

The Position and Status of Women in Vedic Culture: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Rig Vedic women in India enjoyed free and esteemed status in society. The women were even provided an opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. Early marriage and sati did not exist... There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. The influence of Indian society on gender has various role over time and space due to the differences in socio-cultural traditions and practice. So the study has made an attempt to evaluate the women's status and to draw attention to the structural structure of gender relations in ancient Indian civilization. Societal structure has played an active role in stimulating change in women's roles and positions since early times, but at same time it has also slowed down the progress of the Indian society. However, this scenario changed when women started being discriminated against in the later- Vedic period when it came to education and other rights. Child marriage, widow burning, the purdah and polygamy further worsened the position of women.

Key Words : Women, Society, Status, Education, Position

INTRODUCTION

Women plays a key role in the Indian society. Women in ancient India enjoyed high status in society and their condition was relatively better. They had economic freedom. Some women were engaged in teaching as well. Home was the place of production like spinning and weaving of clothes were done. Women also helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits with caring family affairs. In the religious field, wife enjoyed full rights of regularly participation in religious ceremonies with her husband. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed jointly by spouses. Women even participated more actively in religious discourses¹. The status of women improved a little during the Buddhist period with

the changing scenario of social status by the religious movements even though there was no tremendous change.

In Indian history, women's studies have a inclination to throw light on the broad expressions of women's status, which has, consequentially, focused on a restricted set of questions. These queries, as well as their parameters try to find to explore women's roles and positions in different socio- cultural aspects. Moreover, these restrictions have tended to produce a major lacuna in our perception of the societal structure that had shaped gender roles and positions in ancient India period. Women play a key role in strengthening the vitality of human civilization². According to Altekar (1938:1), "one of the best ways to understand the spiri to facivilization and to

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1. Maurya, S.D. (1988), *Women in India*, Allahabad: Chugh Publication.
 2. Halli, C.S. and Mullal, S.M. (2016). 'Status of women in India' -Status of ancient, medieval and modern', *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 297-300.

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appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it³. Although the ancient Indian texts have focused on women's visibility in this regard, historians, while reconstructing the past, they have created firm places for women that exist simply surrounded by specific parameters (Chakravarti and Roy, 1988)⁴.

Consequently, there are some bright exceptions in this gloomy depiction in ancient Indian literature is enormous. Ancient India had many learned ladies in different role. There were two types of scholarly women the 'Brahmavadinis' and Sadyodvahas.' Brahmavadinis were the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the 'Sadyodvahas' who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students studying the Vedas literature. Katyana called and use the term for female teachers like Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, introduced into preaching of Buddhism. Through the Jain texts, it is learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained bachelor to study religion and philosophy. Over and over again, Buddhist nuns composed hymns too. Women plays a multiple role they did write Sanskrit plays and verses, do extremely well in music, painting and other fine arts also.

Women in the Vedic Culture:

The Indian cultural tradition begins with the Vedic culture. It is commonly thought that the Vedic period is spread over from 300 BC to 600 B.C. Some general observations are discussed in this paper regarding the status of women in this period of time. As they are here:

Freedom and Ancient Women in early Vedic period:

The level of freedom which was given to the women to take part in public activities it point out the nature of the status that was enjoyed by women during the Vedic period. Women never observed "purdah". And they could educate themselves too. Widows were permitted to remarry and divorce was however not permissible even

men did not have the right to divorce their wives. Women were given freedom in family subject and were treated as "Ardhanginis" though they could stand out as debaters in public assemblies. Women usually occupied a important position in social gatherings but they were not allowed in to the "Sabhas" because these places besides being used for taking political decisions and were also used for gambling, drinking and such kind of others purposes. A number of women were engaged in teaching professions as acharyas and they engaged in professions for rising health and well-being in Rig Vedic society (Altekar, 1938)⁵. Early Vedic period women enjoyed economic freedom and women also earned money through the spinning and weaving of clothes at home. Women were also helping their husbands in agricultural activities too. On the other hand, the Vedā has emphasized women's greatly restricted right to the inheritance of property and married daughters were never permitted to inherit their father's property. And in post-vedic society, the social structure changed due to progressive approaches was led by Buddhism and Jainism and so on but it was not continued further and women's status gradually declined.

