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Women as lifeline of ancient Indian sustainability

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Abstract

The Veda-s have given pride of place to women in all walks of life. Vedic vision about women can be vividly understood in all the mantra-s which are chiefly concerned with the goddesses. It becomes clear that the Veda-s did not consider women as a means for pleasure. Women, according to the Veda-s, are none other than mothers. Motherly attitude of women is highlighted and lauded in the Veda-s. Basically, a girl has got two options in her life i.e. Brahmvādini and Sadyovadhu. The life as Brahmvādini is meant to be spent in search of truth. She has to engage herself in self-study and teaching of spiritual treatises, performance of austerities, meditation and so on. She has to lead her life in practicing celibacy. The unmarried stage is not considered as Brahmvādini or ṛṣikā. But she has to find happiness in internal and spiritual growth which takes place with regular and rigorous austerities. Moreover, she should also stay in such an ambience which supports her aim. The second pathway is to become Sadyovadhu - married woman. In this kind of life, women are expected to discharge their homely responsibilities.

Keywords: Women as lifeline and ancient Indian

Introduction

The girl who opts the second path, has three stages to pass through in her life i.e. Brahmācārini or kanyā, patni and mātā. Unless she is given due education, it is quite impossible to expect her to educate others. It becomes evident with the role and importance she carries in her life that the girl is never looked down upon. There is no priority or hierarchy on the basis of gender and caste, according to the Veda-s. Everyone and every community has got its own merits and uniqueness which is not at all possible to replace. It is believed that the glory resides in the maiden¹ Furthermore, the maiden is considered to be the abode of effulgence.² In mentioning one of the kāmya karma-s, there is a kind prayer to obtain a daughter.³ As a result of a prescribed practice, a couple will get a daughter who is learned and would live for hundred years. In all these hymns, the girl is extolled as an embodiment of various spiritual values.

Women Saints (ṛṣikā-s or Brahmvādini-s):

Even though there is no direct reference to substantiate that female education was made available in gurukula-s, the Veda-s have regarded women as mother who is the God descended. Therefore, it is worth presuming that the girl was given education at homes (by the parents in her young age and by in-law family during her later years). They were not kept in darkness. In fact the education was not denied to women. As we find the ṛṣi-s in the Veda-s, there are around twenty one ṛṣikā-s or Brahmvādini-s mentioned in the Vedic lore.⁴ These Brahmvādini-s are the products of the educational discipline of Brahmacharya for which

¹ यथा यशः कन्यायाम् ॥ (अ.वे.-१०-३-२०)

² कन्यायां वर्चः ॥ (अ.वे.-१२-१-२५)

³ दुहिता मे पण्डिता जायेत सर्वमायुरियादिति ॥ (वृ.उ.-६-४-१७)

⁴ रोमशा, लोपोमुद्रा, अपाला, कद्रु, विश्वावारा, घोषा, जुहु, वागाम्भृणी, पौलोमी, जरिता, श्रद्धाकामयानी, ऊर्वशी, सारङ्गा, यमी, इन्द्राणी, सावित्री, देवजामी, नोधा, आकृष्टभाषा, सिकतानिवावरी, गौपायना ॥

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women were also equally eligible. Atharvaṇaveda clearly says that the girl who is strictly adhered to Brahmacharya will win a befitting husband.⁵ This mantra clearly indicates that the Brahmacharya āśrama was prescribed even for girls invariably. To get into the bonds of marriage, both bride and bridegroom are supposed to be educated. The word Brahmacharya is used in the sense of education, in the Veda-s. Hence, all the prime directions for brahmachārī will be equally applied to brahmachārīṇī as well.

There is a remarkable anecdote in Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣat which implies some aspects of female education. The sage Yajñavalkya had two wives by name Maitreyī and Kātyayini. When he was about to retire to the forest, he said to his wife Maitreyī – ‘Oh Maitreyī, I do want to enter in the above stage or place from where I am at this time (from the couple life to the life of seclusion). Therefore, I think it good to disburse the property between my wives (you and Kātyayini) by affecting a partition deed.’⁶ Maitreyī replied – ‘oh lord, whether I will get access to the immortal position if the whole earth with the prosperity would be under my ownership?’ Yajñavalkya said – ‘No. Your life, then will alike the affluent. One should not hope for immortality by virtue of the wealth in abundance.’⁷ Maitreyī replied - ‘oh lord, what I will do of the property if it does not enable me to avail the immortality? Instead of it, kindly tell me the measures, if any, you know, regarding attainment of the immortality.’⁸ Yajñavalkya said – ‘my dear, you are my beloved and your statements too are worth raising the affection. Sit by my side and I preach you the measures by which you may attain immortality. I suggest you to follow my instructions.’⁹ Later he instructed her ultimate reality with due examples from life experiences.

It implies that the women were equally entitled to receive knowledge as men do. They were found sharing and discussing some subtle spiritual aspects. The Vedāntic knowledge was never denied to them, provided they are interested. It has been perfectly stated in Yajurveda that the knowledge has to be imparted to all (regardless of class or sex).¹⁰ Even in Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣat (3-6,7,8) we can observe the role of Gārgī making enquiries with Yajñavalkya about subtle issues concerned to spirituality.

