

WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES IN INDIAN TRADITIONS

Dr Govind Setty ,

Associate Professor, Department of History, Government First Grade College,
Hosakote, Karnataka

INTRODUCTION

Women have remained a marginalized section of the society not in India but in the world as a whole. They have been an exploited lot in matters related to liberty in financial, social, religious and psychological. Particular in India, the age old social norms in patriarchal over emphasis have played a havoc role in sidelining and suppressing these natural liberties in the veil of preserving modesty and sanctity. By the mid eighties the women's liberation movement had gained momentum and the current phase of debate on women empowerment is a byproduct of an urbanized middle class in academic circles and as a consequence of it the women working class was recognized gradually as a subject of women studies. Most of the civilizations in the world, from all times have treated women as a secondary citizen. In the Europe and America, women got the right to vote in 1970's. Christianity, a modern religion, has debated "if women were humans at all". Neither does Islam treat its women at par with men. Jainism believes that only men can attain Nirvana. *Mahabharata* times were no different. But this should be no reason to conclude that the ancient Hindus were barbarians in a straight sense.

In the historical context, we see the women in the *Rg Vedic* period as largely working women because it was not a specialized field in the skilled labour. All the household and agrarian work required less specialized labour. Such women came from the lineage of the conquered of subjugated people in the North West India. The position did not change but was somewhat deteriorated in the social and cultural norms. According to Nandita

Krishna¹, "I was recently researching the women of ancient India when I came across a startling piece of information. Seventeen of the Seers to whom the hymns of the *Rg Veda* were revealed were women – *Rishikas* and *Brahmavadinis*. They were Romasa, Lopamudra, Apata, Kadru, Vishvavara, Ghosha, Juhu, Vagambhrini, Paulomi, Jarita, Shraddha- Kamayani, Urvashi, Sharnga, Yami, Indrani, Savitri and Devayani. The *Sama Veda* mentions another four: *Nodha* (or *Purvarchchika*), *Akrishtabhasha*, *Shikatanivavari* (or *Utararchchika*) and *Ganpayana*. Who were these wonderful women who were on par with their men and produced the greatest and longest living literature of the world? In the Vedic period, female brahmavadinis (students) went through the same rigorous discipline as their male counterparts, the *brahmacharis*. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* describes a ritual tonsure the birth of a daughter who would become a *pandita* (scholar). The Vedas say that an educated girl should be married to an equally educated man. Girls underwent the *Upanayana* or thread ceremony, Vedic study and *savitri vachana* (higher studies). Panini says that women studied the Vedas equally with men. According to the *Śruti Sutra* and *Grihya Sutra*, the wife repeated the Vedic mantras equally with their husbands at religious ceremonies. The *Purva Mimamsa* gave women equal rights with men to perform religious ceremonies. Vedic society was generally monogamous, and women had an equal place. While reaching at the time of the Buddha the status of women overall had considerably declined in comparison with that of the Vedic age a daughter was nothing but a source of anxiety to her parents. She was a disgrace and inauspicious to them, if they could not get her married. For the happiness in the other world, the birth of a son to perform funeral rites was considered essential. Under such circumstances, the position of daughter in the family declined.

In the Buddhist period also², we do not find much courageous and firm parameters of women rights. The Buddha sanctioned the establishment of Buddhist nunneries although reputedly with reluctance and after imposing eight special rules that subordinated nuns of any age to male monks. Reinforcing this unequal status, the Buddha reportedly said that his doctrine would last only half as long in India since he permitted the ordination of women. Still, Buddhist nuns were known as teachers of Buddha's dharma to other women and are given credit for composing a text known as the *Therigatha* or 'The Psalms of the Sisters'. By 200 BCE pre-pubescent marriages became the order of the day. The general belief was that if women were given freedom, they would transgress the limits. The Kautilya and *Smriti* writers like, Manu and Yajnavalkya began to favour seclusion of women. During the Mauryan times we come to a number of evidences of women in society from the text of *Arthśāstra*. According to Shastri³, the author himself admitted that he took account of all the literature existing at his time and also of the statecraft prevalent in contemporary states. Accordingly, P.C.Jain⁴ also throws significant light on *dasis* as a labour class in ancient India. Lallanji Gopal⁵ discusses that there is nothing to show that the women slaves (*dāsīs*) were exclusively used for economic enterprises or that upon them depended then economic life of the times. Rekha Rani Sharmahas presented Kautilya as a very liberal lawgiver who took a bold step to abolish this institution of slavery, "Kautilya's ideas on slavery reflect a revolution of the slaves for freedom and a systematic attempt toabolish this institution for all in a secular state⁶."

