



## The decline in the status of women in later Vedic age: A study of scriptural evidences

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### Abstract

This is a general belief that the status of women witnessed a sharp and visible decline in later Vedic age. There are various reasons for it. This paper intends to present a feminist reading of the scriptural evidences for the aforementioned period to support and rationalize the belief. The researcher has used the Feminist standpoint to prove her point. With the help of primary sources like scriptures and the secondary sources the researcher has tried to re interpret the history with a feminist lens. What preceded in the Vedic age is out of the purview of this paper. The researcher has already dealt with it in her previous publications.

**Keywords:** Vedic age, scriptural evidences, scriptures

### Introduction

Later Vedic age is considered to be the age of Dharmashastras and smritis. All the legislators and law givers were chauvinistic. According to Romila Thapar "... law books are both a reflection to early Indian society as well as attempts at working out what is believed to be a perfect social system" (Thapar: 1966). This period can be marked for significant changes in the social and political system of India. Aryans consolidated their little kingdoms. Gradually birth-based caste system came into existence and got firmly established. Consolidation of private property and commodity production took place. New Religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism emerged and left a mark on Hindu civilization. Two greatest epics of Hindu civilizations- Ramayana and Mahabharata took their final shape. In short, the literature of this age forms the bedrock of the current Hindu social system. Whatever social system we witness today, the mythologies we refer to, the social stratification we live in, traditions we follow, have their roots in these periods.

Son preference got a clear mention in the Atharvaveda. We find a prayer in Atharvaveda (VI, 2, 3) for the birth of a son which says, "The births of girl grant in elsewhere, here grant a boy". In *Aitareya Brahmana* we observe a passage that while son is the hope of the family, daughter is a source of trouble for it. Altekar attributes this aversion to girl-child to the enforced widowhood and the prevalence of *sati* custom from about the 5th century AD (Altekar: 1959) [2].

Later Vedic literature started frequently painting a pessimistic picture of women. *Mahabharta* (V, 30, 6) mentions them as a person of unbound lust. In one place in Mahabharata (IV, 39, 78 (B)) we are told that sensual enjoyment is the sole aim of women's existence. In *Manusmriti*, the code of conduct, which lays down the social structure we live in today, uses harsher words for women. Women do not care for beauty nor is their attention fixed on age; it is enough that he is a man, they give themselves to handsome and ugly. Since the women are lustful, *Manusmriti* (XI, 6) suggests that they should be guarded carefully, even by weak men. Women should never

be free and always kept under control.

The age of marriage in cultured families was 15 to 16 in the Rig Vedic period, which continued to be so till 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Marriages at a lower age began to be advocated from about the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC by the writers of *Dharmasutras*, who flourished from 400 BC to AD 100 like *Vashishta*, *Baudhayana*, *Manu* and *Kautilya*, *Gautama* and *Vishnu*. From AD 200 it became a common norm and later writers made it a compulsion. *Yajnavalkya* insists that girls should be married before the age of puberty otherwise every month their guardians will be guilty of destruction of an embryo (*kathasaritsagar*, 34, 229). Later *smriti* writers further lowered this age to 8 years. *Brahma Purana* (165, 8) even recommends that girl should be married at any time after the age of 4. This must be noted that child marriages became common in *Brahmanas* only, *kshtariyas* and the other castes adopted it much later (Altekar: 1959) [2].

We find scriptural evidences of brides choosing their husbands in the Rig Vedic Age through *svayamvara*. But, this tradition remained particular to the warrior circle in post Vedic age too. When from AD 200 child marriages became the order of the day, self choice in marriage became practically impossible. Smriti writers talk of eight types of marriages-*Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, *Prajapatya*, *Asura*, *Gandharva*, *Rkshasa* and *Paishach*. Among them first four were approved forms of marriages. Only first three were allowed to Brahmanas. *Brahma vivaha* was considered to be the most preferred one, which bestows the sole right of the arranging the marriage to the father of the girl. *Gandharva vivaha* (love marriage) was not promoted.

Caste as a form of social stratification got established then and the rule of endogamy was strictly followed. Marriages outside the endogamous circles were condemned. But *anuloma* marriage was socially accepted. In *Manusmriti* (III, 12) we find mention that *Brahman* men can marry *Brahman*, *ksatriya*, *vaishya* even *shudra* women, but *shudra* men can marry only *shudra* women; Though *Manu* advises *Brahmana* men not to do so, because it will degrade them to *shudra*

status, nothing else. Whereas *pratiloma vivaha* (women of upper caste marries man of lower caste) was not sanctioned at all. Manu recommends capital punishment for such *shudra* man and forced confinement for the woman involved (Manusmriti, VII, 365, 366). So, with the consolidation of caste structure, circle of prospective bridegroom for women narrowed. Stricter norms for controlling female sexuality were laid down to avoid mixing of blood, i.e. *varnasamkara*, which was considered to be the cause of destruction.

