

Indian Feminism in Vedic Perspective

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The present paper attempts to reconstruct a positive theory of feminism in the context of ancient Indian social situation obtaining during the Vedic times. The purpose of this delineation is to sketch an outline of the predicament in which we, the women of India, are placed today vis-à-vis the happy position of women in the Vedic society. This historical reference is undertaken with a view to be benefitted and to derive inspirations from the gender relations prevalent during those days, to draw upon the status and roles assigned to women in a society which was just and egalitarian so that in modern times when we are deeply concerned with the issues of gender-equality, gender-justice, dignity and self-determination of women etc., we may emulate the social structure of those days.

To a modern positivistic mind this account may appear to be idealistic but in view of the established fact that it was in practice during the hoary past it may provide new insights, new intuitions and new attitudes to the contemporary world which is beset with the vexed problems of subjugation and exploitation of women in almost every society in every part of the globe. So the Vedic view should not be regarded as just historical, something of the past, it may provide a blue-print for any future social organisation as in all normative generalisations, the takeoff point is the actually lived situations and their universalisability can be substantiated on the ground of human nature being the same all through.

II

The universal aspiration that women and men should be treated equally, is scarcely contentious today. More than anything else, feminist demand for gender-equality is based on this very central point. Feminist thought has emerged in this century as the most challenging issue of social organisation and therefore it is too important and demanding to be ignored by anyone. It may be said without exaggeration that feminism is one of the expressions of the sensibilities of the contemporary society as a whole to which nearly all of the most important debates of the day do make some reference.¹

Feminism as a movement may be understood in terms of a need and a desire that women be recognised as individuals in their own right. From this point of view, it is an expression of female dignity and self-determination.² Whether or not we subscribe to the philosophies expressed in the different types of modern feminist movements,³ we are all influenced by the changes in values that have

taken place because we are passing through a period of major transition. In fact, feminist movement has been necessitated by the present day social situation. It has been partly successful in generating social awareness for equality of status and opportunities to women who constitute the vital half of the society. But it has not been able to bring about gender equality and women's liberation. This fact is amply evinced in a report of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs as follows:

"While women represent 50 per cent of the world population, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive one-tenth of the world income and own less than one per cent of the world property."

This clearly establishes the need to look for alternative approaches to women's issues—such approaches which are not only efficacious and practicable but which can also bring about social harmony and solidarity, which do not envisage any gender bias and which treat women at par with men. It is from this point of view that Vedic feminism seems to have relevance in modern times.

The central thrust of this paper, therefore, is to present a holistic and organismic picture of the social organisation as it has been propounded, propagated and practiced during the Vedic period consisting in perfect parity between man and woman in every sphere of life and existence. The Vedic view of the status and role of women may be termed as 'Vedic feminism', which is positive and constructive, healthy and balanced, based on the principles of mutual complementarity and respect. Even if a doubtful mind might question as to whether it was ever really practised, it is worth practising and emulating. No doubt there is biological disparity between the sexes and therefore some difference in role-play has to be accepted but this is not to be regarded as a hindrance to social equality, since this equality is a psychological phenomenon rather than a physical trait. In this way, Vedic feminism, in a great deal, speaks well beyond the concerns of what is usually thought today to be feminism in other parts of the globe. Although the delineation attempted here is more descriptive than analytical but the social situation and the projected aspirations therein may be of great relevance to the contemporary world.

It is worth mentioning here that the Vedic view of feminism is quite convincing in the context of present needs and aspirations of the women around the world as they are being reflected in the demands for more and more empowerment and equality of status and opportunities. The glimpses of women that we get through Vedic verses are enough to show that they had a noble role-model in the past and to encourage that they shall prove themselves even more worthy in the future.

III

Indian feminism is basically different from the Western feminism in the sense that it has never been aggressive or militant like its European counterpart perhaps because it did not have to face much opposition.⁴ At the same time, it must be admitted that the role of Indian women in modern times has been full of contradictions. On the one hand, we hear of the glorious and enviable position of

women in the Vedic age while, on the other, we see everywhere that they are being exploited as the weaker sex having no economic or social access nor political equality. But things have and are being changed—albeit slowly—and the new, confident Indian woman is emerging on the world scene, coming back to the mainstream of social life to reassume her rightful place.