Women and Education:

Male children were preferred to female children. In the *Rig Vedic* period women took part in the intellectual life of the society. After Upanayana ceremony, this took place as regularly, as that of boys. Despite the existence of a preference for sons, daughters were always acknowledged and treated well in early Vedic India, where the "girls' education passes through the stages. The authorship of some Vedic hymns is recognized to women as they were attained great distinction as philosophers. The *Ṛg-Vedā-Samhitā* mentioned several women seers and sages, of which Sulabhā Maitreyī, Gārgī Vāchaknavī, Lopāmudra, Ghōṣa, Visvavārā, Vadavā Prāchiteyī, and Sikatā Nivāvarī represented well-known female authors of the Vedic māntras (hymns)⁶. The Vedāḥs referred to female teachers as *upadhyāyās* (unmarried female teachers) or *upadhyāyānīs* (married

3. Altekar, A.S. (1938). *The position of women in Hindu civilization: From prehistoric times to the present day*, Benares Hindu University Press, India.

4. Chakravarti, U. and Roy, K. (1988). 'In search of our past: A review of the limitations and possibilities of the historiography of women in early India', *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 23, no. 18, pp. WS2-WS10.

5. Ibid

6. Bala, I. (2014). 'Status of women in Vedic literature', *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, vol. 2, no. 6, pp. 123-127.

female teachers) within Vedic society. The early Vedic period was therefore characterized by women's magnificent role in education⁷.

This period references to women of high intellectual attainments. Gargi Vacaknavi is one of the examples. Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya is represented as holding with her husband philosophical discussion on the relationship of the universal soul (Paramatma) to the individual soul. The *Puranas* also speak of women teachers and Bhagavata refers to two daughters of Dakshayana as experts in theology and philosophy too. But the education of women was not to continue for long time. After 300 B.C. the condition distorted and the right to study came to be denied for women. The *ganikas* or the courtesans and *nautch girls* had a recognized place in the social life in south India. They were talented in fine arts like music and dance and they were even honored by village assemblies for their public support. Later on they looked down upon when the dancing girls attached to the temples (*devadasis*) fell into immorality and these fine arts approach to be observed as fit only to such girls. Some women opted for military and administrative training too.

Kautilya speaks about the women who were kept in the court for kings protection, of a female body guard and directs that the king on getting up from bed shall be received by troops of women armed with bows⁸. Around the beginning of the christen era the doors of Vedic knowledge was closed to women and condition were not same as it was earlier.

Status of Women and Marriage, Family and Divorce:

In early Vedic period, in family matters whether women who enjoyed both their self-independency and their role as wives were well thought-out to be

ardhangini and *sahadharmini*⁹. So marriage was never forcibly imposed on women in Rig Vedic society often referred to spinsters as "*Amajuh*, one who grows old in (one's parents') house" (Altekar, 1938:38)¹⁰. After teenage years and the completion of their education, girls had consent to take up married life by selecting their life partners through *swyamvara* (choosing a husband) system. In this context woman is the very source of purusharthas, not only dharma, artha and kama, but even moksha¹¹. It was a social and religious duty and necessity although the society is changing, ways of working and living is changed. In the Marriage in the Vedic period was considered a social and religious duty and unified the couple on an equal prowl. Child marriages were unidentified. The *Rig-Veda-Samhitā* has also unveiled the existence of both polygamy and polyandry during the early Vedic period (Altekar, 1938:132)¹².

The literature *Mahabharata* favors the marriage of well-developed and adult girls. Draupadi, Kunti, Sita, Uttara, as also Devayani were fully grown-up at the time of their marriage. The literature sutras authorize *anuloma* (male of higher caste marrying a lower class female) and *Smriti* regards such marriages as lawful. The progeny of *anuloma* unions inherited the caste of the father not mother. Marriages were generally arranged by the parents of the couple though there are orientations to be in love with marriages. The sacred law states that the marriage union was unbreakable once the seven steps had been taken together. There was no place for separation. *Manu* does not blame a wife if she left her a husband who is powerless, insane or suffering from a deadly or infectious disease and *Manu* also permits remarriage of such wife¹³.

Other hand Kautilya is more liberal to women in matters of marriage, agreement and divorce. A woman

7. Devi, N.J. and Subrahmanyam, K. 2014, 'Women in the Rig Vedic Age', *International Journal of Yoga-Philosophy, Psychology and Parapsychology*, vol. 2, no.1, pp.1-3.

