

Condition of Women in Vedic and Post-Vedic Period

Dr Indrayani S. Jadhav G. S. Moze College, Yeravda, Pune Email:irkuduchkar303@gmail.com

Dr Tejaswini D. Patil Dange KES's Arts and Commerce College,
Kasegaon, Maharashtra Dist. Sangli, Maharashtra Email: tejaswinipatil70@gmail.com

Abstract:

The comprehensive study of civilizations all over the world, from its beginning till now, has established a fact that man has proved his superiority over other animals by his intelligence, reasoning power and by exploration and development of various arts and techniques which have been useful for the advancement and the betterment of human beings. He has been learning from his mistakes and making improvements in all spheres of life. It is necessary to develop this historical perspective in order to make progress because history helps us to study the life of any society in the past, in all its aspects. It is not merely a chronological record of events which happened in the past but a source of knowledge which gives direction to the future of mankind. This conference, organized on the occasion of International Women's Day, has put forth various topics for presentation which deal with the study of women's progress through various perspectives. In this paper, Condition of Women in Vedic and Post-Vedic Period, the status of women in that period has been studied by the presenters.

Key Words: Civilization, Historical perspective, Vedic and Post-Vedic Period, Women's condition

Research Paper:

The comprehensive study of civilizations all over the world, from its beginning till now, has established a fact that man has proved his superiority over other animals by his intelligence, reasoning power and by exploration and development of various arts and techniques which have been useful for the advancement and the betterment of human beings. He has been learning from his mistakes and making improvements in all spheres of life. It is necessary to develop this historical perspective in order to make progress because history helps us to study the life of any society in the past, in all its aspects. It is not merely a chronological record of events which happened in the past but a source of knowledge which gives direction to the future of mankind. While defining history, a famous historian, V. S. Smith, says the same as: "The value and interest of history depend largely on the degree in which the present is illuminated by the past."

The study of social, economic, political, religious, educational and cultural aspects of any society helps us to peep into the mindset of people at that time. Along with these aspects, the status of women in any society matters most as women play a very important role, not only on the family level, but also in the overall progress of that society.

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The Pre-Vedic Period - The Indus Valley Civilization found in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa excavations is the testimony of the rich culture they lived in their times. The layouts of the cities, the bathing places, the pottery, ornaments etc. reflect the then developed civilization. Though there

were no clear traces about the constructions done specifically for women, it can be said that the people were conscious about their health, food, and social behaviour as such in general.

The Vedic Period - The Vedic period in India is considered to have lasted from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. It is divided into two phases- the Early Vedic Period (1500-1000 BCE) and the Post-Vedic Period (1000-600 BCE). There was an arrival of Indo-Aryans in the Indian subcontinent during this period. They settled primarily in Northern India.

The Early Vedic Period - It was a time of transition from nomadic pastoralism to settled communities. The people in this period were pastoralists who reared sheep, cattle, goats and horses. For them, cows were important as they provided them with the basic needs of life. In course of time, they settled agricultural communities. The economy was based on agriculture and pastoralism. Family and clan were central to social organization. The Rajan was the chief of the tribe, being responsible for governance and warfare. Cows were exchanged as a favored medium of exchange through barter system. Gifts were given to monarchs and traders.

This period shows a gradual shift from egalitarianism to a more complex social structure in post-Vedic period. There were no distinct and rigid social classes or castes. The Varna System was based on social and economic abilities instead of birth. Individuals could move between Varnas based on their skills and knowledge.

The Vedic religion was centered on the worship of natural forces and deities like Varuna, Agni and Indra. Specific sacrifices and rituals like the Ashvamedha and Fire rituals (Yajna) were carried out to please them. During this period, the Vedas, which are considered as the foundation of Hinduism, were composed. Along with it, the Upanishads were compiled which taught about right knowledge and belief.

The foremost of Vedas, the Rigveda, was composed in this period, which reflects the democratic form of government which existed at that time. It is a collection of hymns in Vedic Sanskrit and is considered the first of the four Vedas. It not only explores the themes like creation, cosmology, sacrifice and rituals but also worships various deities.

As family was the basic unit of society, the head of the household, Gruhapati, was dominant. Polygamy was allowed in the elite class, while monogamy was considered as the norm. As wife was called 'Ardhangini', she was referred to as the 'better half' having equal status. It highlights the respect shown towards women in the Early Vedic Period. Women enjoyed considerable freedom, participating in the assemblies like Sabhas and Samitis. They received education and contributed to religious practices. There was a practice of 'Swayamvara' where women could choose their husbands. Ladies from the Kshatriya caste received martial arts courses and arms training.

The Prominent Women in the Early Vedic Period - Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra were prominent female scholars and philosophers in this period. A great scholar of this period, Gargi was the daughter of Sage Vachaknu. She was as knowledgeable in the Vedas and Upanishads as men of the Vedic times. She could contest male philosophers in debates. She was one of the illustrious participants of the Brahma yajna, a philosophic congress convened by King Janaka of Videha.