To quote from the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India:

“Traditional* India had seen a woman only as a member of the family or group—as daughters, wives and mothers, and not as an individual with an identity or rights of her own. The radicalism of the constitution and its deliberate departure from the inherited social system lay in its implicit assumption that every adult woman, whatever her social position or accomplishments, will function as a citizen and as an individual partner in the task of nation building.”⁵

This has to be understood in the historical setting of the Indian freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who declared himself to be “uncompromising in the matter of women’s rights”.⁶

In fact, this merging of the Indian women’s movement in the freedom movement gave it a wider perspective and hence the women’s movement in India has got an identity distinct from similar movements in other countries. The decision to work for the general liberation of all the oppressed and exploited, rather than women alone, prevented the Indian movement from the self-defeating and alienating elitism of its Western counterparts.⁷ This peculiar nature of Indian feminism has to be kept in mind before we proceed further to analyse its roots in the Vedic perspective.

IV

Vedic feminism is characterized by a spiritual outlook which is at the core of Vedic philosophy. Women here are depicted as craving for the eternal and the immortal knowledge⁸ rather than the material and the mundane things. It can be well substantiated that women in those days had a free and fair access to education and they even had the courage and conviction to challenge the intellectual giants like the sage Yājñavalkya. The names of Gārgī and Maitreyī are very well known in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. The searching cross-examination of Yājñavalkya by Gārgī shows that she was a dialectician and philosopher of a high order.⁹ There are no signs of disparity between sexes at this level, no gender bias is visible here. Women participated in the learned assemblies as well as in the battles.¹⁰ There are more than twenty female seers of Vedic hymns mentioned in the Bṛhad-devata.¹¹ There are good many passages in the Ṛgveda which are sufficient to prove that women enjoyed equal rights with men in the early Vedic period.¹² They were not denied any right.¹³ They were regarded with due respect in every sphere of life and they were not subject to any of the merciless laws of an unsympathetic society.¹⁴

*Post-vedic.

From this point of view, women do not seem to be standing on an antagonistic pedestal, rather they are portrayed as essentially complementary to men. This idea of complementarity is very well reflected in the later metaphysical conceptions of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* (through metaphorical) put forth by the Sāṅkhya system of Indian Philosophy. The idea of *Śakti* and *Saktimān* enunciated in the Indian mythology does not envisage any difference in the sexes, but it is a relation of total identity or inseparability—none can do without the other, this is the core of Indian feminism which led to the Indian myth of '*Ardhanārīśvara*'.¹⁵

In fact, the Vedic philosophy does not conceive any sort of discrimination between man and woman since as per the Vedic cosmogony, the Supreme Being divided Himself in two equal halves for their creation.¹⁶ Therefore male and female are like two parts of the same substance, two sides of the same reality¹⁷ and there should be no basis for disparity or bias.

This metaphysical presupposition leads to the high social status which is assigned to a woman in the Vedic society. She herself boastfully declares that: 'I am the flag of the society, the very high forehead of it.'¹⁸

Woman is even said to be the creator of the world,¹⁹ she is noble, pious and worthy.²⁰ She had full freedom to choose her husband,²¹ and this means that she was married at a mature age and child marriage was not prevalent. She was not confined to home and hearth, nor was she secluded in purdah, but was an equal partner in family as well as public life. There is no evidence to show that a girl was regarded as an unwanted baby, rather we have a prayer for the birth of a scholarly daughter²² and also a sense of pride in having such a daughter.²³ The available evidence is enough to show that the woman could be initiated in Vedic studies and the marriage or remarriage of a daughter was also not a difficult problem; hence it may be deduced that the birth of a daughter was not a source of consternation to the family in the Vedic and Upanisadic ages.²⁴