8. Jaiswal, S 2001, 'Female images in the Arthashastra of Kautilya', *Social Scientist*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, pp. 51-59.

9. Devi, Naorem, and Kambhampati Subrahmanyam (2014), "Women in the Rig Vedic Age", *International Journal of Yoga - Philosophy, Psychology and Parapsychology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, p. 1. *Gale Academic OneFile*, accessed 4 Feb. 2021.

10. Ibid.

11. Das, S 2017, 'Esteem of women in Vedic India', *Religious and Spirituality*. Available from: <<https://www.thoughtco.com/esteem-of-women-in-vedic-india-1770409>>. [29 April, 2018].

12. Ibid.

13. *Mānu* 200 AD, *Mānusaṃhitā: The Laws of Mānu*, trans. G Buhler 1964, *Mānusaṃhitā: The Laws of Manu*, Translated in 1886, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi.

can remarry when her husband was abroad for a long time, if he suffered from incurable disease, or if he had become a nout caste or if he was found guilty of high disloyalty or was unsafe to her infertility or if she unsuccessful to give birth to sons. The above rules were completely forgotten during the Gupta period when divorce becomes almost impossible for the people of higher classes of society.

Women in Prostitution:

Ancient India women were free from restrains especially class of women who mixed freely with men. They are called as Ganikas (courtesans) and Vesyas (prostitutes) in social status. In the literature a prostitute is portrayed as a beautiful, accomplished and wealthy women enjoying a position of reputation and honour¹⁴. They were systematically skilled in sixty four Kalas (arts) including music, dancing, singing and acting. The Ganikas (courtesans) takes pleasure in a great social position. Characteristically of such well-regarded and honoured courtesans was Ambrapali, and another noted courtesan of Vaishali was immensely wealthy, highly intelligent and famous throughout the civilized portions of India¹⁵. She was one of the most precious assets of her city, and mixed on equal terms with princes as she was called a *sri-ratna* (jewel of a woman). Through South Indian inscriptions evidences the role that the ganikas played in contemporary society was from chalukyas, cholas and other dynasties which shows the keen interest the Ganikas demonstrates in charities¹⁶.

We learn from the Arthasastra of Kautilya a prostitute noted for her prettiness, adolescence and accomplishments was appointed superintendent on a salary 1000 pans per annum and they had to carry a

license from the state to carry on their profession by paying two days earning a license fee to the government. It was keep attention that female's main concern and pleasure during sex has been noticeably observed in *Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra*, which highlights the *Rig Vedic's* sexual eroticism and emotional accomplishment in life (trans. Fosse 2012)¹⁷. Furthermore, Jayadeva's *Ratimañjari* (based on the *Kāmasūtra*) has thrown light on a deep illustration of *kāma* during the *Rig Vedic* period (trans. Rossella 2010) and explained as wives, girlfriends, or prostitutes; women were, significantly, considered to be partners in giving pleasure to men and for being fully satisfied by him at the same time when it came to sex (trans. Rossella, 2010)¹⁸. In the *Rig Vedic* civilization, prostitutes, along with put into practice, were never considered to be humiliating or disgraceful, rather female sex workers were depicted as elegant women, without societal boundaries (Nandal and Rajnish, 2014)¹⁹. In addition, a broad understanding of sexuality through tantra sex (divine prostitution) has been uncovered in early Vedic society. Consequently, the *Rig Vedic* civilization endeavored to make a picture of the tranquil setting of women's sexuality (Chakravarty 1988)²⁰.

Women, Property Rights and Inheritance:

Women rights were very much limited in inheriting property each spinster was entitled to one-fourth share of patrimony received by her brothers. Women had control over gifts and property, etc., received by a woman at the time of marriage but the bulk of the family property was under in charge of and management of the patriarchal structure. As a wife, a woman had no straight contribute to in her husband's property though abandoned wife was entitled to one third of her husband's wealth. A widow

14. Chaudhari, J.B.(1941). 'The Position of the Daughter in the Vedic Ritual', in *New Indian Antiquary*, pp.77-85.

15. Saxena, M 2006, 'Ganikas in early India: Its genesis and dimensions', *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, no. 11/12, pp. 2-17.

