

Reading Women in the Indian Cultural Context with Special Reference to the Vedas

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Abstract

Women of the Vedic period, were epitomes of intellectual and spiritual attainments. The Vedas have volumes to say about these women, who both complemented and supplemented their male partners. This paper represents an understanding of the status of women in the Indian cultural context, as mentioned in the Vedas. During the earlier times, the women were considered with respect. Many women Rishis have contributed to the hymns of the Vedas. They were also known as ‘Brahmavadini’ In terms of their status, they were treated equally as their male counterparts. They even had an access to proper education. This paper also talks about women’s freedom in various fields. They also contributed to the battlefield. Despite the patriarchal structure, women enjoyed their own rights and privileges. They had right to choose their own husband through ‘Swayamvara’. This paper examines the status of women in early Vedic period through different aspects.

The Vedic Period was a crucial period in the development of Indian civilization and culture. It arose from a simple system of a complex society, much like all other civilizations. There are four main Vedas available to provide light on society, which are mainly religious scriptures that also remark on many areas of society such as political, economic, and more.

They wrote Samhitas of Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, and Sama Veda during the later Vedic Period when society became more complicated due to the shift to a completely rural civilization. The texts that were created were also intricate, with special rites and procedures.

According to one view women during the Vedic period occupied an exalted position and they enjoyed a fair amount of personal freedom and equal rights with men. But another view holds that birth of a girl was not a welcome event. However, she did not suffer due to that reason. She was given all the privileges entitled to a son. No discrimination was made on the basis of education. At least twenty women composed Rig Vedic Hymns. Gargi and Maitreyi were the leading philosophers of the time.

The Vedas are ancient scriptures that formed the foundation of ancient society and contain the earliest thoughts known to mankind. The Taitriya Samhita depicts a man and a woman as two wheels of a cart, suggesting that they both resemble two bulls drawn by a chariot. The Samhita claims that women serve as stepping stones for their families. In accordance with Vedic doctrine, Brahma (the Creator) caused a man to appear on his right side and a woman to appear on his left. The lesson delivered by the Vedas through this symbolic account is that there is equality between men and women in this world, and that humanity should be mindful of it in all their dealings (Vanshika, 4048).

Women, in the Vedic era, so excelled in the sphere of education that even the deity of learning was conceived of as a female popularly known as ‘Saraswati’. Girls were allowed to enter into the Gurukulas along with boys. There are also instances of female Rishis, such as Ghosa, Kakhivati Surya Savitri,

Indrani, Shradha Kamayani, Yami, Shachi, Poulomi, Urvashi etc. Marriage in the Vedic Period was considered a social and religious duty and united the couple on an equal footing. The couple prayed that their love and friendship should not break down. The Vedic literature also contained that the Kshatriya girls were allowed to settle marriages in accordance with their own wishes. This was done through the custom of 'Swayavara' or self choice. This is an indicator of their dignified status in the Vedic society.

The concept of 'dan' or gift was prevalent in the Vedic period. But the practice of dowry was unknown. The wife held an honorable position in the household. She enjoyed freedom of movement and was not confined to the house only. In religious performances, the wife occupied a prominent position. Even the performance of certain ceremonies was invalid without the wife.' Monogamy was the form of marriage during the Vedic days. The term 'Dampati' was frequently used in the Vedic texts. The term meant "two joint owners of the household."

The Vedic people were quite ignorant of the possibility of marital bonds ever being terminated or ended. The concept of widow remarriage was in vogue and the brother of the dead husband was taking care of the widowed sister-in-law in the Vedic days. The widow did not have the right to inherit her deceased husband's property in the Vedic age. However, the Rig Veda recognized the right of a spinster to inherit her father's property (Nitisha).

Early Vedic age can be called as Golden period of womanhood in India. In that age, women enjoyed an honoured place in the society. The education of girls was not neglected. The wife was mistress of the household and authority over the slaves. In all religious ceremonies, she participated with her husband. Purdah system and Sati system were not prevalent in the Vedic society. Remarriage of widows was permitted. The practice of Swayamvara was prevalent in the society.