Aryan women continued to get educated till the end of the Post Vedic period, though the extent kept on declining. Education was still imparted to women in the Post Vedic Age, but it seems that the goal of educating women had always been to make them better wives; individual development and independence had never found a mention as goal of education. We observe that a maiden can succeed in her marriage only if she has been properly trained during the period of studentship i.e. *brahmacharya* (Atharvaveda, XI, 5, 18). Gradually the doors of Vedic education got closed for women, though women from the *kshatriya* class used to get some military training. Thus, lowering of marriage age did fatal harm to women's education. Aryan women ceased to get Vedic education after 300 BC.

Status of wife was much below than that of her husband. Even the privilege of participation in Vedic rites with husband was snatched away from her. With the lowering of marriage age and discontinuation of Vedic studies, they were now regarded as a pupil of their husbands and were expected to always revere them. Her sole duty was to obey and serve her husband, which alone can ensure a seat in heaven for her (Manusmriti, V, 158). We find the physical coercion of the wife getting sanctions in the scriptures. The husband was allowed to beat his wife with fist or rod if she refused his sexual advances. Mere disobedience of orders, whatever the reason may be, could attract desertion by the husband. Manu allows the husband to leave his quarrelsome wife immediately, without any conciliation process. Final authority of punishing such undutiful wives was vested in the king, who can get her thrown before dog in public (Manusmriti, VII, 370). Wives were considered to be a chattel of her husband who had the right to stake her away or even sell. Even the haughty queen of *Mahabharata* silently accepts it. She only wants to clarify whether her husband was a free man, when he had staked her (Mahabharata, II, 89, 19). Ideal wives were expected to subsume their self in their husbands and control their words and deeds in similar ways, even a bit deviance was severely criticized.

Bearing son was central in the life of a Hindu woman and acted as a major determinant of her the status in the household. Manu (*Manusmriti*, IX, 81) says that a barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children die in tenth year and she who bears only daughters after eleventh year. *Vashishtha Dharmasutra*, (XXVIII, 2-3) too allows the husband of a sonless wife to marry again. Even begetting a son often could not provide emotional security to the wife, because the husband was allowed to marry again for more sons. Many times we find a mention of seed- field analogy in later Vedic literature. Same as the harvest belongs to the farmer who sows; the offspring belongs more to the father (who sows the seed) compared to the mother (field). The de-

facto authority on the offspring lied with the father, though she was compensated with reverence.

Generally, it is believed that women were secluded after the invasion of Muslims. But we find its example as early as the Asoka's time. The earliest reference to it is found in Panini's III, 2, 36 which yields *Asuryampashya raj darah* which means, those who do not see the sun that is the wives of king (Indra: 1975, pg.73). *Arthashastra* allots a punishment of six *panas* to a woman going out in the day to sport or to see a woman or to spectacle (Indra: 1975, pg. 74).

Discussion regarding polygyny (more than one wife) and polyandry (more than one husband) too can throw light on the position of women in Later Vedic and *Smriti* Period. Though the ideal was monogamy, still polygyny was practiced in well-to-do families, which were able to bear the burden. The anxiety for male child and ensuring the same was the cause of the expansion of this practice. *Apastambha dharmasutra* (II, 5, 11, 12) prohibits a second marriage if the first wife had already given birth to a son thus sanctioned it for the above cause. Lowering of marriage age seems to have helped this undesirable tendency. Often the husbands would not always like to be bound down by the choices made by their parents and would contract a second marriage (Altekar: 1959) [2]. Even devoted wives began to be superseded on flimsy or no grounds at all, even when they had given birth to sons. It got an indirect support by *Manusmriti* (X, 81). Polyandry was not as common as polygyny. We find mention of polyandry in the *Mahabharata* and some *Puranas*. The most famous example of polyandry is of *Draupadi*.

Another important issue is the position of a widow in society. Widows were regarded inauspicious in the society and this stigma grew stronger with time. Widow Remarriage was generally not permitted in the Hindu civilization. Though earlier Dharmashastra writers like *Vashishtha* were sympathetic towards child widows if the marriage itself was not consummated, but with growing ideals of asceticism, even the remarriage of the child widows was not permitted. Manu (*Manusmriti*, V, 157) discards widow remarriage completely. The custom of *niyoga* started receiving condemnation after 300 BC for being detrimental to the purity of women. The custom came to a complete halt after AD 600 which raised the issue of disposal of surplus women and it eventually gave an impetus to sati system.