This fact is very well reflected in the Vedic marriage ceremony where friendship is solicited between the husband and wife.²⁵ It proves that in the household as well as in the society, she has the place of a friend of equal status. It is also clear from this that she was really a '*sahachari*' and not '*anuchari*'. There is a perfect parity between the two which is expressed in the Vedic prayers where oneness of hearts is sought between the husband and wife.²⁶ Here there is no better half or the worse half but just the two equal halves. Marriage in Vedic philosophy is not a compromise or a contract undertaken for physical pleasures or material comforts, but a sacrament, a fulfilment of the highest goal of life, a perfect companionship. It is therefore designated as *āśrama* meaning total functional dedication to the cause of familial and religious duties. Both husband and wife have equal rights as well as duties for the welfare of society; there is no difference at all²⁷—they act as if they are one single unit, hence the name *dampati*²⁸ (both are owners of the house). The Veda goes even a step further and declares that it is the wife who symbolises the house²⁹ and not vice versa. It is in this background that she is called as *sāmrajñī* (perfectly illuminant, empress) of the house.³⁰ Can a nobler depiction of womanhood be thought of?

As stated above, marriage in Vedic society was deemed as a religious duty, hence it was laid down as a rule that the husband cannot perform any religious sacrifice without his wife sitting by his side.³¹ In fact he is incomplete until he unites with his wife³² and the wife is called a *patnī* only because she partakes with her husband in the sacrificial rituals.³³ She is designated as *dharmapatnī* whereas the husband is merely a *grhapati*.³⁴ Not only that, he cannot even desire to ascend to the heaven alone, he calls his wife to accompany him there too.³⁵ In this way, Vedic marriage is an inseparable bond which gives equal status to both husband and wife. Here woman was viewed not as a thing of pleasure, but as a partner in the religious duties. Hence there is no scope for subjugation or exploitation. In the Vedic period, both the husband and the wife lived in perfect harmony and both were regarded as a unit of society. This is evident from the hymn of the Rgveda embodying the nuptial ceremony, as well as from many other references to the wifehood of a woman, where she is depicted as sharing the burden of her husband, not only in domestic life but in social and religious ceremonies as well.³⁶ From this it may be presumed that husband and wife denote an ideal couple, a perfect pair, equal partners in domestic and social life.

It is noteworthy that in the Vedic literature although a woman's prime role is portrayed as a wife only, yet several other aspects of feminine form are also suggested by various names and epithets used to denote a woman. It is quite interesting to derive the exact meaning of these words because it may help in giving a better idea of different roles of woman in home and in society. For instance, a woman as wife is denoted by three words: *jāyā*, *jani* and *patnī*. Of these, *jāyā* is the woman who gives birth to one's progeny, *jani* is the mother of children and *patnī* is the co-partner in the religious duties.

Similarly woman is designated as:

1. *Aditi*, because she is not dependent (Nirukta, 4/22)
2. *Aghnyā*, for she is not to be hurt (Y.V. 8/43)
3. *Bṛhatī*, for she is large hearted (Y.V. 11/64)
4. *Chandrā*, because she is happy (Y.V. 8/43)
5. *Devakāmā*, since she is pious. (A.V. 14/1/47)
6. *Devī*, since she is divine (A.V. 14/1/45, Y.V. 4/23)
7. *Dhruvā*, for she is firm (Y.V. 11/64)
8. *Havyā*, because she is worthy of invocation (Y.V. 8/43)
9. *Idā*, for she is worshippable (Y.V. 8/43)
10. *Jyotā*, because she is illuminating, bright (Y.V. 8/43)
11. *Kāmyā*, because she is lovable (Y.V. 8/43)
12. *Kśamā*, for she is tolerant/indulgent/patient (A.V. 12/1/29)
13. *Mahī*, since she is great (Y.V. 8/43)
14. *Menā*, because she deserves respect (Nirukta 3/21/2)
15. *Nārī*, for she is not inimical to anyone (A.V. 14/1/59)
16. *Purandhī*, for she is munificent, liberal (Y.V. 22/22)
17. *Rantā*, because she is lovely (Y.V. 8/43)
18. *Rtāvarī*, *Rtachit*, for she is the preserver/fosterer of truth (R.V. 2/41/18)

