

Indian Women in Vedic Society and The Present: A Comparative Study



Manohar Kumar

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of History,
Saltora Netaji Centenary College,
Saltora, Bankura, West Bengal

Now-a-days, whenever we peep into the dailies, we can find the different types of crime against women community in every time and everywhere in India. Day by day, things are becoming worse for the women to live with dignity and honour in society. They are apparently free but in chains. Violence, molestation, oppression, rape are the breaking news. Many laws have been enacted, acts are enforced to protect them, to establish their rights but condition is still deteriorating. It is the high time to find out the reasons that are mainly responsible for this severe crisis. It is assumed that the patriarchal structure controls the machinery of socio-political system that prevents from attaining the dignified status of the women. In ancient India especially in Vedic times the society was liberal and the women acquired the highest position. The educational system was based on moral values and ethics. There was no gender discrimination. It may be the absence of something in society that is responsible for generating the worst sense and adverse attitude towards the women. The present status of women has to be dealt very carefully and sensibly comparing with our traditional socio-cultural system to restore the dignified position of the women, enjoyed in early Indian society.

Keywords: Women, Indian, Vedic, Society, Present, Status, Position, Attitude, Education, Social.

Introduction

Woman and man are the two basic elements to constitute a family. Families gather together to build up a society. In a civil society man and women have the equal duties and responsibilities to make a healthy environment to live in happily. They are created as a companion each other to make the way in course of life. The foundation of a civil society is built with women. It is the mother's lap, where the child finds its first and best school. It is the mother, from whom he learns how to speak, how to behave, how to deal with different situation with an emotional touch. So, the active role of a mother in making a perfect man or women, largely affects the behavior of a civilized society. As Brigham Young says 'If you educate a man, you educate a man, if you educate a woman you educate a generation.' Thus the women are the architect to build up a disciplined society. They perform every duty in the family for the development of the family and the society. They are sweet-tongued, generous, and always careful about the duties and responsibilities. But still they are facing various challenges in and out evrytime, everywhere. By taking advantage of their biological weakness, the male-dominated environment always keeps a stronghold on them to subjugate under it. It is very important to understand the traditional culture that we inherited from the Vedic times regarding the status of women in social perspective to deal with the present.

Status of Women in Vedic Period

The basic source of information about the Vedic Aryan society is a mass literature called Vedas. Historically, after transformation from cattle-rearing tribal life to agricultural productive group around 1500 B.C., the Aryans began to constitute a disciplined society. In the mean time, they started composing the sacred *RIG VEDAS* for worshipping Nature and Gods. It was the beginning time for a society, based on the highest level of moral and ethical values, though it was a patriarchal in its composition, but liberal in attitude, that took a share of every aspect of individual and social life in general. No evidence supports of the gender bias or female discrimination in that period. The women enjoyed top level position with great respect in domestic and social life. As the legal heir, they inherited and possessed property. They were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. They enjoyed liberty for exercising every Right. Rig Veda provides ample evidences to prove the concept of equality. The Rig-Vedic women not only handle the house-hold activities including bringing up children but helped her husband in every

aspect of life. In the Vedic culture women stood as a decisive power in the spirituality that laid the foundation of moral development of the undivided joint family system. Kshatriya ladies received martial art courses and arms training and allowed to go battlefield with their husbands to fight against their enemies.

The birth of a girl child was desired and not considered as a curse as depicted in Rig-Veda by these words, "A girl should be brought up and educated with great effort and care." They also received similar education as male child.

Marriage was considered a social and religious duty. In Vedic times, there were many different types of ceremony (such as Daiva, Prajapatya, Kanya etc), out of which was a significantly important called 'SAYAMBARA' where the girl had the freedom to choose her husband from among the eligible bachelors, invited to her house for the occasion. After marriage the girls became Grihini and Ardhagini (better half). They constituted a GRIHA, where she was considered SAMRAJNI and had an equal share in the performance of religious rites. Every divine rite and ritual was performed with the help of women. No auspicious ritual was taken place without the participation of the wife.

Among the prominent female seers were Ghosa, Apala, Viswavara, Lopamudra etc. They participated in philosophical debates.. It was also compulsory for a married woman to perform pooja to Bramha. Widows were allowed to marry her husband's brother in particular.

Child marriage, dowry system, 'SATI' did not exist. Any kind of crime or violence against women remained absent During later-Vedic period till 6th century B.C. the women continued enjoying same privileges in interior house-hold activities but socially some restrictions were imposed on them. They lost the rights of UPANAYANA and the participation in political activities. Child marriage, polygamy dowry emerged. But at home they had supremacy. They received education. The BRAMHABADINIS, who remained unmarried and devoted their lives to study Vedas and wrote hymns, SADYODWAHA would get married after their study, based on rituals and necessary subjects, required after marriage Among prominent women were Gargi, Maitreyi. "Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there was no restrictions upon her remarriage." Will Durant - Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage.