*Sati* does not figure in *Grahyasutras*, *brahmanas* or *Manusmriti* and *Yajnavalkyasmriti*. The custom started becoming popular from AD 400. We find the example of widows burning themselves in certain Sanskrit literatures like *kumarsambhava* and *Mrichchhakatikam*. Soon the support for the system grew stronger and the previous mentions were used as scriptural evidences for *sati*. Since the ascetic ideals gained the upper- hand in the society it ultimately led to the popularity of *sati* system. Initially, it was in vogue in *kshatriyas* but soon *bhrahmanas*, who were more concerned about asceticism and chastity of women, adopted it. This change occurred around AD 1000.

The custom of tonsure started gaining popularity from AD 900. This tradition was probably borrowed from Buddhist nuns, who used to follow it as a mark of denouncing worldly pleasure. Some *smritis* like that of *vedavyasa* begin to recommend that if a woman does not become a *sati*, she

should tonsure her head. This custom was more common in *Brahmanas*, Other castes adopted it later.

Let us now discuss the changes occurred in proprietary rights of women. We saw how rights regarding immovable property of women were recognized in Vedic period extreme conditions. In later period we have a lot of misogynist text who argue differently. In *Shatapatha Brhmana* (IV.4.2.3) it is stated that women own neither themselves nor an inheritance. *Yaska* in his *Nirukta* (III.4) says that women are not entitled to any partition and inheritance. But whatever was the attitude towards women, it was not possible in practice to suppress all their property rights. Post Vedic literature and Buddhist literature suggest that in case of brotherless daughter, her rights in paternal property was recognized down too 400 BC. Though some texts like *Mahabharata* (XIII, 80, 11; XIII, 88, 22) and *Arthashastra* (III, 5) permitted it, but they too allowed a little share to her; but the opinion was divided in the society. Later writers like *Yajnavalkya*, *Narada* and *Brihaspati* adopted a soft approach toward women allowed them to inherit property as next heir after the son as a widow. But practically women without brothers were few so it continued to remain an extra-ordinary situation. In case of women with brothers, the general opinion of the society was that they should not get the share in paternal property.

Widows were not recognized as an heir in Rig Vedic age. Soon a school of thought dominated by *Vishnu* (on the failure of sons) and *Yajnavalkya* emerged who equipped the widow with the right to inherit, but they too do not recognize her as a full heir, they preferred to remain silent. *Mahabharata* (XIII, 82, 25) too does not recognize as a full heir as she was not allowed to dispose the property. On the other hand, orthodox school of thought was strictly against the idea of widows being recognized as an heir. Its chief advocates were *Narada*, *Katyayana* and king *Bhoj of Malwa* (1015 AD to 1055AD). Society was very reluctant to even recognizing a widow as even a limited heir, that's why this practice was a rare one.

Question of *stridhana* too is tied with property rights of women, though of elite class only. Early *smriti* writers like *Manu* were reluctant to give women complete ownership of *stridhana*. With the expansion of the scope of it the right of full ownership decreased. *Jimutavahana* of *Dayabhaga* School argued that it would be proper to describe only that much property under *stridhana*, which women are allowed to dispose of according to their own free will; Thus favoured limited scope of *stridhana* refusing *Vijnaneshvara* of *Mitakshara* School's version of amplified scope. But no doubt it existed as a compensatory gesture to ensure son's exclusive right over patrimony. Its scope differed with caste, custom and region.

With this description we can conclude that even the status of Aryan women got deteriorated in post Vedic period and *Dharmashastra*'s period, leave the non-Aryan women. They were snatched of their right to Vedic education. They got equated to *shudra*. Child marriages became a general trend, which worsen the condition. They were put under rigorous norms of morality as compared to men and expected to follow it throughout their life failing in which attracted severe criticism and punishment. Polygamy became a very easy resort after getting sanction from almost every scripture; conditions for polygamy were made more flexible to suite

male chauvinism of society. They almost became a slave to their husbands, aspiring for more love and affection from their husbands as compared to other wives. Their movement too must have got restricted to ensure their chastity. Caste got consolidated and so the endogamy. *Svayamvara* system which allowed aristocratic *kshatriya* women to choose their husband too became useless as *kshatriya* too gradually started adopting brahminical norm of child marriage. Even the *svayamvara* system did not offer woman equality with her husband, after choosing the husband she too submitted herself to her husband conforming to the existing norms in the society and accepted herself as a property to her husband. *Draupadi* is an apt example of it. The *sati* system started gaining popularity, which even denied woman the right to exist without her husband. We don't have much information about common women and *dasis*, but their condition is not hard to imagine after understanding the position of upper class women belonging to royal families. In *Mahabharata* (V, 86, 8) we find *Dhritarashtra* proposing to give hundred female slaves to *Krishna* as a token of his regard for him. Women continued to live a life of subordination with constant deterioration in their status.

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