16. Ibid.

17. Vātsyāyana (400 BC-200 AD), *The Kāmasūtra*, trans. LM Fosse 2012, *The Kamasutra: The original sanskrit / Vatsyayana ; An English translation*, United States of America.

18. Jayadeva (1170-1245), *Ratimañjari*, trans. D Rossella 2010, *The Ratimañjari by Jayadeva in Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual*, vol. 4, no. 1, Publication of Charles University, Prague, pp. 139-178.

19. Nandal, V & Rajnish, M (2014), 'Status of women through ages in India', *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 21-26.

20. Chakravarti, U 1988, 'Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a new understanding of gender relations in early Indian history', *Social Scientist*, vol. 16, no. 8, pp. 44-52.

probably had no share in her husband's property²¹. Accordingly, social situation was not in favor of women possessing property and yet protection was given to them as daughters and wives. The couples were the joint owners of the household as well as the property and the time of marriage the husband declared that he would not defy the rights and interest of his partner in the economic affairs. The joint possession secured her an absolute right of maintenance against the husband. The Hindu jurists never made a second attempt to secure women an absolute equality with their husbands in the control of the property of the family²².

The lawgivers have renowned the claims of wife to Sridhana (women's special property) which consisted of the bride-price, gifts given by the husband even ensuing to the marriages so the landed possessions came to be incorporated in the Sridhana. In this sense if a woman died childless and if her marriage was not according to approved forms, the Sridhana devolved on her parents or brother; otherwise it was inherited by her children. In eastern India brotherless daughters were entitled to patrimony and the situation was changed after 300B.C.

Women and Religion:

In the religious ground, the wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband and sacrifices were performed jointly. At the same time as explained in *Devi* and *Subrahmanyam* (2014), "the value of women and respect shown towards them was not only limited to the idea of mistress of the household, rather, women demonstrated huge potential for contributing to human civilization during the Vedic period"²³. The *R̥g-Vedā-Saṃhitā* text discovered

that the (goddess *Durgā*) (trans. Müller 1869, p. 211); "Aditi, (the goddess of freedom) (trans. Müller 1869, p. 243); and *Sārasvāī* (the best mother, best of rivers, best of goddesses) (trans. Griffith 1896, Hymn XLI) were worshipped with absolute devotion. The sculptures on behalf of early Vedic society have also revealed that women were positioned in a higher status in this society²⁴. In addition to this, in the early Vedic religious discourses, women had the advantage and full right to regularly participate in ceremonies and formal procedures. In Rig Vedic society women would have been honored to carry out sacrifices together with their better half. Women also had the liberty to interpret sacred literature, and also had the right to take part as debaters in public get-together²⁵.

Status of Women in the Vedic Age onwards:

The women of epic India take pleasure in an honorable position at home. Together *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had agreed a highly regarded place for women; women had been called the origin of Dharma, wealth and pleasure in both the epics. The vast references of the phrase of courage, strong willpower and valour of women like Kaikeye, Sita, Rukmani, Satyabhama, Sabitri, Draupadi and others too. The *Ramayana* is a magnificent picture for the Hindu ideal of womanhood, it glorifies the value of "Pativrata" and idealistic womanhood²⁶. The *Mahabharata* also sketches the duties and the approaches of the wife to the husband²⁷. Throughout the period of *Dharmashastras* and puranas the status of women steadily turned down and underwent a major transformation. The girls were deprived of formal education and freedom of women was shortened. Sons were given more weightage than daughters.

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21. Dutt, N.K. (1938). 'Widow in Ancient India', in *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIV, no.4, pp.661-79.
 22. Chakravarti, U 1993, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state', *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, pp. 579-585.
 23. Devi, NJ & Subrahmanyam, K 2014, 'Women in the Rig Vedic Age', *International Journal of Yoga-Philosophy, Psychology and Parapsychology*, vol. 2, no.1, pp.1-3.
 24. Vedavyasa 1500BCE-1000BCE, *R̥g-Vedā-Saṃhitā, The Sacred Hymns of the Br̥hmaṇas*, vol.1, trans. F.M Müller 1869, Trübner and Company, London. Vedavyasa 1500 BCE-1000 BCE, *R̥g-*
 25. Arvind Sharma (2005), 'Women in Indian Religions' (Ed.) Oxford University Press. *Atharva Veda XIV-I*, p. 43-44. Kumar, A. (2002), *Empowering Women*, New Delhi.
 26. Vālmiki 500 BCE, *The Rāmāyana*, trans. and ed. RTH Griffith 1870-1874, *The Rāmāyana of Vālmiki: Translated into English verse*, vol. 1, Trübner and Company, London.
 27. Krishna- Dwaipayana Vyasa 400 BCE, *The Mahābhārata*, trans. KM Ganguli 1883-1896, *The Mahābhārata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa: Translated into English Prose from the Original Sanskrit Text*, vol. 12, Bhārata Press, India.