In post-Vedic including Epic period gradually it took a change and began to lose some of the rights in a considerable degree. The honored status of women, enjoyed in the family and society began to undergo a radical change. Scope of activities of wife in religious field was restricted by Rishi Gautama. He says "Let her not violate her duty towards her husband and let her restrain her tongue, eyes and actions", though he was liberal about widow re-

marriage, right to property for women and some other fields of life.

Baudhayana, who came after him prescribes a widow to lead a life of an ascetic for one year before she can marry again. Apastamba who frames rules to limit women's rights further. He discourages widow remarriages and Bashishtha introduces other restrictions including child marriage.

Later on, Manu, who codifies the laws in India, in his Manusmriti, writes, 'where women are honored there the Gods rejoice, where there they are not honoured, all sacred rites proves to be useless, the house shall utterly perish.' On the contrary, He says, "She is under control by her father in her childhood, by husband in youth, and by son in older age." Manu declared that a man should enjoy the supremacy over his wife. Women were not granted right to study Vedas. Child marriage, polygamy, came into force. The custom of SATI (as recorded in RAMAYANA and MAHABHARATA) began to emerge in the society.

In spite of these, the idea of womanhood was respected. "Women were held in higher respect in India than in other ancient countries, and the Epics and old literature of India assign a higher position to them than the epics and literature of ancient Greece. Hindu women enjoyed some rights of property from the Vedic Age, took a share in social and religious rites, and were sometimes distinguished by their learning. The absolute seclusion of women in India was unknown in ancient times." R. C. Dutt - The Civilization of India.

The stories in RAMAYANA and MAHABHARATA reflect the high status of women. In Ramayana we see, having returned from exile, Rama ascended the throne of Ayodhya. He intended to perform a ASHWAMEDHA YAJNO but as Sita, his loyal wife, stayed in Rishi Balmiki's cottage, it could not be completed, until a golden statue or replica of Sita was kept beside Lord Rama during the ceremony.

In Mahabharata women is glorified as "light of the house, mother of the universe." The philosophical concept of 'SHAKTI', the feminine principle of energy took the shape of worshiping goddess who were portrayed as feminine embodiment of important qualities and powers. Female power represents different forces such as goddess Kali (destructive energy), Durga (strength of power and protection) Laxmi (fortune), Saraswati (learning and creativity) and to show the honour of female divine, the form is usually addressed first, just as Radha-Krishna, Sita-Ram, Uma-Mahesh, laxmi-Narayan .Throughout many hundred years women in Vedic society were given the highest level of respect and freedom as well.

Thus "Among the many societies that can be found in the world, we have seen that some of the most venerating regard for women has been found in Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of women, and has retained the greatest respect within its tradition." -Stephen Knapp- Women in Vedic Culture.

Aims of the Study

Through this article my endeavor will try to focus on the basic inherent reasons that are lying with

our society to upgrade the dignity and honour of the Indian women community.

1. To study the position of Indian women in Vedic period in social perspective.
2. To search the present social condition of the Indian women.
3. To find out the causes and factors, responsible for the women's depressed condition.
4. To understand the comparison between the present social system and the Vedic times.
5. To find out some remedial measures to tackle the situation.

Women in Indian Present Society

With a comparison to the above-mentioned periods the women whose role and status was well defined in the society has undergone in a tremendous change at the present time. With the passage of time, the women have now occupied a leading position and become an active participant in all walks of life. They are inclined towards socio-political issues, administrative affairs, cultural needs, educational institutions, employment sectors, professional jobs, economic activities, literary fields, sports centres etc. Many laws have been enacted to eliminate undesirable practices. The right to equality of women is guaranteed by the Constitution. Domestic violence including all forms of discriminations 2005, dowry prohibition act 1961, The family Courts Act, 1984, The Maternity benefit Act 1961, Immoral traffic act (1958), Suppression of prostitution, The National Commission for Women Act 1990, The Right to property Act 1956) etc. are enforced strictly to protect the interest of the women.

Despite of all development and all the legal support, the rights and facilities, being enjoyed by them, women are still in distress condition, being a subject to many socio-economic restrictions in rural and urban area as well, due to financial independence, social customs, lack of quality education, and female mind-set. They are becoming the victim of mental and physical torture, sexual harassment. Rape has become a burning topic for the present day. The study conducted by WHO and Indian National Bureau found that the frequency of rape cases in India. Every time they become the victim of the so-called society-bound laws such as dowry system. The bride's family has to pay a lot of cash and kind or gift to grooms family as dowry demands in wedding arrangements. Sometimes it becomes the cause of domestic violence, suicide or murder.

