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Status Of Women In Ancient India: (The Vedic Period)

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Abstract:

The concept of Status of Women:

The status of individuals and groups depends on their inborn advantages and disadvantages, abilities and disabilities and handicaps, which to a great extent affect their status and role in society. For example, women are vulnerable during menstrual periods and pregnancy. The status of women should be defined in terms of rights, powers, authorities and privileges, and protections and safeguards against the high-handedness of male domination and exploitation.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD:

Vedic religion is supposed to be the oldest religion in the world and has the history dating back to 800 B.C. The status of women was equal to that of men during this period and women had social, economic and educational freedom. The women during this period enjoyed a sense of security. Besides having religious freedom, women had freedom to do anything according to their wish. The women in the Vedic Period, it is observed, had equal status with men and independence in action.

“उपोष मे परा मृश सा पे दभ्रां । मयथाः ।
सर्वाह मस्मि रोमशा । धारी ॥ मिवावि ।।”¹

(Let the queen ask the king that she is in no way inferior to him. As you impart justice among men so I do among women. In the previous days wives of kings administered justice to the wives of their subject. I am also like them.)

A woman was treated to be equal to man during the Vedic Period. She rubbed shoulders with man in every field. She had great influence in the family. “The woman is assigned care of the home. Family is being her creation; her association with man in every sphere is stressed. Her influence has been much greater in public place also. When circumstances have drawn her outside home to high duties at that time she has shown capacity, courage and strength.”

In the Vedic Period marriage was considered as a religious ritual and this was an institution which linked individual with the society. According to Dr. Sarojani Babar during this period “the father of a good girl would find out a suitable bridegroom for her. Marriages took place in adult age and a bride and bridegroom would pray all gods to unite their souls”. Women had liberty in selecting their life partner,

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widows were permitted to remarry, women were given complete liberty in family matters and were treated as 'ardhangini', i.e. the better half. A widow had liberty as to whether she should remarry or not. She could even live her remaining life as a Sanyaasi (as ascetic) if she wished. Widows did not have to undergo any difficulties or suffering during the Vedic Period. She had the right to decide whether to continue living in the house of her in-laws or to go to her parents and live in her parental house. The following example is illustrative of this. “O woman, if you are laying near your dead husband, do get up after seeing this group of living people and get ready to remarry the brother of your dead husband who wants to marry you”.⁴ That women lived honorably during the Vedic Period can be seen from the following statement. We have noted that even among polyandrous people a woman would be married ceremonially.

Not only did they have the place of honour, but were entitled to participate freely in social activities too. They were allowed to pursue the academic attainments and share the family life with full vigour & élan. They were free to select their conjugal partners and they exercised free will in entering into the matrimonial bondage.

Swayamwar, the practice of selecting the bridegroom, was in vogue and the Aryan girls were free to choose their husbands of their choice.

“ब्रह्मा ऽस्पते यता सूक्तस्य बोधिं तां च तिव ।
विष्टं तदभ्रं यदवति बृहद्वदेम विदथे सुवीराः ।।”⁵

(For men it is incumbent to understand the real meanings of the Veda Vakya by proper means and marry a woman in the prime of his life and produce and protect children and keeping them unattracted towards worldly affairs & impart proper education and make them learned enhancing happiness.)

With regard to property rights and inheritance in the Vedic times there was a lot of disparity between men and women. A daughter had no share in her father's property. But each unmarried daughter was entitled to one-fourth share of patrimony received by her brother. The Vedic tradition explains that women had control over whatever the gifts they received at the time of marriage. It was called as 'Stree Dhana', i.e. the women's property. The major share of the property belonged to the patriarch. But daughters without brother(s) used to get share in property.

“During the Vedic Period the married women had no share in her husband's property due to various reasons originated in Indian tradition. We find the abandoned cases or divorced cases. A forsaken wife used to get one-third of her husband's property. If the husband abandoned his wife and if she happened to be poor, she could get the maintenance charges from her husband. That woman was expected to lead an ascetic life or Brahmacharya. Yajnavalkya, who recognized the widow as an heir naturally, considered women's right to property other than Stree Dhana.”⁶

WOMEN IN THE RELIGIOUS FIELD

“In the entire religious activities women's role was considered as inevitable and in all religious ceremonies and sacrifices men and women took part in coordination with one another. Husband and wife offered religious prayers and sacrifices jointly. There was a social norm restricting the husband not to participate in any kind of religious activity without his wife. Like man, woman too, had all the religious rights. Women could chant the Vedic mantras. Some married women would perform the ritual sacrifices. There were neither temples nor the practice of idol worshipping during the Vedic Period; no religious sect or sect of worshipping had yet come into existence. (The Bhakti, the Dedication, movement had not yet started). Yagnya (ritual sacrifice) was the only way of worshipping and women could perform Yagnya after taking Diksha or after Upanayan. If a woman's husband had been out of headquarters due to some work, she could alone perform the Yagnya which was supposed to be performed by the husband and wife together.”

There were some Yagnyas which could be performed only by women. They were 1) “Sita Yagnya 2) Rudrabali Yagnya 3) Rudrayag Yagnya. The first two Yagnyas were performed for the purpose of good yield of crop and reproduction, while the Rudrayag Yagnyas was performed for the purpose of the good future for unmarried girl and increase in the cattle stock.”⁷

THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN:

A woman had the opportunity of seeking education to enrich her intellectual and spiritual life during the Vedic Period. The women learned the Vedic Suktas and Sutras, which were needed for daily rituals, by heart and like men they did 'Sandhya' (worship) in the morning and evening. Shri V.S. Apte

illustrated the Oral education system as follow. 'Evidently the entire instruction was orally given in the Veda Kaal.'

“There were two types of girl students – (1) Brahma Vadini (2) Saddhodwaha; Brahmavadinis took education of the Vedas (the Veda & Vidya) and Brahma Vidya by remaining virgin throughout their lives. Besides reading, they also created. Yajnavalkya's Maitrayee was famous during this period for her proficiency in the knowledge of the self. The mental power of women during this period can be illustrated as follows: Gargi participated in the spiritual arguments that took place in each court once she defeated even Yajnavalkya in an important debate. Saddhodwaha students took education till they were sixteen years of age. They would marry after sixteen years of age and after having sought the education required for being a good housewife. Women would say mantras from the Vedas. They would also study the Vedas by virtue of various 'Gurukuls', the schools. They even served as teachers at Gurukuls. Girls had the right to pronounce the Vedas. We come to know from the comments of Patanjali that girls learnt and also taught during this period. Besides the advantage of education, the women were also allowed to learn the skills in singing, dancing, decorating a bed with flowers, designing & a host of other things.”

WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE:

“During the Vedic Period women used to participate actively in public life. They enjoyed freedom as they could move in the company of their husband or lovers. They usually had an important position in social gathering.”¹⁰

In this way, women had liberty of all kinds during the Vedic Period. A woman was equal to man in the religious, public and educational fields. Study of the Vedas, singing, playing music and dance were not prohibited for her. She was not deprived of education. She would be married in her adulthood with her consent. Women from good & eminent families took education of various branches during this period. They possessed property, they took share in sacrifices and religious duties; they attended great assemblies and state occasions; they also distinguished themselves in science and learning.

It may thus be concluded that in the Vedic India the status of women was not inferior. They had ample rights in the social and religious fields. They were not treated as subordinate, but equal to men. They were honored and respected. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar concluded that Indian Women during this period enjoyed superior status to that of any groups of women in any other part of the World did.

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