Girls were prohibited from learning the Vedas and becoming Brahmacharinis. Manu, the law giver of Indian society said the statement that “*women have to be under a father during childhood, under her husband duringy out hand under her sonduring oldage*”²⁸. Due to the a variety of restrictions imposed on the freedom of women some problems started creeping in. In the contemporary times in 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 ‘Sati’ became ever more prevalent, purdah system came intovogue and practice of polygyny came to be accepted by the societies. In the economic field a woman was totally deprived of a share in her husband’s property by maintaining that a wife and as lave can not own property and in the religious field, women were not allowed to offer sacrifices and prayers, practice penance and undertake pilgrimages too. Hence, these reasons are obligation of Brahmanical strictness on the entire society, rigid limitations compulsory by the caste system and the joint family system²⁹.

The status of women better a little during the Buddhist period though there was no great transformation as it has been seen some of the rigidities and restrictions imposed by the caste system were relaxed. Buddha advocated equality and he tried to get better the cultural, educational and religious statuses of women. In the period of the kind rule of the famous Buddhist kings such as Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Sri Harsha and others, women recuperated a part of their lost freedom and status due to the relatively broad minded Buddhist philosophy. Women were allowable to become “Sanyasis” and many women took a leading role in Buddhist monastic-life. Women had their sangha called the “Bhikshuni Sangha”, which was guided by the same rules and regulations as these of the monks in sanghas. The sangha unlocked to them boulevard of cultural activities and social service and plenty of opportunities for public lifematters³⁰.

Womens political and economic status however stays behind unchanged way. According to the

Tattvārtha-sūtra, all beings - set aside for infernal beings, one-sensed beings, or gods - possess one of three genders: female, male, or hermaphroditic. These genders are shaped by a specific “body-making karma” that is attached to the soul of an individual being. Although Jainism is in many ways dedicated to equality, for some Jain woman’s very femaleness produced spiritual in equality. Women over and over again enjoyed well-known roles in political affairs. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya dynasty women operational the administrative affairs. The Satavahana queen, “Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her youngster as well as Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. Subsequent to the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra. Princess Vijaybhattarika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King; Vikramaditya I, same way Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada territorytoo³¹.

Conclusion:

In Vedic cultural society there is no differences between male and female and this is observed by analyzing the available Vedic literature. The position of women in orienting life and family were clarified in Rig Vedic age. They enjoyed freedom and independence. Above and beyond their domestic role, they had every access to education with tremendous potential to understand the highest realities. Women were given all sovereignty for their personal growth and it was found that several women added in inscription, compiling and analyzing the Vedic literature too. All walks of life women were equally foremost. Education was equally significant for women before the wedding. Education and individual freedom was probably the reason behind their advancement and marriage was not a compulsory for them. In case of not finding a appropriate bridegroom they were given all right to stay unmarried with respect in society. Many women were soothsayer who had an intellectual and spiritual deepness. Women played a significant role in maintaining the economic status of the

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Maurya, S.D. (1988), *Women in India*, Allahabad: Chugh Publication.

31. Marr, JR 1975, ‘The early Dravidians’ in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. AL Basham, Oxford University Press, London, pp. 30-37.

family with the occupation of spinning, weaving, and needle work etc. Widow's remarriage was allowed in Rig Vedic society as evidenced in the funeralhymn in the Rig Veda and the society did not seem to be very stringent. Throughout this time inter-caste marriages took place in society. Women learned several disciplines that incorporated vocal and instrumental music and dance too

and women were also allowed to learn martial pursuits. Respect and worth of the women in the Vedic society not merely as household mistress but also as individuals with great potential to give to human society were revealed. Later on after Vedic age the women's status little change but not thoroughly.
