Feminine Status in Rgvedic Society

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The concept of feminine status from the age up to that of present time has been subjected to several studies from various angles based on different theories. This matter a new awareness is being created by the theorists of contemporary womens studies and they argue that the unequal, hierarchical and exploitative relationship between men and women is caused by social and historical factors. In this context it will be relevant and useful to analyse the feminine status in early Vedic society as reflected in Rgveda, the earliest document of mankind.

Before entering to the topic, one must be aware of some peculiar features of society reflected in Rgveda. It is generally admitted that Rgveda is a compilation of Sêktas composed in different periods that extend from several centuries. Books II and VII, which are called Family Books, are the oldest portions. Book I and X, that account for a large part of the text, are later additions. So the society reflected in Rgveda is not confined to a particular age. Moreover, as observed by R.S. Sarma, the oldest portions, the Family Books, do not contain purely Vedic tradition, but Vedic and Non-Vedic traditions are mixed in them. Thus ultimately, 'Rgvedic Society' means a society which bears the stamp of different cultures, both Vedic and Non-Vedic, of different ages. Taking into consideration all these aspects, this paper is a humble attempt to trace out the attitude of Rgvedic society towards womanhood.

The woman images abundantly portrayed in Rgvedic Sêktas will make it clear that during this period the status of woman in society was much favourable when compared to that of later ages. In this period, the total denial of her individuality is not found as such in the ages of Brähma, as and Dharmastras. The advantage of education was not denied for her at that time. Rgveda refers to several women seers like Viṣwârî, GhoÂľ, and Apli, who are termed as Brahmavîdîns - women who used to enter in discourses on the sacred texts. The following references in the beginning of the certain Sêktas are examples:

1. treti viṣwârî, nma brahmavîdîn eAiA / (V. 28)
2. kakAvate ghoÂľ, nma brahmavîdîn eAiA / (X. 39)
3. apli, brahmavîdîn eAiA / (VIII. 80)

At that time women even performed religious ceremonies reciting Vedic stanzas. Brahmacri: Viṣwârî is described as starting sacrifice by herself early in the morning.

etî priçe viṣwârî, namobhiAiA
divâla haviA huche  / / (V. 28.1)

[Praising the Gods with homage and oblations, the female seer Viṣwârî, goes eastward carrying the sacrificial ladle with Havis in hand.]

Freedom for indulging in social activities is also allowed for them. They could go around freely, mix in society and participate in social gatherings. It is hinted in the following Mantra portion:

samhotram sa phri, nre samaman viṣvagacchati // (X. 8. 10)

Samana here means social gathering. There are references to woman warriors also like Viṣvârî and Vadhrimate (X. 39. 78). Another lady Mandgalame - the wife of Mandgalame - is described as an efficient charioteer (X. 102). (These references are seen in 1st Ma -ala also). All these reference show that irrespective of marital status women entered in public activities at that age.

Marriage and family life

Marriage was generally considered as a religious necessity to both men and women. Wifehood and Motherhood were considered as esteemed roles. Wife was the joint owner of the house and an indispensable partner in rituals. There is no clear reference to Sati system or child marriage. The following Rk of the funeral hymn give the indication of widow remarriage:

doçAvâi nryabhîjeyalokam
gat¬saumenam upagEaiA eti /
hasçgrhâsya didhiAsãvAedam
patyurjanitvam abhisambAhEva  // / (X. 18. 10)

Thus one can conclude that in Rgvedic society, women enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges both in the sphere of family and public life. As wife and mother, she held an esteemed position and was considered as a partner in household and religious rituals. Thus women had a graceful phase in the ages of Rgveda.

But a critical revision of several hymns, especially the marriage hymn (X. 85), will make it clear that these people did not always practice these principles, positions, gender discriminations and male-dominance were prevailing in Rgvedic society also. It is observed by historians and social scientists that a society in which patrialini and joint family system exist, these tendencies are naturally inevitable. Several references can be cited from Rgveda to substantiate the above mentioned idea.

There are ample evidences to infer that patrialini and joint family system were in vogue in Rgvedic society. The institution of marriage was well established at that time. The 85th Sêkta in the 10th Ma -ala, which is famous as Viyâhaska, gives a detailed description of the marriage ceremony with all its auxiliaries. It also reflects the prevailing family pattern in that society and the ideal role of a woman in such a family system.