19. *Sanjayā*, since she is victorious (R.V. 10/159/3)
20. *Sarasvatī*, since she is scholarly ((Y.V. 20/84)
21. *Simhī*, since she is courageous (Y.V. 5/12)
22. *Śivā*, for she is benevolent (A.V. 14/1/64)
23. *Śivatamā*, since she is the noblest (R.V. 10/85/37)
24. *Strī*, since she is modest (R.V. 8/33/9, Nirukta 3/21/2)
25. *Subhagā*, because she is fortunate (Y.V. 8/43)
26. *Subudhā*, for she is knowledgeable (A.V. 14/2/75)
27. *Sumaṅgalī*, since she is auspicious (A.V. 14/2/26)
28. *Suśevā*, for she is pleasant (A.V. 14/2/26)
29. *Suvarchā*, since she is splendid (A.V. 14/4/47)
30. *Suyamā*, since she is self-disciplined. (A.V. 14/2/18)
31. *Syonā*, for she is noble (A.V. 14/2/27)
32. *Vīriṇī*, since she is mother of brave sons (R.V. 10/86/9, 10)
33. *Viśrutā*, since she is learned (Y.V. 8/43)
34. *Yaśasvatī*, for she is glorious (R.V. 1/79/1)
35. *Yoṣā*, because she is intermingled with man, she is not separate (Nirukta 3/15/1)

All of these words have separate connotations and various shades of their meaning can be grasped exactly only by referring to the context. Still a hint is given here with a view to denote the respectable status of woman in the Vedic society.

V

Human equality is, no doubt, a mark of civil society. In a civil society, there must be respect for human rights and right to equality is a fundamental right. In contemporary society, we are rights-oriented and therefore we talk in terms of human rights, women's rights, etc. But the Vedic view is basically different from this standpoint in that it is not right-based, rather it is duty-oriented. A social set-up based on duties is naturally more harmonious than the one based on rights. It is so because in duty-consciousness there is a feeling of sacrifice and co-operation, but no conflict or antagonism. In a sustainable democratic society where there is inevitable need for mutual care, regard and consideration, one may legitimately talk of rights in general and human rights in particular, which are inalienable, non-negotiable and politically universal, but for a smooth social structuring and functioning, duty-centric approach may be more conducive for the strengthening of family bonds and social solidarity. It may have another added advantage of developing environmental awareness.

VI

Even if we forget about duty-centeredness and talk of rights only, then also in Vedic perspective, neither individual rights nor equal rights are to be sought after, rather joint rights are to be proposed for all the human beings³⁷ and more so for

the husband and wife.³⁸ The Veda teaches us to be 'humans' and not to be 'he-mans' or 'she-mans'.³⁹

Moreover, a human rights' claim should begin first with equality of status between man and woman, otherwise the claim of human rights will be self-deceit. In other words, a human right is fake without human dignity and human dignity is above gender-bias. Hence each and every human being is to be respected as an individual in his/her own right.

In the West, during Renaissance period, there has been a revolt against social inequality and in the French Revolution the three ideals of equality, liberty and justice were prominently put forth, but it seems ironical that even while projecting equality, liberty and justice as ideals of humankind, no attention was paid to equality between man and woman. Unfortunately, even at the fag end of the twentieth century, all calls for promotion and protection of women's rights have been mostly usurped by menfolk in spite of tall talks of equality, liberty and justice.

On the other hand, when we talk of women's empowerment, we have to be very cautious and careful about its limits, otherwise it will prove to be a political slogan only. Empowerment should be accompanied with disempowerment; if one section of the society is to be empowered, it should automatically disempower the other. Secondly, empowerment should be facilitated along with suitable opportunities and conducive conditions for its efficacious employment.

In the Vedic society, there was no need felt for any talk of empowerment, since it was a gender-just, duty-oriented society. But in the present scenario, when the social mindset is rights-oriented, we have to talk of empowerment of that section of humanity which is oppressed or suppressed. In the history of humankind, more often than not, the status of woman has been relegated to a subordinate position and her role confined to the private, rather than the public, the reproductive, rather than the productive.⁴⁰ At the same time, in idealistic projections and in some recognised situations, she has been assigned a status and a role, equal to, if not higher than, the man. There have been social organisations of the matriarchal type in some places. But these have been more as exceptions than as a general rule.

