

Women under Vedic and Brāhmanic Traditions

Women in Pre-Vedic and Vedic Period

When we refer to the status of women in ancient India, specially, at the time of Pre-Vedic and Vedic, they were recognized more important than men, respected, and well treated in the society. The concept of Goddess of Mother in the Indus Valley Civilisation must have come into existence due to that reason. The tiny terracotta female images with ornaments and decorations found at Indus Valley Civilization evidently prove that people had worshiped the Goddess of Mother and attributed divinity to women (śakti). She was also considered as the mark of prosperity. According to 'the Religions of India' by Karmakar, A. P., the Goddess of Mother concept paved the way for arising of the Hindu goddesses such as Pārvati, Sarasvati and Lakṣmi. Worship of female and Yoni worship show that the respect and honour they enjoyed.

The Vedic teachings also provide evidence that women were cared and had a good recognition in the Vedic period. Some hymns of Ṛg Veda provide information that certain women who were well-versed in the Veda and imparted their Vedic knowledge to others. They were called Brahmavādnīs or female Ṛṣīs, the ones who possessed of Vedic wisdom. The Atharvan Veda teaches that the husband should encourage his wife talking to her as follows.

O bride, may the knowledge of the Vedas be in front of you and behind you, in your centre and in your ends. May you conduct your life after attaining the knowledge of the *Vedas*. May you be benevolent, the harbinger of good fortune and health, and live great dignity and needed be illuminated in your husband's home.

The aforementioned quotation tells us that women were highly respected in Vedic religion. There are lots of Vedic teachings which honour women by giving due respect for them. They enjoyed the highest level of respect and freedom, but also protection and safety. There is a Vedic saying, "Where women are worshiped, there the gods dwell." Or where the women are happy, there will be prosperity. In fact the direct quotes from the *Manu-saṃhitā* explain as follows:

Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare. Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The houses on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honor women on holidays and festivals

with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes and (dainty) food.
(*Manusmṛti* III.55-59)

In a similar way that would foretell the future if women are no longer honored, Grandfather Bhiṣma explains: "O ruler of the earth (Yuddhiṣṭhira) the lineage in which daughters and the daughters-in-law are saddened by ill treatment, that lineage is destroyed. When out of their grief these women curse these households, such households lose their charm, prosperity and happiness." (*Mahābhārata*, Anuśāsanāparva, 12.14).

Furthermore, in the *Vedas*, when a woman is invited into the family through marriage, she enters "as a river enters the sea" and "to rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family." (*Atharva-Veda* 14.1.43-44) This kind of equality is rarely found in any other religious scripture. Plus, a woman who is devoted to God is more highly regarded than a man who has no such devotion, as found in the *Rig-Veda*: "Yea, many a woman is more firm and better than the man who turns away from Gods, and offers not." (*Rg-Veda*, 5.61.6)

In the matter of *dharma*, in the days of Vedic culture, women stood as a decisive force in spirituality and the foundation of moral development. As we have stated earlier, there were also women *Rṣīs* who revealed the Vedic knowledge to others. For example, the 126th hymn of the first book of the *Rg-Veda* was revealed by a Vedic woman whose name was Romaśā; the 179 hymn of the same book was by Lopamudrā, another inspired Vedic woman. There are a dozen names of women revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Viśvavarā, Śaṣvati, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apalā, Ghoṣā, Sāvitrī, and Aditi who instructed Indra, one of the Devas, in the higher knowledge of Brahman. Every one of them lived the ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the things of the world. They are called in Sanskrit Brahmvādīnīs, the speakers and revealers of Brahman.

Women under Brāhmanic Tradition

Though women were well treated and respected in both Pre-Vedic and Vedic period they were ill-treated and disrespected under Brahmanism. The *Manusmṛti* looks at the women in both positive and negative ways however it deals with more negative qualities of women than positive qualities. Therefore, we can say that *Manusmṛti* despises women a lot. The Brahmanical teachings are predominantly male dominated and females were always treated secondary to men. According to Brahmins the women are inferior to men by birth and they are physically impure, especially due to their menstruation. Unlike men they are untrustworthy and have a fickle mind. And also women are with excessive sensual desire, looking for other men and therefore they are obstacles for spiritual cultivation. Brahmins said: "The appearance of the woman distorts man's mind, her touch destroys his money, she brings death to him in the bed. Hence, indeed woman is a she-devil".

Darśanam citta vaikalyam - sparśam dhana nāśanam

Śayane maraṇaṃ kuryat – strī pratyakṣa rākṣasī.

Brahmins did not give her any social and religious right. She had no freedom under their power. “In childhood a girl must be subject to her father, in her youth to her husband, after her husband, lives under her sons’ protection; a woman must never be independent”.

Pitā rakṣati kaumāre – bhartā rakṣati yauvane
Putraścasthavire bhāve – na strī svatantra maharhatī.

And it further teaches: “She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons; by leaving them she could make both families contemptible”. In this way she has to live like a servant.

Earlier we stated that women are not trustworthy. Brahmins believed that women change their mind and never can keep a secret. The Pratyāśataka says:

Audumbara bhavaṃ puṣpaṃ - śveta varṇaṃ ca kākayoḥ
Matsyapādaṃ jale paśyet – nāri cittaṃ na visśvaset.

The meaning of this śloka is: Even though one believes that there are fig flowers, white crows, footprints of fish, but one should never trust woman’s mind.

“Her face is like a beautiful lotus and words are cool like sandalwood, she is having sweet words like honey but her heart is absolutely poisonous”.

Mukha padmaḍākāraṃ - vācā candana sītalaṃ
Madhu tiṣṭati jihvāgre - hṛdayetu halāhalaṃ.

Woman was not allowed to recite Veda or perform sacrifices and she never could conduct sacrifices. What woman should do is to obey her husband and perform all duties to him. This will be sufficient for her to go to heaven.

The worst thing is the practice of ‘sati’ or ‘satipūjā’, which means to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, if he dies before her. If husband dies in her young age or middle age, husband’s family will hate her as an unlucky woman who brings bad luck for the family. She has to undergo lots of problems as a widow. Women knew this situation, so some of them selected the first option to kill themselves jumping into her husband’s funeral pyre. Sometimes she was forced to do so by her in-laws. Some women thought that sacrificing their life in the flames is better than having a painful life under pressure. She never got a chance even to think about a second marriage. This was the unjust male centric Brāhmanic law against women.