Household and Family

These two terms, household and family, are commonly used in the same sense. But scholars proficient in modern women studies, like Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar, observe that there is significant difference between them. According to them Household is a residential unit in which members generally live, cook and dine together. Family is more a relationship, an emotional bond, a normative structure with rights and duties (Women in Indian Society, 2001, p.62).

Sex roles and Program of behaviour

In Rgvedic society, husband as the patriarchal head of the household, held the dominant role and wife is viewed as subservient to him. The primary responsibility of pleasing the Gods is vested upon the husband and wife is only a silent joint partner in it. It is suggestively indicated in this statement:

bhago aryan; savic; purandhaIiA
mahayam tva aduA grhaapatiyiya deviA // / (X. 85. 36)

[Gods gave you to me for Grahapatyya] He is the Yajamna, the host of the Gods and guests. It is expressed in the following Mant.as:

yo yajati yajata it
svanaaca pascti ca
brahmedindrasya ckanat /
puro;spam yo asmaI
somam rara jiram
p❞it tam jakromhasA  // / (VIII. 31. 12)

[That Brahman (any pious worshipper) pleases Indra well, who worships, sacrifices, pours libation and prepares the meal. Eakra protects one from woe n who gives him sacrificial cake ad offers Soma blended with milk]
A woman, at the same time, is in the bond of family where she is expected to maintain the emotional relationship between the members. The following two Mantras from the marriage hymn explicitly hint that through this religious ritual she is tied up to the enigmatic institution of family, physically, emotionally and psychologically:

pra tvā muñiṣyati varunasya piyay/ yena tvā baddhīn savit śuṣṇayeA/ etasya yonau suketya lo- karnām tvā sahaptay dadhīmi/ preto muñiṣyati nmuṣyA/ subaddhamanumatakaram. // (X. 85. 24, 25)

[Now from the noose of Varuṣa I free thee, where with most blessed Svaltar hath bound thee. In laws seat, to the world of virtuous action, I give thee up uninjured with thy consort. Hence, and not hence stand thee free, I make thee softly fettered there.]

The Ideal Role of Women

The advice given to the newly wedded wife and the blessings bestowed upon her clearly bring out the concept of ideal woman in that society. She is blessed to be auspicious and fortunate always. She is advised not to be angry or hostile to her husband, to be tender, amiable, glorious, devoted to God, the mother of males, the bestower of happiness, the bringer of prosperity to all men and animals:

adūrmya gāvayā patikām vijī/ janno bhava dvipade jām catuApaAde // aghoracA.bmp mppatīnAhitA/ nītvā pājuhaA jāmun svuvaCjī/ vrñatsrudevaCjm svon nāno bhava dvipade jām catuApaAde // (X. 85. 43, 44)

She is also blessed to reign supreme over all the members of the family, relatives and the dependants by her virtues, submissiveness, softness, and piety. The Vedic poet says:

gham garca ghapatm vathiśo/ vajīn tvam vidathavajāyAṣi/ samrijīa yavuṛe bhava/ samrijīa yavuṛuṃ bhava/ nan cādi samrijīa bhava/ samrijīa adhiyeA// (X. 85. 26, 46)

It is to be noted here that in a general reading these passages appear to be indicative of a wife's supremacy over the household and her equal status with husband. But a critical analysis will make it clear that actually these words are affirming the conservative ideological positions of sex roles, reserving the private sphere to men. It will not be a folly conclusion that the concept of ideal Indian woman devoting herself exclusively to her husband and always confined and dedicated to her family had already been set by the time of Rgveda itself.

In this connection, a hymn from the 23rd Śekta of VIII Mañjula is much interesting to be noted. By the impression of Gods, Esanga, son of Playoga, had been changed to a woman. Then Indra says to him thus:

adhaA pāyaṣhya upari santraṃ pāda kara mī tē kaṇapālaka deśa tē hi brahma bhābhīvita // (VIII. 33. 19)

[Cast down your eyes and look not up. More closely set you feet. Let none see your knee and ankle. Now you have become a dame]. Here the Vedic poet clearly suggests the strict behavioural program of a woman in her dress and manners.