Some erudite women who wrote mantras and became Rishis are named in the Rig Veda, including Vishwavara, Apala, and Ghosha. Women were given a prominent position in society during the Vedic era. They had a form of autonomy that was genuinely accompanied by societal consequences, and they were on an equal footing with their male counterparts. This era also gave rise to the old Vedic philosophical idea of "Shakti," the feminine principle of energy. Worshiping female gods or goddesses was one way this manifested. "A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care," says Vedic literature, praising the birth of a scholarly daughter.

The highly intelligent and greatly learned woman, who chose the path of Vedic studies, were called "Brahmavadinis". Co-education seems to have existed in this period and both the genders got equal attention from the teacher. Ladies from Kshatriya caste received martial arts courses and arms training. In the Vedic age, there was the custom of 'Kanyavivaha', where marriage of a pre-puberty girl was arranged by her parents and 'Praudhavivah', where girls were married off after attaining puberty. As in present, after marriage, the girl became a 'Grahini' (wife) and was considered 'Ardhangini' or one half of her husband's being.

Remarriage of women were allowed under very special condition. If a woman lost her husband, she was not forced to undergo merciless practices that cropped up in later years. If they chose to, they could live a life of a 'Sanyasin' or a hermit after the husband passed away. The Rig Veda mentions Romasha, Lopamudra, Apala, Kadru, Vishwavara, Ghosha, Juhu, Vagambhrini, Paulomi, Yami, Indrani, Savitri and Devajami. The Sam Veda adds Nodha, Akrishtabhasha, Sikatanivari and Gaupayana. Women Rishis (Rishikas) of about 30 are named in the Rig Veda. Lopamudra was the wife of Agasthya, known for her command over Sanskrit and Tamil. Romasha was the wife of Svanya, and Vishwavara belonged to the Athri family. Sarasvati belonged to the Angirasa family; Apala of the Athri family. Gargi was one of the

learned persons summoned by King Janaka. Ghosha, the granddaughter of Dirghhatmas and daughter of Kakshivat, both composers of hymns of the tenth book, each containing four verses, assigned to her name. She suffered from an incurable disease, probably leprosy, and remained a spinster at her father's house. Her imploration with the Ashwins and the devotion of her forefathers towards them cure her disease and allow her to experience wedded bliss. In Rig Veda, there are long conversations between the sage Agasthya and his wife Lopamudra. This testifies to the great intelligence and goodness of the latter.

According to tradition, the philosopher Agasthya created Lopamudra, who was handed to the Vidarbha monarch as a daughter. She was raised in luxury and received the greatest education imaginable from the royal couple. Sage Agasthya, who was sworn to chastity and poverty, desired to own her when she reached marriageable age. Lopamudra left her castle for Agasthya's hermitage after agreeing to marry him. Lopa became weary of her husband's harsh methods after years of devoted service. She composed a two-stanza hymn in which she fervently begged for his love and attention. Soon after, the sage realized his responsibilities to his wife and lived his ascetic and domestic lives with equal fervor, achieving a state of spiritual and The Rig Veda contains about one thousand hymns, of which about ten are accredited to Maitreyi, the woman seer and philosopher. She contributed towards the enhancement of her husband Yajnavalkya's personality and flowering of his spiritual thoughts.

The Vedic women were economically independent. Some of the ladies worked as teachers. Clothing spinning and weaving were done at home. The place of manufacturing was at home. Women also assisted their husbands in their agricultural endeavours. Personal property, such as jewellery and clothing, was allowed for the women. The Arthashastra allows women to have up to 2000 silver panas in their possession. The funds in excess of this limit were kept in trust for the wife by the husband. Only in the direst of circumstances might a husband use a woman's possessions. When a lady dies, her property is passed down to her daughters (not to the husband or the sons). In the event that her husband died without a son, the widow inherited his property. In some cases, women appear to be treated as commodities. She may be given away or rented out like any other object. This was the mindset of a patriarchal, private-property-based society. Women had no proprietary interest under Brahmanical law, and the provision for Stridhana is quite restricted, extending only to the wife's rights to jewels, decorations, and gifts given to her at the time of her marriage. In the Vedic era, a widow did not have the right to inherit her slain husband's possessions. The Rig Veda, on the other hand, recognised a spinster's right of ownership in her father's property.