It is generally held that the seclusion of women was introduced by the Mughals in India. But this was practiced as early as the time of Aśoka. The earliest reference to it is found in Panini (III.2.36) which yields "*Asuryampashya Raja- darah*" which means those who do not see the sun, that is, the wife of a king."⁷ Similarly in the post Mauryan period, the ancient lawgiver Manu, according to Hirday N. Patwari, states: 'as with cows, mares, female camels, slave-girls, buffalo- cows, she-goats, and ewes, it is not the begetter (or his owner) who obtains the offspring, even thus (it is) with the wives of others. Thus, men who have no marital property in women, but sow their seed in the soil of others, benefit the owner of the woman; but the *giver* of the seed reaps no advantage (emphasis added).'⁸ *Manusmriti* says, 'As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She must never seek to live independently'.⁹ 'She must never want to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; for by separating herself from them, a woman brings disgrace on both families (natal family and husband's family)¹⁰. 'Her father guards her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently.¹¹

The women were largely subjugated to men is evident in the laws laid down by Manu as regards the duties of a wife. He proclaims, though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. Moreover, he asserts, in childhood a female must be subject to her father. in youth to her husband... when her lord is dead to her sons. Hence, if we refer only to the apotheosis of women while talking of traditional Indian women it would be only half a truth and a blatant disregard of the completely subjugated and oppressed image of woman which is very much part of our scriptures. In the medieval period a composer of the *Ramayana*, Tulsidas prescribes, 'The drum, the village fool, the *Śūdras*, animals, women, all these are fit to be beaten'.¹²

To have the glimpse of female status in the Gupta period, in the words of an eminent author¹³, 'It was the great age of Sanskrit poetry and drama, of sculpture, and of cave temple architecture as seen at Ajanta and Ellora. The available sources yield relatively little enlightenment about specific women, whether elite or non-elite. But some information on roles for elite women comes from the *Kama sutra*, a manual about the ways to acquire pleasure, a legitimate goal for Hindu men in the householder, or second stage, of their lives. Women were expected to be educated, to give and to receive sexual pleasure, and to be faithful wives. Courtesans were trained in poetry and music as well as the skills of sexual pleasure and were esteemed members of society. Since visual artists in India remained anonymous until the twentieth century, we presently know nothing about the possible role of women in the creation of the great sculpture and painting of the Gupta period'. In a version of the *Mahabharata*¹⁴ we see no special regards to the female, right from the birth to her death even in the royal families. We see Draupadi, Pandu, Satyawati, Hidimba, Madhavi etc. all awaiting the birth of a son. No *yajna* was performed, for the birth of a daughter in the family. Yet, a female child was welcomed and female infanticide was not practiced. Those who didn't have son had options like adopting the daughter's son, adopting any male child, *niyoga* or even buying a son. These options provided by the society were practiced very regularly. The *Mahabharata* does not mention the number of daughters born to any character. Dhṛtrāshtra for example has only 1 daughter Dushila and 100 sons. (Dushilla is mentioned as she is Jayadrath's wife). Ganga had eight sons, Madri had two, Kunti had three, Hidimba had one, Subhadra had one son and so on. None of them had daughters? Draupadi gave birth to five sons from the five Pandavas. Madhavi bore four sons to three kings and a sage Viswamitra. Women generally accompanied their husbands to retire into the forests (like Sita, Gandhari and Draupadi). But they had the option to stay with their children (like Subhadra). We also see widows like Satyawati, Ambika, Ambālīka, Satyabhāma retiring to spend the rest of their lives in the forests. It is believed that Draupadi and Madhavi had daughters too, but having a son was a religious matter, and they had to give at least one son to each father. The *Mahabharata* presents a detailed text on female vices, including the following: 'Fire is not contented with fuel, the ocean is not contented with rivers, death is not contented with creatures, and women are not contented with men.'¹⁵ Thus we get a strong evidence of patriarchal ethos from the verses of the great epic.

In her empirical studies, Uma Chakaravarty¹⁶ made an attempt regarding women's position in society and as a *Dāsi* of the subjugating class. She draws our attention to a host of problems associated with early *Dāsis*. She talks about the predominance of women slaves over male slaves in the Vedic period. According to her the *Dāna* (gift) of *Dāsis* in huge numbers to the brahmin priests was made because *Dāsis* provided cheap labour, they were producers and replenished of the declining stock of the Aryans, thus it was necessary for them to go through a process of acculturation and *Aryanisation*.

The social customs and traditions which were reinforced by the law-givers made the women degraded. There was no sense of equality or justice in these laws. That women had no recognized place in society was revealed in the laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, property rights and the right of inheritance in the later periods. Much discrimination is shown by these Hindu lawgivers. Romila Thapar says, ". . . the law books are both a reflection of early Indian society as well as attempts at working out what was believed to be a perfect social system."¹⁷ The majority of women were "looked down upon as a temptation and hindrance in their march towards higher development."¹⁸

The condition of the Hindu widows became somewhat miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving off her head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by the contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death. In the Western India context, G.C. Chauhan has rightly observed that 'The earliest epigraphic evidence of widow-burning is recorded in the Eran Stone Inscription of Bhanugupta in 510 CE in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh.'¹⁹ But another observation also states that 'The early Indian textual origin of this custom of widow burning is difficult to pinpoint exactly, soothe social and cultural forces that lead to the adoption of the custom are obscure and a matter of conjecture.'²⁰

Another major factor in the study of the women in early India as already pointed is the concept of slavery. It has been observed in the *Rg Vedic* literature that there being no specialized skilled need for the labour, only slave women were meant for the household work or for the purpose of *Dāna* to the religious mendicants. Thus with the passage of time and formation of social institutions, slavery became institutionalized and its forms and assortments went on increasing. But, the forms of slaves differ with different writers and periods. This divergence is partly due to recognition of new categories and partly due to a more scientific classification.²¹ Kautilya in his *Arthśāstra*²² provides nine kinds of slaves, i.e.