Child marriage is prevailing in backward class society. Some of the teenage girls in Purulia district of West Bengal daunted to protest against this social evil ignoring the pressure of the society. Rekha Kalindi (15), Afsana Khatun (16) and Sunita Mahato (16) become the "messenger of the social change" as they resisted child marriage and inspired other girls to oppose the practice.

The lower rate of literacy of female, domestic violence, female child abortion, and female infanticide posing a threat for the women empowerment. Rape, sexual harassment, immoral trafficking has degenerated the situation.

The society does not permit a girl to choose her husband of her own, if parents do not approve.

Sometimes if it happens, she is killed. At home, a girl child is neglected. She is led to believe that she should get herself equipped for her in-laws house. Even they are not treated with same manner as a son receives. A girl is restricted to go outside alone and sometimes not allowed to receive higher education. Widows are not treated as the same manner as married. They are not allowed to participate in many religious rituals or family function. Priesthood in any temple for women, in general, is strictly prohibited. Particularly in rural areas, in case of premature death of a young husband, is attributed to the wife. The women become the victim of the blind beliefs of superstitious mind of the society, by blaming her as *WITCH*, leading to murder or excommunication of her family. It is hard to think, such evil customs are still prevailing in our society.

In the name of modernity, the society is becoming a victim of the 'civilized' western culture that secretly infuses the unsocial evil thoughts and behavior that is quite far away from the Indian traditional culture. In this globalised village, through internet we link up with the western culture in a moment. They are always trying to inject poison into the blood of our great culture by tempting us with various dating sites, pornographic sites, sexuality, which is posing a threat to maintain the peace and harmony at home. The materialistic provocation has become a leading factor for creating disturbances among the society, between the men and the women.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is found the Indian women are facing several atrocities including domestic and social violence that become the obstacles for their all round development. Though there is no legal or constitutional barrier to equality, but still they are not equal to man for exercising every right. The problem is, on one hand, the women think that their real domain is within four walls. On the contrary, they expect freedom, education, self-dependence, proper treatment, and a healthy environment. The patriarchal structure of family, society, and state is still maintaining its stronghold over the women. The women fail to understand the real nature of the patriarchal hegemony, which is deeply rooted in our society. Falsely and apparently society made them understood that they have got prestige honour, liberty, equality but practically they are under control of patriarchy. Unless and until the system would change, the status or condition would remain the same whatever the laws or acts may be enacted in favour of the women. The society should think the women's problems as societal, unless a man be a perfect social human being, until a man think of the women as their own mother, as we find in Vedic period, it is difficult to stop the atrocities against women or to develop the position of women in society. Thus we should think with RamKrishna Paramhansa, 'Women are but so many forms of my divine mother. I cannot bear to see them suffer. You are all image of the mother of the universe.'

Suggestions

1. Proper care should be taken for educational development of women's condition especially rural and remote area by establishing institutions, where efficient teaching is urgently

ISSN No. : 2394-0344

- needed. Teachers, guardians, NGO's, Govt. should take major steps for the empowerment of women.
2. The traditional educational system including moral and value based syllabus should be introduced.
 3. To support the women for financially self-dependence through implementing vocational training free of cost.
 4. To initiate awareness camp among the rural area to eradicate the social evil customs, superstitions and blind beliefs.
 5. Women empowerment of all kind is needed in order to preserve their purity and dignity.

References

1. Sharma, R.S. ---: India's Ancient Past, Oxford University Press 2005.
2. Basham, A.L. --- The Wonder That Was India—Picador, London, 2004.
3. Jha, D.N.--- Ancient India: An Introductory Outline, Delhi, 1977.

Remarking : Vol-2 * Issue-4*September-2015

4. Thapar, Romila.--A History of India. Vol.I, Penguin 1966.
5. Luniya, B.N. ---life and culture of Ancient India: Agra, 1978.
6. Majumdar, R.C.—The Vedic Age, London.1950.
7. Macdonnel, A.A.—India's Past, Oxford, 1927.
8. Kosambi, D.D.-The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India-London, 1965.
9. Majumdar R.C., Roychoudhury, H.C., Dutta K.K.Dutta--An Advanced History of India
10. Discovery of India----Jawaharlal Nehru.
11. Valavalrar P.H.—Hindu Social Institutions, 2nd, Baroda,1942
12. Ghosh, B.K.----The Hindu Ideal of Life, Calcutta, 1947.
13. Altekar, A.S.-- The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. 2nd ed. Banaras, 1956
14. Agnihotri, V.K.-IndianHistory
15. www.purulia.gov.in
16. The Telegraph—07.12.2011
17. <http://creative.sulekha.com>