Daughters who were not married had a share of their father's property. In the absence of a boy, the daughter held complete legal rights to her father's possessions. Mother's estate was split evenly among her sons and unmarried daughters following her death. Married women, on the other hand, had no claim to their father's property. A woman had no direct share in her husband's property as a wife. A bereaved mother was entitled to certain benefits. Manus also inhibits women from their economic rights. "A wife, a son, and a slave are deemed to have no property; the wealth that they earn belongs to him to whom they belong," he says. Women always had distinct economic role to play right from ancient ages and that it took its contours according to different class, age, place and socio - religious conditions of that age. There was also a direct link between the social status of women and their role in production. The association of women with productive and creative work is an aspect on which most ancient texts are silent, where ever the work on women we get; it usually seems to follow the pattern laid by Dharmasutras that is women in relation to household work.

Women were encouraged to perform certain chores according to their abilities throughout the Vedic time. She had religious liberty that allowed her to conduct the rituals. She was entrusted with a significant role in the sacrifice. In Brahnavidya, the ultimate knowledge, we see Gargi and Maitreyi standing out. In a sacrifice, Visvavara takes the place of a Ritvik. In the religious sphere, the wife had full rights and routinely joined her husband in religious rituals. The husband and wife performed religious ceremonies and sacrifices together. Women were even active participants in religious debates. Manus asserts of women and their relationship to men, "Women must always be honoured and respected by the father, brother, husband, and brother-in-law who wished their own wellbeing", also "Where women are honoured, the very Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite even could yield rewards." Manus believes that a family in which women suffer is certain to perish, whereas a family in which women are content thrives. He also instructs everyone to maintain order with the ladies of the home. He also tells every householder to love his daughter as the most precious object of affection and to respect his mother as the most beloved person on the planet (Malik, 5696-5697).

The family was an important institution in the Rig-Vedic era. Duhitri was the name given to the family's daughter. Although society appears to value the male child, allusions in Rigveda suggest that female children were equally valued. In Vedic times, a parent did not want to differentiate between his son and daughter. He treated them all the same. Women were provided with excellent education to live their social and personal lives to the fullest. Marriage was viewed as a sacred task in the Vedic era. Daughters were allowed to choose their husbands in this manner (Sah, 17).

The Rig Vedic women went to the battleground to assist their men in political matters. To illustrate, Vispala lost one leg in the fight and was cured by the Asvins with the addition of an iron leg. Some sacrifices, such as Rajasuya, Vajapeya, Asvamedha, Purusamedha, and Sarvamedha, are linked to social and political life. God Savita plays a significant role in the Asvamedha sacrifice. The evidence suggests that women's political responsibilities were introduced and persisted in full force during Rig Vedic times (Sah, 18).

In order to strengthen women in society, we should heed Vedic advice. Women's status and respect are frequently compared to men's in order to determine how high they are regarded. Hindu women's standing has been changing in India. It has undergone major changes over the course of history. In India, women have traditionally experienced two stages in their lives: submission and deliverance. She has experienced oppression and repression, as well as being venerated as the household's divinity. Her rank and position have evolved over time, beginning in the Vedic era and continuing today. They were viewed as the guardians of morality and values. More importantly, they are depicted as having great potential for understanding the highest truths. A creature of institutions is the woman. It is necessary to address the vast and extensive topic of women's position and status. They performed an admirable role in family and social life and made a beautiful contribution to society's overall growth because of their creativity, intellect, and spirit of sacrifice.

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