

Status of Women in the Vedic Age

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of the word ' Veda ' is knowledge. Women were revered and given a place of honour in the Rigvedic period. Various evils of society like the Purdah system, Sati, child marriage, etc. had yet not crept in. In the absence of a male heir, the daughter had a legal right over the property of her father. The brothers had to share the property of their father with their unmarried sisters, if any. After marriage, the girl was given a place of honour and respect in her new home. She had authority over her aged father - in- law and mother- in- law. No social or religious ceremony was considered to be complete and effective without the participation of the lady of the house.

The word ' Veda ' means knowledge. There can be no two opinions regarding the fact that the *Rigveda* is the earliest of the four *Vedas*. "...the Hindus consider the *Vedas* to be divinely revealed books and give them the title of Apaurushya (not made by man) and Nitya (Eternal) ". The early Vedic Age constitutes the period of composition of the *Vedas*, namely, *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*. The above mentioned three along with *Atharvaveda* and the *Itihasa Veda* comprise the *Vedas*.

The *Rigveda* consists of 1017 suktas or hymns which have been further divided into ten chapters or Mandals. The *Samaveda Samhita* has been referred to as the "Book of Chants ". It consists of beautiful hymns which are, "meant to be sung at the time of the Soma sacrifice by a special class of Brahmanas called Ugratris ". The procedure for the performance of sacrifices is laid down in the *Book of Sacrificial Prayers* or the *Yajurveda Samhita* .

In the *Rigveda* there are episodes and references which point towards a society which was highly organized. Women were revered and accorded a place of honour in the early Vedic period. Amongst the princes of the royal families polygamy was practiced but the general rule for the common people was monogamy. However, polyandry was not practiced and was absolutely unknown.

The distinguished historian , Dr. Winternitz says , " we hear in the hymns of the *Rigveda* of incest , seduction , conjugal unfaithfulness , the procuring of abortion as also of deception , theft and robbery ... We need not , therefore , imagine people of the Vedic age either as innocent shepherd people or as a hoard of rough savages " . There are references to girls living as spinsters, i.e. unmarried till late and living along with their brothers and father. This point towards the fact that it was not mandatory for girls to marry. But, the bond of marriage could not be broken by any human action as this bond was considered to be very sacred and of paramount importance.

If widows were left without a child, they were allowed to re – marry. The keen desire of the Vedic Indians for a child to

perform their last rites is described in great detail in the *Rigveda*. This accounts for the practice of widow re - remarriage. The practice of dowry was prevalent during the Vedic Age but there were certain exceptions as well because sometimes the son -in - law had to purchase his wife by paying money to her family.

The bride was brought to the house of the bridegroom after the sacred marriage ceremony. The girl was given a place of honour and respect in her new home. The woman wielded power in her new home and she had authority over the sisters and brothers of her husband. The various evils of society like child marriage, Sati pratha, bride burning, etc. were unknown.

No social or religious ceremony was considered complete and significant without the participation of the woman of the household. At the time of religious ceremonies, the wife was the partner of her husband and the husband was considered incomplete without his wife. This signifies that woman held a high position in society. The girls enjoyed absolute freedom in the selection of her bridegroom; however the choice and opinion of her father also counted.

The family was the unit of society and it was primarily patriarchal." A widow could marry the younger brother of her deceased husband. The father's property was inherited by the son. The daughter could inherit it only if she was the only child of her parents ". The right to property was known in immovable property like land and house and also in moveable property like gold, ornament, horse and cattle. "There were learned ladies like Visvara, Lopamudra, Ghosa and Sikata Nivavari, who even composed the mantras and rose to the rank of Rishis."

The Rigvedic society propagated freedom for women. She enjoyed freedom in choosing her husband; this ceremony has been referred to as the Swayamvara. Thus, we see, in the great Epic *Ramayana*, it is Sita who selects the protagonist Rama as her husband in a Swayamvara ceremony arranged by her father, king Janaka. The *Mahabharata and Ramayana*, illustrate that most of the women received education.

Women were treated as Ardhanginis and they enjoyed complete freedom in the family but legally they were not permitted to obtain a divorce. In the Vedic period women had an elevated status in society and they enjoyed various legal rights. During this period, women did not observe purdah .

Legally the women in the Vedic Age were entitled to the Upanayan ceremony and they studied the various fine arts and acquired knowledge of the Vedas. Education was not denied to women and in this field women enjoyed full freedom. The law could not curtail a girl's right to receive education. However , the Aryans had a patriarchal society and the male child was more welcome than the female child .Some of the legal rights to which women were entitled have been enumerated as under :-

- In the absence of a male heir, the daughter had full and complete legal right over the property of her father.
- The brothers had to share the property of their father with their unmarried sisters, if any.
- The property had to be equally divided amongst unmarried daughters and sons after the death of the mother, thus, women had legal right over the property of the mother as well.
- Women, who had been married, could not claim a share in the father's property.
- The Rigvedic people had some sort of belief in the divinity of the feminine principle. They worshipped various goddesses; one of them was Usha who was supposed "*to ride a shining car drawn by ruddy steeds and was the daughter of the sky* "

The social conditions of the Vedic and the Later Vedic Civilization also help us to understand the position and status of women. The Vaishyas and Shudras could not marry

Brahmana and Kshatriya girls while the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas could marry girls from the Sudras and Vaishyas . Marriages were also allowed between the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas. Thus, we get to know that Chyavana, a Brahmana , married Sukanya who was a Kshatriya girl . The caste system developed further during the Later Vedic Period. During the Vedic period the caste system was midway between the rigidity of the Sutras and the Laxity of the Rigveda. Vishwamitra has been referred to as a Rishi, although he was a Kshatriya. We get a glimpse of the position of the bride in the family of her husband from a hymn in the Rigveda where the husband says;

"May the Lord of creatures bring children unto us ... be as queen over thy husband's sisters and thy husband's brothers ".

The *Upanishads*, the *Aranyakas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Atharvaveda Samhita*, *Yajurveda* and *Samveda Samhita* throw light upon the later Vedic Civilization. In this period there was a marked deterioration in the position and status of women and their condition changed for the worse. However, there were a number of accomplished and gifted women who have been respectfully referred to as Brahmadinis. There were intellectually advanced and well educated women like Gargi and Maitreyi. King Janaka had organized a conference and Gargi was one of the intellectuals invited to this conference convened by Janaka. However, women were denied the right to the Upanayana ceremony. At the time of their Samskara there was no recitation of Vedic hymns. The rich classes and the royal families practiced polygamy. The Manu Smriti deprecates women to a certain degree. We see that women were deprived of their legal and economic rights. Manu observes that a slave and a wife should not be entitled to any property. Thus, we see that there was a marked deterioration in the legal and social status of women in the Later Vedic Age.

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