Both man and woman are an integral part of society. If the humanity's future has to be revitalised, women have to cast off the shackles of social taboos, superstitions, and, above all, ignorance, and thus become equal partners with men in shaping its image. Male and female have to live in co-ordination as has been argued by Laclau, one of the modern scholars: "Politics of pure difference would be self-defeating." In his provocative essay, "Beyond Emancipation" he states: "We are today coming to terms with our finitude and with the political possibility that it opens. This is the point from which the potentially liberatory discourses of our postmodern age have to start. We can perhaps say that we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom."⁴¹ On the contrary, there are some other contemporary scholars who argue for the cause of feminism but they do not address the question of relationship and connectedness between men and women. They probably think that one can live in a world of differences without the need

for any coordination whatsoever and it seems as if for them to talk of a system of coordination is totalization.⁴² Scholars with this differentiated approach tell us that no assumptions can be made about the character, function and definition of the relationship between men and women.⁴³

It is at this crucial point that the holistic philosophy of the Vedas comes to our rescue according to which both the male and female are inevitably complementary to one another and this would be a different world, if only both of them could lead a harmonious life and work together, not in confrontation but with cooperation. But while Vedic philosophy can provide us a gender-just situation in the form of a theory, we have to cultivate and demonstrate an inner preparedness for participation in a humane and dignified society. "Both theory and practice now have to be given radically transformative meanings. Making our home and the world just for women requires fundamental structural transformation and the striving towards the overcoming of ego has to be practised along with structural transformation of patriarchy without wasting our time in deciding which one should come first and which one should come later."⁴⁴ Hence collective action and critical reflection on gender-justice today has to strive towards the evolutionary ideal of self-transformation, an ideal which is a challenge for the humanity as the 'Mother' (Pondicherry) has observed in this context: "The problem of woman is as old as humanity in its appearance In any case the indubitable fact is there That is why no law can liberate women unless they are free themselves; men too likewise cannot in spite of all their habits of domination cease to be slaves unless they are freed from all their inner slavery."⁴⁵

There is no denying the fact that the question of gender-justice is a double-edged, open and universal question which involves its so called oppositional elements, that is both male and female. It is both a man or woman's problem as well as a human problem; we cannot undermine the significance of either. Nor can the laws and constitutions bring forth any magic solution to this age-old problem. If the legal framework alone was an evidence of a gender-just society, India would not be found lacking. As far as the legal rights of Indian women are concerned, the constitution not only grants equality to men and women under article 14, it also empowers the state to "adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women to assist them to overcome cumulative socio-economic, educational and political oppression faced by centuries." It means that even the law-makers of our land were aware that women had to live a life of oppression and exploitation for centuries starting from the post-Vedic period. It is not possible at this juncture to go into details of the reasons for this changed scenario in the Indian society, but this much is obviously certain that laws and further legislation are hardly the answer today. "The hurdle now is a non-conducive mindset rather than an unfavourable legal framework. In such a scenario, it becomes obvious that more than the provisions of bills and directives, the need of the hour is a change in the mindset. One that does not look at emerging female empowerment as a threat Instead, as Naomi Wolf states: "Women just want to share. Equality makes the world better, for men as well as women."⁴⁶

Women have come a long way in terms of their constitutional and legal equality, but the path to equality of access is still a long one. The lag between the theory and practice of equality between the two genders may be attributed to several factors: social and familial prejudices, ethnic and regional differentials, absence of adequate vocational training and skill vis-à-vis men. Last but not the least, the women's self-perception of their own potential, often underrated, determines to a great extent the priorities.

Among the various factors affecting women's emancipation today, perhaps the crucial one has been changes in the life-style as a result of the technological revolution, particularly in the developed countries.⁴⁷ Barbara Ward's list of the major catalysts of social change including modern medical measures, improved communications, increasing urbanization, new opening of paid employment, education, political emancipation and legal change⁴⁸ seems to be fairly exhaustive in this respect.