Maitreyi was the daughter of the sage Maitri. She was considered as a prominent woman scholar of the period.

Lopamudra was also known as Kaveri, Kaushitaki and Varaprada. She was the wife of Rishi Agasti and was called Rishiki. Rishiki means a woman who was well-versed in the Vedas. She composed two verses of the Rigveda.

Romasa, Apala, Kadru, Visvavara, Juhu, Vaghambhrini, Paulomi, Yami, Indrani, Savitri and Devjami were some notable women intellectuals of the Early Vedic Period. Every one of these women lived the ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the material things of the world. The Post-Vedic Period- The Later Vedic Period is also known as the Epic Age, as the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written in this period. The three Vedas, the Samveda, the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda, are considered as the literary sources of this period.

The chief features of Post – Vedic Period were the establishment of the caste system, the growth of trade and commerce and the emergence of hereditary kingship. There were four prominent Varnas based on the individual's birth- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The caste system was hereditary as children had to follow the same profession as their fathers.

There was a growth of trade and commerce, domestic and overseas, with the growth of civilization. Hereditary kingship emerged in the society. The Rajan had great control over the productive resources as he was considered as the custodian of social order.

During the Post-Vedic Period, women's status in society declined. They were considered inferior to men and were denied many rights, including education, property ownership and political participation. Women were not allowed to participate in public gatherings or political activities. They were denied to participate in religious ceremonies like Upanayana Sankara. They were prohibited to read Vedic literature. They were not even allowed to vote.

Women were forced into child marriages. They were expected to practice monogamy while men were allowed to have multiple wives. Remarriage of widows was not permitted.

If we consider women's position in family, they were expected to stay at home and work as housewives. They were expected to serve their husbands. In elite class, polygamy was common. Women were imprisoned in their homes having no considerable social mobility. As a result, they were unable to enjoy their domestic lives.

The Prominent Women in the Post-Vedic Period- Ghosha was a well-known philosopher and seer. She was proficient in the Vedas and composed two hymns in the Rigveda. She was called as Mantradrika, meaning well-versed in Mantras. She was also called a Brahmavadini.

Nivavari was a prominent woman scholar and Brahmavadini who composed hymns in the Vedas.

Comparison of Condition of Women in Early and Post-Vedic Periods- The comparative study of women's condition from the Early Vedic Period to Post-Vedic Period depicts their deterioration in all spheres of life. Societies growing rigid attitude with respect to religion, education and Varna system resulted in the diminution of women's basic rights. The Early Vedic Period women had considerable freedom to take active part in political and religious activities. They were called Brahmavadini which means they could debate with male philosophers. They were trained with arms training. In our epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, there are references to such intellectual women like Princess Seeta, Queen Droupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Savitri, Ganga and others. Princess Seeta and Droupadi chose their husbands through Swayamvara, while Savitri undertook a journey to find the suitable husband for her. Their parents had given them freedom and

rights to choose their life partners. These, and other examples which are not mentioned here, show that women were treated with due respect as sources of knowledge and creation.

With denial of right of education, women were forfeited from having intellectual freedom. They could not become speakers in Sabhas and Samitis in this period. Furthermore, they were forbidden to take part in religious ceremonies. They became more like a caged bird in this period having no basic rights and even claims in property. As a result, this period shows lack of scholarly women like Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra. The society in that period had made progress with trade and commerce, politics and economic conditions, but the very backbone of social life formed by women devolved in the course of time.

The post-post-Vedic period does not have any trails of civilizations in the concrete form. It may be called as the Dark Period when civilization was very much in primitive conditions after the huge losses after the War of Kurukshetra. We have the traces of the Indus Valley Civilization in the form of excavations which were before Mahabharata and Ramayana. Post- Mahabharata Period, when Ramayana and Mahabharata are said to be “Epics” not having any direct references to the reality.

However, if the ‘Fictitious Epics” were based on the then contemporary reality, we can point that Seeta was left in the exile two times for the sake of the promises made by her husband, and his being a just king. She was also kidnapped by Ravana in the disguise. It means that they were prone to such threats existing in the society.

Then, Droupadi, a queen, was dragged to the court before all Kouravas as a Dasi, a maid servant won in the Dyuta, the Game. There are hundreds of the characters discussed in the two epics. They represent their periods and the wretched treatment given to the women characters can stand on their own.

As discussed above, the Vern System, that took over the period, started treating women as ‘Shudras’, the lowest of all Vernas. There are two contradictory Subhashitas, ‘दुष्कुलात् अपि नारी रत्नमस्वीकार्यः’ and the other being ‘ न स्त्री स्वातंत्र्यं अर्हति’(Manusmriti: Shlok 9.3). In the first, men in any Varna are free to accept the woman from even “Dushkula”, a non-reputed family. And in the second, women are forbidden of all the rights. So, in conclusion, it can be said that the women who fought for their own rights, or who proved their superiority through their intellect or who were born in upper classes, got some of the equal rights.

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