- Captured in battle,
- Who became slaves for food,
- Born in the house,
- Those being bought,
- Received slave,
- Slaves who are inherited,
- Those selling themselves as slaves,
- Slaves made by judicial decree, and
- Who are mortgaged.

Women Slaves and their Functions in Early India

As observed earlier there were only two types of slaves i.e. domestic and agrarian as reflected in the early Vedic traditions. In the Buddhist stories we have a number of instances such as *paricharika*²³(attendant), *atthacharikaitthi*²⁴(personal attendant), *perana-darika*²⁵ (women doorkeeper), *sahayika*, *dhatish*²⁶(wet nurses) etc., connected with the household and similar tasks.

We find a number of terms and tasks of women slaves in the ancient Indian literary traditions as below.

- Vanna-dasi, a slave prostitute
- Kula-dasi, a slave woman of a high family.
- Natakaitthis²⁷, they were also sometimes designated by the name nataka or nataks. We learn that the monk Ratthapala had abandoned two principal wives and many “natakaithis”. The chaplain who declines an offer of women says, I have forty wives and many natakaitthis. Probably they were slaves enjoying high status and better placed than their other counterparts.
- Dhatri-dasi²⁸, among all the female slaves she enjoyed much respect and was trusted. She used to nurse the royal children and they loved the dhatri and considered her equal to their own mother. The expression dhatri-dasi, ‘slave wet nurse’, itself proves that all dhatri were not dāsi but only few dāsis did the job of wet-nurse were called dhatri- dasi. Kautilya mentions slave women among the nurses.
- Deva-dasis²⁹ were female slaves of God, the girls dedicated in service of the temples which later on turned into temple prostitution. Devadāsis are less visible in the texts although inscriptional evidence testifies to the existence of the institution of devadāsis in the 3rd century BCE.³⁰
- Ganika-dasi³¹, female slave living as a prostitute was apparently used as a prostitute by their masters.
- Kumbha-dāsi³², was a slave woman who brought water from far off places. They were also called ‘ghata dāsi’³³, one who brought water from the well.
- Vihi-kottika dāsi³⁴ a female slave husking rice. These dāsis worked day and night.
- Nati-dāsi, a slave woman in a rich home. and
- Rupa-dāsi³⁵ was a female slave living by her beauty, the female slave or an attendant of the ganikas. As ganika was an important treasurer of the state, and the safety of her mother (matṛka), daughter (duhitṛaka) and female slave or an attendant (rupadāsi) was of great importance, as killing of any these was to be punished with the highest fine of violence.

It can be surmised from the above findings in the literary terms that view that domestic slavery was largely flourishing at this time. The female slaves were generally employed in the ordinary duties of a household like fetching water, pounding rice and spreading the rice out in the sun, cooking, making beds, lighting lamps, milking the cows, fulfilling the physical needs of the master, going on errands, helping the master and the mistress during their baths, bathing the feet of the master and the family before they retired to bed at night, entertaining the master with musical instruments and dance, washing the plates and dishes, sweeping yards and stables and such other duties. In the absence of required statistics it is difficult to have an idea of the numerical strength of woman slaves in relation to their employers. It is no denying that largely female slaves were engaged in the domestic works, fetching water from wells and distant rivers and removing the husk of rice were the two most difficult domestic duties of the female slaves who worked in the kitchen and had therefore access to the common household items and there was not a kind of rigorous untouchability in the earlier phases.

Accordingly, by the advent of the mature phase of feudal society in early medieval India the encouragement to *Sati* was prevalent which meant self-immolation of the widow.³⁶ By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. Similar views have been expressed by Saroj Gulati, "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society."³⁷ And *Sati* was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity

While looking into the different traditional sources and texts of legal character, we would come across many remarks complimentary or derogatory about woman in the society and as an individual. In reality a woman's role has been described differently by *Śastrakaras*, the epic writers and other jurists. The most ancient history known to us is an undying witness of the fact that women has always been kept in subordination and has always been treated as inferior to man in rights and privileges. In the words of Rekha Singh³⁸, 'There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in the last fifty years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. The Hindu Code Bill has given the daughter and the son equal share of the property. The Marriage Act no longer regards woman as the property of man. Marriage is now considered to be a personal affair and if a partner feels dissatisfied she or he has the right of divorce. But passing of law is one thing and its absorption in the collective thinking of society is quite a different matter. In order to prove themselves equal to the dignity and status given to them in the Indian Constitution they have to shake off the shackles of slavery and superstitions. They should help the government and the society in eradicating the evils of dowry, illiteracy and ignorance among the eves'.

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