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Place of women in the Bhavabhūi's *Mālatīmādhava*

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Abstract

The position of women in a society is an accurate index of the development of that society. Many societies boast that position of women in their respective societies has been respectable, dignified or high but women suffer from one kind of discrimination or other everywhere and every time. It is true that the progress of a country can be gauged to a great extent by the advancement in the status of its womenfolk, as they form the vital part of the society. To understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and to visualise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women. Women's role and function in society were largely dependent on that of men in realistic terms in majority of cultures.

Keywords: Position, accurate, respectable, discriminaton, excellences, function

Introduction

It is the sum of differences between status of men and of women which gives one an idea that women have a distinctive position in society. The position of women represents a coherent structure in which all the elements viz., role in the family, society, economic role, sphere of activity etc are integrated.¹

During Vedic period the status of women was equal to that of men and women had social, economic and educational freedom. The women during this period enjoyed a sense of security. Besides having religious freedom, women had freedom to do anything according to their wish. The women in the Vedic period, it is observed, had equal status with men and independence in action.²

During the period of the Smṛtis, the period of codification of social laws, women were bracketed with the Śūdras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Hence during such an age marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning. Devotion to and self-effacing service of husband were their only duty.³

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the highest manifestation of domestic perfection is found in the inimitable personality of Sītā, the idol of Indian womanhood throughout the ages. The *Mahābhārata* too is resplendent with a galaxy of great women fulfilling their destinies, persuing their ideals and attaining their ends in different spheres of life in a manner at once simple and superb. As a glorious example of *brahmavādinī* during that age, mention may be made of Sulabhā of immortal fame.⁴ She belonged to the clan of Rājarṣi i.e. kingly sage Pradhāna. But she being a great scholar, no suitable bridegroom could be found for her. Accordingly she became an ascetic for life and roamed about alone from place to place in search of knowledge. Another celebrated *brahmavādinī* of the *Mahābhārata* was the daughter of Śāṅḍilya. She has been described as a *brāhmaṇṇī* who had attained perfection, who had adopted the vow of celibacy and purity, who practised *Yoga*, who had reached heaven, who had attained perfection in austerity and who was an ascetic.⁵ Thus, there were found numerous highly learned, ascetic women in the *Mahābhārata*.

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1. Joshi, S.C., Women Empowerment Myth and Reality , pp.207-210
2. upaupa me parā mṛṣa mā me dabhrāṇi manyathāḥ / sarvāhamasmi raumaśā gaṅdhārīṇāmivāvīkā // Ṛgveda, I.126.7
3. Aiyar, Ramaswami C.P., The Cultural Heritage of India, p.606
4. Mahābhārata , XII.320
5. Ibid., IX.54.6

There are many civilization in the world where respect for women and their role in society were prominent. Throughout many years of Vedic culture, women have always been given the highest level of respect and freedom, but also protection and safety.⁶ In this respect Manu states that - where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where female relation live in grief, the family wholly perishes but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The houses in which female relations not being duly honoured pronounce a curse, perish completely as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek their own welfare, should always honour women on holiday and festivals with gifts of ornaments, clothes and food.⁷

Place of Women in the *Mālatīmādhava*

In this article it is intended to trace a picture of women as to how women were treated, what kind of freedom they availed and what was their position in society during 8th century A.D.

Women in Religious Field

In the religious activities women's role was inevitable during early 8th century A.D. It is noticed that women did not suffer any religious inequality during Bhavabhūti's time. Various religious sects or seat of worshipping had come into existence during Bhavabhūti's time. It is observed in the *Mālatīmādhava* that Kāmandakī embraced Buddhism. Kāmandakī was a female Buddhist nun in the Monastery⁸ and Saudāminī, who was pupil of Kāmandakī⁹, adopted asceticism and was meditating on the Śrīparvata.¹⁰ There were temples or the practice of idol worshipping. It is evident from the *Mālatīmādhava* that Mālatī had repaired to the temple of Śaṅkara on 14th day of the dark half of the month to worship the god with flowers for the enhancement of her good fortune. Moreover, Mālatī's mother ordered Mālatī to worship the deities at the commencement of the auspicious marriage rite for the attainment of good fortune.

During 8th century A.D. women appeared to have been ascetics. The yogis reflected the growing influence of Tantricism. Women acquired miraculous powers by practice of *yoga*. Yogic powers achieved through meditation were seen as a manifestation of control over the human body extending into mind. Levitation, flight and invisibility were possible through yogic power. Furthermore, women reached a climax in respect of exhibiting the miraculous power. Saudāminī attained the miraculous power by practising *yoga* to bear one aloft and then through space. Through the help of this miraculous power Saudāminī had flown up from the divine Śrīparvata to Padmāvati.¹¹ In the 10th act when everyone had resolved to put an end due to separation from Mālatī at that moment a terrible admixture of darkness and lightening thwarting the perceptive power of the eye appeared for a moment and then vanished by the greatness of Saudāminī.¹² Again it has been known from the speech of

6. Knapp, Stephan, Women in Vedic Culture ,http://www.stephen-knapp.com

7. Manusmṛti, III. 56-59

8. saugatajaratparivrajikāyāstu kāmandakīyāḥ prathamām bhūmikām bhāva / Mālatīmādhava, I.p.10

9. kathamiyāḥ sā bhagavatīyāḥ pakṣapātasthānamādyāśiṣyāḥ saudāminī / Ibid., IX.p.213

10. bhagavatī sā saudāminyadhunā samāsādītāścarya mantrasidhiprabhāvā srīparvate kāpālīka vratam dhārayati / Ibid.,I.p.18

11. eśāmi saudāminī bhagavatāḥ śrīparvatādutpatya padmāvatiṃmupāśritā/ Ibid.,IX.p.176

12. vyatikara iva bhīmastāmasau vaidyutaśca/

Mādhava and Makaranda that Saudāminī descended from the sky parting the cloud , of whom the shower of nectarous water in the form of words surpassed the shower of water from the clouds.¹³ Mādhava and Makaranda, subjected to affliction by the evil in the form of kapālakuṇḍalā's wrath had been rescued from the calamity by Saudāminī with a resolute effort. However, women were seen to be achieved high during that period.

