

Deconstructing the 'Golden Age' Myth for Early Vedic Women

Mr. Ajoy Krishna Roy

The Teacher-in-Charge, A. C. Institution, Malda

Abstract

The idea that the Rig Vedic period was a 'Golden Age' for women has been a topic of contention, of late. While the common narrative seconds this notion, a closer and critical probe of the Rig Vedic texts contradicts this century old conception. This paper argues that the Rig Vedic era, while offering privileges to a sectional group of women, actually portrayed a less idealized society for the rest. Mostly the women remained in the confinements of the patriarchal framework. Participation of women in public life was restricted and they had no room in the Vedic governance. This paper highlights that female empowerment in that age was, in reality, a myth. Although an elite group of women could transcend the societal norms, these evidences were exceptions and not universal. This paper also marks how women were circumscribed by a male dominated social hegemony and thus justly demands a critical reevaluation in both historical and educational discourse.

The common narrative presented in most of the History books about women in the Rig Vedic period (c. 1500 - 1000 BCE) suggests that women of that period enjoyed liberty, equality and high status in the erstwhile society. But if we probe deeper into the topic, it might challenge this typical narrative and suggest a contradictory fact that the age might not have been a 'Golden Age' for women, in the truest sense. Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar in *Great Women of India* opined, "the general position and status of Indian women in the Vedic Age was much higher than in any other ancient society that we know of, those of Greece and Rome not excluded" (5). But this conception becomes debatable when Upinder Singh in *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone age to the 12th Century* contradicted. She rightly said, "The experience of women belonging to different groups in society varied, and it is therefore necessary to break down the category of women into more specific sub-categories based on rank, class, occupation and age" (193). Barbara N. Ramusack and Sharon Sievers, while citing Wendy O' Flaherty in *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History*, wrote that *Rig Veda* is "a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men [and] one of these concerns is women" (19). They also contradicted A. S. Altekar's quotation regarding women's "fairly satisfactory" status in society and asserted that the early historians did their work of compilation of historical facts in great haste (19).

During the Rig Vedic period, the *Rig Veda* was composed. "Early Vedic literature refers to the family books of the *Rig Veda Samhita*" (Singh 187). It was the only source of documentation and the root problem lies in there. The tangible evidence which is available in the form of this single scripture may not suffice establishing the notion that gender parity at that time was in vogue. Women undoubtedly did have some prominent roles but those women did not represent the entire society but only a part of it. In total, four hundred and seven ascetics were associated with the composition of the *Rig Veda* out of

which only twenty-one were women (Ahuja Introduction xii). Upon calculation, we can clearly witness that the percentage of women ascetics involved in the composition of the *Rig Veda* was only five. This is the actual reflection that we get of that society. Only a small section of women were privileged enough to receive education. But if we cross check the backgrounds of those privileged women, we would surprisingly find that those women were either the daughter or the wife of the great venerated sages of that time. Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Arundhati, Ghosha were some of them who had elite family backgrounds.

It has been established by the historians that the Aryans were actually "immigrants" (Singh 186) who, in all probability, vigorously engaged themselves in strife with the indigenous tribes like *Shambara*, *Pipru*, *Dhuni* and *Chumuri*. These Aryans had an objective of establishing their political hegemony and "had to undergo frequent wars with the non-Aryans in the newly occupied areas" (Mitra 22). Therefore, it is well assumed that the society was left under the supervision of the sages who allowed their daughters and wives to receive education. But it was an exception and not a norm. Moreover, education was granted to a section of women on a condition that they would always be subservient to men. When Gargi violated this condition in the scholarly debate with Yajnavalkya, she was threatened "to stop or her head might fall off" (Singh 183). In this verbal contest Gargi's competence to challenge the knowledge of Yajnavalkya was considered threatening and hence she was immediately clipped off. So, it is proved that in the Rig Vedic period women had no power to exert their supremacy. Their liberty was in the hands of men who unfailingly decided the fate of women, privileged or unprivileged.

In *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj*, Sukumari Bhattacharya validated that the Rig Vedic society was out and out patriarchal and so the position of women could not possibly be glorifying (1). For being liberal, the hymn 1.46.4 of the *Rig Veda* chided Ushas and called her 'blatant' (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj* 1) as if freedom enjoyed by a woman was a sin. Lineage followed patrilineal descent as the married couples prayed for sons and not daughters and rituals and prayers available in the Rig Veda concerned procuring sons alone (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj* 7). Though the custom of *suttee* or *purdah* was not prevalent in that age, polygamy was much in vogue. To establish polygamy the people in that age practised a peculiar religious ritual of wrapping a stick (stood for men) with two pieces of cloth (stood for women) (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj* 4). Women were allowed to take part in the religious activities but only in the presence of men. Moreover, they owned no right to give gifts to others (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharat: Samaj O Sahitya* 31). Upinder Singh seconded this opinion when she wrote, "While women participated as wives in sacrifices performed on behalf of their husbands, they did not perform sacrifices in their own right; nor do they appear as givers or receivers of dana or dakshina" (193). The fact that widow remarriage was prevalent in that age did not ensure that the widows were well off. Widows were married to their brother-in-law. In reality, it might have been one of the strategies of the patriarchal society to possess the *streedhans* those widows owned.