Gender Discrimination

Prayer for male progeny, which is seen incessantly throughout the text, clearly shows that gender discrimination was in force in Rgvedic society. The seers always seek for the welfare of their sons and grandsons. These are certain examples:

1) bhavā tokaya taṇāṣya jām naA// (I. 189. 2)
2) vṛcēA uṛam upapo dhī naA svam// (I. 24. 15)
3) aghē tokasya nasthe tāṇām// (II. 9. 2)

They become much delighted and satisfied by the birth of sons: pumindēSēm jām abhisamrabhanē// (III. 29. 13)
jitē jām atiprasējē// (II. 24. 6)

Women are always expected to be the mothers of male issues:

agnirmaṛṣy verakAär purandhi svasti naA putrākē tēA uṃnīA// (X. 63. 5)
dājīyēm putrēdēhi// (X. 85. 45)

No prayer for getting a daughter is seen anywhere in the Śekta of Rgveda.

In this matter an observation made by R.S. Sarma is worth to be noted here. He says, The constant prayers for sons, who possibly because of labour power they provided, are treated as an item of property, indicate that the Rgveda family did not have enough male members (Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India, R.S.Sarma, 1983, p.29). Whatever may be the reason, the fact that the Rgvedic society always stressed the extreme importance of male issues exists.

This discrimination to women can also be perceived form the practice of inheritance recorded in Rgveda. In patriarchal descend system, son is supposed to continue the patriline. So he is considered as a permanent member of his fathers lineage while the daughter is viewed as a transient. As a result the patrimony is inherited by the male heirs and the daughter get only dowry and ornaments. In the following Mantra the Vedic poet expressly informs the brother that he should not give any share to his sister, she is after all to migrate to a different family:

na jimmē yīn rokhiṃnaik caκā ranbāram saṃturādām // (III. 31. 2)

If there is no male issue, the inheritance goes to the grandson, not to the daughter. The following passage is an indicator of this practice:

sijaṃvāranuṛdhūtā nāmpīyā gujīvīn gūta jādhiṃtii sapārayān / pīt jāna duhituskeṣapījān saṃjāmyena manas; dādhanve//

The meaning of the stanza is much obscure. According to Śya, this stanza gives the reference to the sonless father entering into a contract with his son-in-law stating that the daughters son will continue his maternal lineage.

Feminine Sensuality

The feminine images dispersed throughout the text are centered on her physical charm and sensuality while man is always depicted as bold and valorous. Woman is praised for her youthful beauty and radiance with appealing adornment and amorous gestures. She attracts and delights man. Several images are portrayed by the RAIs which can be cited as examples:

1) upo ruruce yuvatāma yοA// (VII. 77. 1)
2) jīyēva pātyā jatē suvījī (seen in many places)
3) kanyī iva vahatūm etavī u auiyājījī abhiśeika etī (IV. 58. 7)
4) abhisravanta samamya yοA kalyā, yA smayāmītī jīgāna // (IV. 58. 8)
5) agra eti yuvatirahānījī // (VII. 86. 2)

The feminine description in these contexts are always focused on the sensuality and child bearing capacity of a woman. Her intellect or identity is not all taken into consideration by Vedic poets.
Despising remarks on women
Moreover, in many places in Rgveda, one can see clear and explicit statements which are absolutely despising women. In one of the hymn Indra remarks that woman is much feeble and vacillating:
striya aghayam mana\nuto aha kratum raghum // (VIII. 33. 17)
[The mind of woman brooks not discipline. Her intellect hath little weight.]
Another Mantra records that her mind is extremely fickle:
na vai strai,ni sakhyini santi slyvok,im hridayini ete // (X. 95. 15)
[With woman there can be no lasting friendship, hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women.]
From the foregoing survey it can be ascertained that, like in every society in the world, in Rigvedic society also male dominance and discrimination against women were existing to a great extent. These characteristics might have inherited from the ancient Indo-Europeans who were pastoralists. In such a society the role of man was predominant and importance of woman was defined primarily by their production of male children. When these people migrated and settled in India, an improvement in the status of woman also took place. The male domination was modified with a new appreciation of the importance of woman as a partner both in household and religious rites. Many of the hymns in Rgveda show that both femininity and complementarity between husband and wife are always appreciated by the Vedic seers. Katherine K. Young observes thus: This appreciation was probably an improvement on patriarchy in the prior Indo-European context. The semantic change of the term Dampate best illustrates this point. For its former Indo-European meaning of lord of the house became in Indiathe couple, husband and wife. (Women in World Religions, 1995, pp.70,71) But it is to be underlined that this new respect for complementarity did not occur to the extend of equality of women with men in all respects in Rigvedic society.

Reference Books
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