Position of Marriageable Girl

During Bhavabhūti's time girls were kept under the protection of their parents. The girl's father selected bridegroom for his daughter and the girls had no voice in it. As in the *Mālatīmādhava*, Bhūrivasu, the father of Mālatī arranged Mālatī's marriage with Nandana, the minister of a king.¹⁴ Bhūrivasu decided to give his daughter to Nandana. On the other hand, Mālatī loved Mādhava deeply. But she did not oppose her father's decision. Even when Lavaṅgikā, her friend suggested her about *Gāndharva* marriage, she solemnly declared that she would rather die than bring disgrace to her family and to her parents.¹⁵ It indicates that during Bhavabhūti's time girls did not go against father's decision.

Women in Public Life

During 8th century A.D. women used to participate actively in public life. The marriageable girls enjoyed freedom as they could move in the company of their lovers. It is evident from the *Mālatīmādhava* that Mālatī had gone to the garden of Madana where Mādhava also had gone. There Mādhava took off the *bakula* garland from his neck and gave it to her. Mālatī accepted it saying that it was a great favour. Afterwards she disappeared in the great throng of the citizens who moved about at the close of the fair.¹⁶ Though the girls were kept under the protection of their parents yet they were allowed to move about at the public places, in the gardens and in the temples with their friends. In the 1st act of the *Mālatīmādhava*¹⁷, Mālatī is found to have gone to the *Kusumakāra* garden accompanied by Lavaṅgikā. At the same place the reference of Mālatī's going to the temple of Śaṅkara with Kāmandakī is also found.¹⁸ Apart from these a good number of women were employed as servants to earn their livelihood.

Education of Women

During the period of 8th century A.D. women had the liberty of taking higher studies as it has been seen that Kāmandakī

kṣaṇamupahitacakṣurvr̥ttirūdbhūya śāntaḥ//

kathamiha mama vatsastatkimetat kimanyat/

prabhavati hi mahimnā svena yogīśvarīyam// Ibid.,X.8

13. sā yoginyambarato vighaṭītajaladābhuyaitiyayam yasyāḥ/

vāgamṛtajalāsāro jaladajalāsāramatiśete// Ibid.,X.17

14. astyetatnaredravacanānurodhināmātyena nandanasya pratipannā mālatīti/ Ibid., I.p.55

15. yenapratyāśānibandhanairvacanasamvidhānairjīvayitvemamhābībhat sāram bhāmanubhāvitāsmi / sāmpratam punarmanoratho me eṣa eva yattasya devasya parakīyatvenāparārdhamātmānamparityakṣāmīti// Ibid., VI.p.130

16. anantaram ca yātrābhaṅgapracalītasya mahataḥ pauraṅgasya saṅkulena vighaṭītyāṃ tasyāmāgatoasmi / Ibid.,I.p.36

17. anantaram ca yātrābhaṅgapracalītasya mahataḥ pauraṅgasya saṅkulena vighaṭītyāṃ tasyāmāgatoasmi / Ibid., I.p.36

18. adya kṛṣṇacaturdaśīti bhagavatīyā samaṃ mālatī Śaṅkaragṛham gamīsyati / tat evam kila saubhāgyam vardhata iti devatārādha nanimitam svahastakusumāvacyamuddīśya lavaṅgikādvīṭiyāṃ mālatīmbhagavatīyeva kusumākaroḍyāneśyati / Ibid., III.p.66

had studied in the city Padmāvati where students had gathered from different regions for the purpose of education¹⁹. Co-education in higher studies was not unknown in the 8th century A.D. for Bhavabhūti in his *Mālatīmādhava* represents Kāmandakī as being educated along with Bhūrivasu and Devarāta. The percentage of girls receiving co-education was however not large²⁰. Girls in rich, cultured and royal families were given a fairly good literary education. Special effort was also made to give them a good grounding in fine arts like music, dancing, painting and garland making etc. Mālatī, the daughter of minister Bhūrivasu, had mastered in the art of painting as in the 1st act it is found that she had drawn a portrait of Mādhava²¹. She is found in performing dance without musical accompaniment. It verily proves that besides the advantage of normal course of education, women were also allowed to learn the skills in singing, painting, dancing as well as garland making etc.

Conclusion

It may thus be concluded that during Bhavabhūti's time the position of women was not inferior. They had ample rights in the social and religious fields. Singing, painting, music and dance were not prohibited for them. They were not deprived of education. They were honoured and respected. Moreover, the women of this period enjoyed a sense of security.

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19. ayi kiṃ vetsy yadekatra no vidyāparigrahāya nānādigantavāsinām
sāhasaryamāsīt/ Ibid., I.p.14

20. Vide, Altekar, A.S., *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p.14

21. tayāpyātmano vinodanimittam mādhavapraticchandakamālikhitam /
Mālatīmādhava, I.p.17