she will find it much more difficult to break free from these earthly attachments, and unless she does this, she cannot achieve liberation.

V. LITERATURE AND WOMEN

Interfacing Indian women with literature, we start with getting aware with women writers from ancient time's literature amongst women in ancient times. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is enormous. There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahmavadinis, or the women who never married and erudite the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned female students studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess Jayanti, who remained a spinster-to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.

It is encouraging to note that in ancient times, even though women were bound in restraints in the male-controlled society, they were associated with literature, music, and arts, further to the above inclination of women to literature by adding a list of women writers during ancient times: "*The Wonderful Anthology Unbound* (2015), edited by Annie Zaidi, reminds us, that the earliest written records of "breakaways" are those of Buddhist nuns from the Therigatha. Some of these poems were collected as early as the sixth century BCE, and are voices of those women who indicated their spiritual goals above everything else. Followers of the "*great tradition of ancient Hinduism*", of course, like to present Vedic characters such as the sages Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra as the first examples of feminist liberals. However, there's no harm in consequence some excited inspiration from their stories of standing up to superior male Brahmin scholars.

It would be many more centuries before Indian women would start challenging and actually receiving some literary activity. These were women outside the domain of society, who, having cast off the burden of being a man's property, found their voices. Though primarily devotional and directed towards male gods, their poems reflect autonomy of spirit in a society that expected only convention and obedience from them. In their denial of specific women roles and aspects, they set the earliest examples of feminism in action. The ancient women literary figures were attached to poetic leanings toward God and verses written by women rishi's are pertinent even today, hymn these verses and get engrossed in holy spirits.

VI. AT THE END

It is to be sure that, except Rig Vedic Age, women are sometimes mistreated in ancient India, later Vedic Age, medieval and modern Indian society as well as elsewhere in the world. 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. Now in postmodern age, western countries showing that women's in reality are equal with men. But in India and world 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 moment all the heinous and illegal offences being committed against them like sexual exploitation, rape, kidnapping child marriage, dowry system, and most importantly nowadays growing rapidly female feticide and women trafficking.

Among the Smritikaras Manusmriti which is the collection of work written by various Manu, we do not know this produce of which Manu, whatever, it is clear that madness of Manusmriti was main cause to decline the position of women in society during the later period. In 18th Century conservative intellectuals were more supported and heads of the society implemented the Laws of Manu which were against the women educations, property right and liberation. Differential marriage laws and differential laws of descent for different castes were sought to be placed by Manu. Therefore, the story of Indian women started from Vedic period and end in 11th century, suddenly then we came to know about women during the British period, in between more than 600 years, we could not found those general women story who were living in villages and small Janapads (Town) or in society in written format, or in text or in Novels. The '*downfall of women*' from ancient to 19th century shows how we would understood shifts in conjugal practices, particularly those that occurred with the Brahmanical victory over Buddhism as leading to the degradation of women.

At the end of this discussion its need to be stressed that the general tends to ignore the women issues even today. Society most of the time played a typical role against the women, execution of equity and social justice so far from reality. In 18th century India in pre-modern times to the establishment of a particular way of life generally was accomplished by the subordination or marginalization of other worldviews and practices. Hierarchical male dominated social order is based on the inequality of its constituents mainly in Shastras and Smritis. During the reformation era Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar were fight for women liberation from religious and social bondage first time. Abolition of Sati and Widow Remarriage Act both were the end of the madness Manu's laws. Gradually spread of education among the women, they are aware about their right and empowerment. Struggle of Indian women if show in a graph it is appearing that from ancient to modern time frame is from so high to low and again slowly grown up and still continued.

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