Even in the Rig Vedic period, the marriage of the girls was greatly prioritised by the families. The primary role of the women was not receiving education but getting married off and procuring male offspring for their husbands. The parents even tried to marry off the daughters with deformities in exchange for lucrative dowry. But in the case of Apala, the dowry was useless and her marital discord could be solved only after her skin disease was cured by Ashvins, the twin gods of medicine (Pattanaik 48). The terms like *amajuh*, *kulpa*, *jaratkumari* suggest the existence of the spinsters and they were

disregarded in the society because they had no alternative left but to dwell in their natal home (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj* 3).

Incidents of abduction, elopement and selling of a wife portray nothing but the deplorable condition of the women in the Rig Vedic age. The Rig Vedic hymn 10.85 of *Akshya Sukta* pictured the rue of a gambler-husband whose wife was taken by another gambler (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharat: Samaj O Sahitya* 14). Hymn numbers 1.212.7 and 1.116.1 narrate the story of the kidnap of Purumitra's daughter by Bimad and hymn number 7.55.5-8 of the *Rig Veda* gave us a narrative of an elopement (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharat: Samaj O Sahitya* 29-30). These examples, which are way from glorifying the status of women, actually hint at the vulnerable position of women at that time.

Although women were allowed to earn their livings, it was just because men at that time were in need of women's contributions. We must remember that men were engaged in battles. So for the sake of the society, women's active economic participation was required. If we come across the various terms, we would find that women in that age were involved in various types of professions and were permitted to go outside the confinements of their homes. We get the terms like *pesaskari* ("female embroiderer"), *vidalakari* ("basket maker"), *kosakari* ("scabbard maker"), *vasahpalpuli* ("landerss"), *rajayitri* ("dyer"), *upalapraksini* ("grinder of corns"), *siri* ("weaver"), *anjanakari* ("ointment maker"), *kantakikari* ("thorn worker") (Padia 29-30). They also made weapons (Altekar 179) and were part of the battles as evident in the hymns (5.30.9) and (10.102.2) of the *Rig Veda* (Padia 30). We even get terms like *agru*, *rojyitri*, *samanya*, *sadharani*, *punshcholi* which hint at the presence of the prostitutes, who traded their bodies to earn their livelihood. One might think that the women in the Rig Vedic period were economically independent and had autonomy. But one must not forget that the aforementioned professions were not at all of lofty standards and so their professions could easily be replaced by those of slaves or *sudras* in the Later Vedic period. (Sukumari Bhattacharya *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj* 52-53). Women were not part of the *sabhas* and *samitis* and had no right to take decisions in serious matters. Power and autonomy were exclusive to men who treated women as per their requirement and enjoyed all the privileges that society could offer.

Hence, it cannot be denied that the patriarchal norms were deep rooted in that age and though some liberties were given to women in terms of education and performing religious rites, these rights were either restricted to a particular section of women or limited in scope. Professions that were followed by women were menial, so were allowed to perform. Compared to later periods, this age might have appeared to be liberal for women, but it would be inappropriate and inaccurate to call it a 'Golden Age' for them. The statement asserted by Upinder Singh validated the true picture of this age as it highlighted the universal nature of patriarchy. She wrote, "Male dominance and the subordination of women is a feature of all known historical societies. The issue is one of the degree of dominance and subordination, and the structures in which these were embedded. Compared to later Vedic literature, the family books of the *Rig Veda Samhitav* reflect a situation in which social status was not as rigidly defined or polarized as it came to be in later times. However, it was not a society of equals-rank and genders were the two main bases of inequality" (193).

Works Cited

1. Ahuja, M. L. *Women in Indian Mythology*. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2011.
2. Altekar, A. S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization : From Prehistoric to the Present Day*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2016.

3. Bhattacharya, Sukumari. *Prachin Bharate Nari O Samaj: A Bengali Translation of Women & Society in Ancient India*. National Book Agency Pvt. Ltd., 2015.
4. ---, *Prachin Bharat: Samaj O Sahitya*. Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2015.
5. Madhavananda, Swami, and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, editors. *Great Women of India*. Advaita Ashrama, 1953.
6. Mitra, Priti. *Life and Society in the Vedic Age*. 1st ed., Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1966.
7. Padia, Chandrakala, editor. *Women in Dharmasastras: A Phenomenological and Critical Analysis*. Rawat Publications, 2009.
8. Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine*. Inner Traditions Rochester, Vermont 2000. E-book, ISBN 978-1-594-77-537-6.
9. Ramusack, Barbara N., and Sharon L. Seivers. *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History*. Indiana UP, 1999.
10. Singh, Upinder. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2009.