All that is required today is to give women of the world what they have been deprived of, i.e. to inculcate in them a sense of self-respect. They need to be self-propelled, able to take decisions and then to act on them Let woman grow in self-esteem, self-respect and let her be conscious of her rights when she is performing her duties Let her also be recognized as a respectable, moral, responsible human being.⁴⁹ Let us all join hands and work hard to see that "no woman feels the degradation of being a woman—not the degradation of being that 'God' made her a woman but what 'man' has made her."⁵⁰ If only the women were also provided equal opportunities in all walks of life, the picture of the present world would have been very different. Ernestine has rightly echoed the same feeling:

"Humanity recognises no sex, mind recognises no sex; life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognise no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers; . . . like him she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws, and far greater penalties she has to suffer from ignorance; like men she also suffers or enjoys with her country. Yet she is not recognised as his equal."⁵¹

Finally, it may be said that in the intricate and complex web of social relationships nothing has been more conflicting and contradictory than the relation between man and woman as well as woman and woman or man and man. But the blatant discrimination and social exploitation of women under various social set-ups has given rise to feminist movements. As for India today, its gender development index rank is an abysmal 103 of 137 countries. India is among the few countries in the world where the proportion of the women in the total population is smaller than men. What is more disturbing, this proportion has been declining steadily over the last 100 years, from 972 per thousand males in 1901 to 930 in 1971.⁵² That is why feministic studies are attracting greater attention in the Indian context too. To quote Andre Beteille:

"Few developments in recent years have generated as much enthusiasm in the Indian academic world as women's studies. What gives vitality to women's studies is that they

are not just a branch of scholarship but part of a larger social movement. The ablest exponents of the subject see themselves as contributing simultaneously to a new type of theory and a new social practice.⁵³

It can no longer be regarded as though it was concerned exclusively with women's interests. Rather it has to be looked upon as a question of wider complexity in relation to the entire society.

In the light of these changing trends, one might conclude that the emancipation of women is closely linked up with a perception of the place for women in the social order. Women's rights, roles and norms of behaviour as also those of others towards them, are still greatly influenced by cultural factors like the institutions of family, religious and other traditions. In the Indian context, the processes of social change, development and modernization are more complicated by the ignorance of our own heritage and the impact of Western lifestyle have superimposed certain imprints which have resulted in a conglomeration of complex problems. The problem of Indian woman today is only one of these contradictory as well as complementary patterns of change. Hence it should be viewed in consonance with ancient Indian tradition and we should explore some typical Indian solutions for that. We have to keep in mind that all said and done, happy family alone can create a healthy society and so there should be cooperation between the family members with equal opportunities and responsibilities in all walks of life for both males and females; a perfect parity between the two sexes in the family can alone bring harmony in the society.

Viewed in this way, Vedic feminism is not only a theoretical idea, but a complete code of life and society where woman is the equal partner of man, neither of them is subordinate to the other.

As we move towards a new century which also signifies the commencement of a new millennium in human history, it is appropriate that we work hard to build a new India of the 21st century in which woman and man shall be treated as equal partners. In this context we can be enriched by the ancient Indian Vedic view of participatory existence in which both woman and man partake not for their individual rights but for the preservation and furtherance of familial and social duties at all levels. The current issue of women's empowerment could be amicably settled if we are able to shed gender bias and care for a gender-just world in which woman and man share power with rather than power over one another. Both the sections of society have to be free from their inhibitions and prejudices to live with mutual regard and dignity. Vedic seers offer valuable insights in urging us to adopt and consider this fact. Vedic feminism suggests that the striving for gender justice today cannot be fulfilled in a particularistic manner, it has to have some sort of holistic approach incorporating all webs of social relations and their mutual transformation. From this point of view feminism should not be understood as a women's movement alone, but as a total human quest. This is very well reflected in the following verse of the Veda⁵⁴ where mutual love and family concord has been bestowed upon the couple:

"The union of hearts and minds
and freedom from hate I'll bring you,
Love one another as the cow
loves the calf that she has borne!"

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33. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1/9/2/14; *Pāṇini Sūtra*, 4/11/3.

34. *Atharvaveda*, 14/1/51.
35. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 5/2/1/10.
36. *Rgveda*, 1/14/7, 1/57/3, 1/72/5, 5/3/2, 5/43/15.
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