

Position of Women from Rigvedic Times to the Epic period as daughter, wife and as mother

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Women in the early Aryan society were free in social activities. Women were on an equal footing with men. They enjoyed equal rights with men. She was honoured in all the religious rituals. There were many honourable and intellectual women some of whom wrote Rigvedic and other vedic 'shlokas' Ghosha etc were such women. Sulbha, Gargi, Mastreya are counted among rishis King Janak invited Gargi for intellectual discourse . Yajnas performed without the presence of women were thought to be incomplete. Lord Rama had to install a gold statue of Sita in her absence in order to perform Ashwamedha Yajna.

But during the post Vedic, period her social and religious status remained intact but doubts were raised about her intellectual capacities. In the Mahabharata Bhishma advises Yudhishtir that women must be kept under control as they are incapable of keeping restraint on their desires. During the

Dharmasutra and Smriti period there was a steep fall in the status of women. The society by then had become patriarchal. Rules were made about the dress of women. A proper dress code was made for them to observe.

Woman as a daughter

A Woman is recognized at first as a daughter and as mother. Rigvedic literature terms them as Kana and as Duhita. During this period there are references that the father of a daughter treated her as his son. The father of a daughter was elated and exulted to see his daughter playing. The father of a daughter considered her son as his own grand son. The daughters too underwent the same education and rituals as the son.

Apart also from this Rigvedic literature references to the indifference shown towards the daughters are prevalent too.

Later Vedic period points towards the decline of the status of women Atharvaveda has clear references of the dominance of males over females Atharvaveda also refers to Punsavan Samskar which declares the birth of a daughter as ominous. Brotherless girls were not accepted in households as brides and they had to become prostitutes to earn their livelihood . Or else such brotherless girls had to remain chaste all their lives.

Maitrayani Samhita and Taiteraya Samhita refer to the love showered upon the son but the daughters were left uncared.

Rituals dominated the religious activities of the society during the Brahamans Religious and social activities gave respect to the women. People believed that the woman gives birth to a son which is a medium to the entrance to Paradise. During this period people used to perform Yajnas so that they did not have to bear the burden of bringing up a female child.

Aitraya Brahaman refers to the female child as a burden and more than that a disaster . The same scripture refers to a son as the highest ladder to Paradise. The Taitraya Brahman has clear references of the sale of daughters. Aitraya Brahman clearly says that the daughter in a family is a source of discomfiture to that family and she after gaining adulthood may be a source of shame to the family.

The epics show the daughter as source of burden and shame. King Janak found Sita as a wailing weeping child and he was worried about getting her a husband. Contradicting this view point there are references that girls were good omens on religious occasions.

But Mahabharata speaks of daughter as great trouble makers.

Woman as a mother

The very word Ma has magnetic powers. Ma i.e. mother gives her all, sacrifices her all for the welfare of her children and her family. Indus Valley Civilization refers to the worship of Mother Goddess which clearly shows that the people held high regard for women,

Rigveda also tells us that the ascetic refers to God as his / her mother rather than father. There too are references in the Rigveda that a terminal patient remembered his mother in his last days . There is another reference in the Rigveda that a loving mother shields her son Vritrasma from assault Atharvaveda calls a female unworthy of being a mother if she doesn't give birth to a male child .

Upnishads have references to the dignity the mothers enjoyed. The Brahmacharins were directed to worship their mothers as goddesses. Sons were even named after their mother's names-Satyakam, Jabal, Gautami Putra, Gargiputra.

Taitreya Aranyak and Taitreya Upnishad speak of mother as Goddess and father as guide.

Balmiki Ramayan speaks of mother as the character building block but during the epic age husbands were preferred to sons as sources of their

livelihood. The fact that Ram obeyed his father's command in contravention to his mother's wishes shows that the Patriarchal society was too much prevalent. But another epic Mahabharata depicts the mother as all-embracing Goddess.

Woman as companion and wife

Man and woman are bonded together to procreate and give rise to a family. The woman is responsible to maintain cordiality among various relations. To make her offspring responsible citizens is also the duty of the mother. The woman plays the pivotal role in all the affairs of a family.

The Rigveda refers to woman as Jayedastam which means the woman is the pivot around whom the wheel of the family revolves right from the Vedic age the woman has been considered the life and spirit of a family. It is the responsibility of the woman to safeguard the interests of all the members of a family. She accompanied and actively participated in religious rituals with her husband. There are occasions too when she alone could conduct the religious ceremonies like Yajnas etc. Apart from that there are references that the wife accompanied and aided her husband even during battles. The Rigveda describes the marriage of Surya and Savitri and bestows upon the woman or the bride the blessing of being the mistress of the

household . In Atharvaveda a dedicated wife is said to be a life giving source to her husband. Without the mistress of the house the prestige of that house is not guaranteed.

Atharvaveda describes a woman as doing all the household chores like storing of drinking water, bathing the domestic animals etc. She had to weave and sew the clothes of all the members of the house. The same Veda also warns that such a contributing unit towards the society should in all cases be respected or else the family is bound to be doomed.

Atharvaveda also enjoins upon the woman to act judiciously and prudently for that ensured the well being of the family.

Brahman scriptures also tell us that the existence of man is hollow without a wife. Man and woman are complements and the existence of one without the other is incomplete Shatpath Brahman refers to a young girl Sukanya being duty bound to accompany her aged husband Rishi Chayavan. Without the company of a wife a man was considered unfit to perform a Yajna.

The other aspect of the woman as wife is that the Shatpath Brahman refers to them as Shudra and indicates their uncleanness. Shankhayan Brahman describes them as unfit to perform Yajnas and advocates that they must be kept out of the periphery of the religious rituals . Shatpath Brahman

has clear references that the wife of the householder performed all the rites of the Vedic ritual i.e. Yajna but later on the priest took over this job of performing the rituals. Aitreya Brahman considers a wife supreme only if she is docile towards her husband and does not indulge in an argument with him. Brihadaranyaka refers to a woman being beaten by cane by her husband to discipline her. The epics tell of the authority a woman enjoyed over her husband Sita asked Rama to go and hunt the deer whose golden skin she liked. In direct contrast to this reference is Rama's assertion in Balmiki Ramayan that woman can be had anywhere but not a brother . That speaks a lot of the degenerating condition of women.

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