माता निर्माता भवति

Later, she plays the role of wife. The Veda-s have acknowledged equal status to both husband and wife in

⁵ ब्रह्मचर्येण कन्या युवानं विन्दते पतिम् ॥ (अ.वे.-११-४-१८)

⁶ मैत्रेयीति होवाच याज्ञवल्क्य उद्यास्यन् वा अरेऽहमस्मात्स्थानादस्मि हन्त

तेऽनया कात्यायन्यान्तं करवाणीति ॥ (वृ.उ.-२-४-१)

⁷ सा होवाच मैत्रेयी यच्च म इयं भगोः सर्वा पृथिवी वित्तेन पूर्णा स्यात् कथं तेऽमृता स्यामिति नेति होवाच याज्ञवल्क्यो यथैवोपकरणवतां जीवितं तथैव ते जीवितं स्यादमृतत्वस्य तु नाशास्ति वित्तेनेति ॥ (वृ.उ.-२-४-२)

⁸ सा होवाच मैत्रेयी येनाहं नामृता स्यां किमहं तेन कुर्याम् ? यदेव भगवान्नेद तदेव मे ब्रूहीति ॥ (वृ.उ.-२-४-३)

⁹ स होवाच याज्ञवल्क्यः प्रिया बतारे नः सती प्रियं भाषस एहास्व व्याख्यास्यामि ते व्याचक्ष्णायस्य तु मे निदिध्यासस्वेति ॥ (वृ.उ.-२-४-४)

¹⁰ यथेमां वाचं कल्याणीमावदानि जनेभ्यः ॥ (कृ.य.वे.-२६-२)

married life. When the God almighty do not feel happy by being alone, he became two as man and woman. They become husband and wife. By the harmony, male and female, mankind is reproduced.¹¹ The Veda-s have assigned prime position and responsibilities to wife, especially in the performance of Yajña. The ritual which is performed without wife, is not at all a ritual.¹² It does not yield its results. It is also said that the husband takes the birth again through his wife. There is a prayer to be able to have a number of children,¹³ so that the family will be happy. Apart from the above, there are innumerable hymns which profusely educate on how to lead a life of household. Perhaps, female education is more practical and applicable to everyday life.

There is a reference in Sundarakāṇḍa of Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa about the performance of daily rituals by cultured women. ‘While in Aśoka Vāṭikā, Hanūmān thinks that when it is time for worship, Sītā will surely come to the bank of this river of clear water.’¹⁴ It shows that Āryan (not by race but by culture) women also used to meditate in olden times, as men were supposed to.

The most significant assignment to women is to play the role of mother. She is honored only because of this role.¹⁵ These injunctions clearly say that the role as mother is the precious gift and obligation on the part of woman. By discharging these duties, she gets her mind sublimated and helps the society to experience motherly affection and love.

Literary education was of two types: the study of scriptures; and the study of literature, fine arts etc. In the remote past women of the priestly classes also used to study the scriptures. In course of time the study of the scriptures became restricted to men. Some reasons are mentioned here and there to justify the denial of the study, but these are the usual justifications of puritans. In the study and preservation of sacred literature and religious rituals certain amount of Puritanism is unavoidable. But this should not be taken as a discriminatory attitude. At the same time, such Puritanism should not be allowed to grow to such an extent that it curtails human values and affects human relations. Though women were denied the study of the scriptures, they did participate in religious practices actively and with honour. The other form of education viz. literature and fine arts was not denied to them.

There is another scriptural reference of women playing major role in the field of higher education. Maharṣi Kapila, the proponent of Sāṃkhya śāstra, taught the entire Sāṃkhya principles to devahūti, the spouse of Maharṣi Kardama. With this reference of Bhāgavata Purāṇa (3 skandha – 25th chapter to 33rd chapter) it becomes evident that women were not

¹¹ स्त्रीपुमांसौ सम्परिष्वक्रौ, स इममेवात्मानं द्वेधाऽपातयत्, ततः पतिश्च पत्नी चाभवताम् ॥ ...अयमाकाशः स्त्रिया पूर्यते ॥ (वृ.उ.-१-४-३)

¹² अयज्ञो वा ह्येषः। योऽपत्नीकः ॥ (तै.ब्रा.-२-२-२-६)

¹³ दशास्या पुत्रानाघेहि पतिमेकादशं कृधि ॥ (ऋ.वे.-१०-८५-४५) (ऋ.वे.-१०-८५-४६)

¹⁴ सन्ध्याकालमनाः श्यामा ध्रुवमेष्यति जानकी। नदीं चेमां शुभजलां सन्ध्यार्थं वरवर्णिनी ॥ (वा.रा.-सुन्दरकाण्डः-१४-४९)

¹⁵ माता पूर्वरूपम्। मातृदेवो भव ॥ (तै.शी.उ)

prohibited from education. If they are found eligible they were considered on par with men and encouraged too.

Ubhayabhāratī – An Epitome of Women Intellectuals

In another historical incident women played an instrumental role. It was an intellectual debate on the profound principles of the Veda-s. Sri Ācārya Śāṅkara, the exponent of advaita philosophy had the arguments with his opponent Maṇḍanamiśra, who believed that karma is greater. Interestingly, for this historical debate between intellectual giants, one of the best brains of that period was selected. It was none other Ubhayabhāratī, the wife of Maṇḍanamiśra. She presided over the debate and gave impartial judgments. After listening to the prolonged debate, according to the judgments of Ubhayabhāratī, ācārya Śāṅkara trounced Maṇḍanamiśra. To be eligible to evaluate the proceedings of debate, she must have been on par with the two, in terms of knowledge and education. This incident talks volumes on women achievers in the field of education.

The following Vedic mantra-s, scriptural references would give a detailed account on the position of women; and her role in family and society.

“I hold your hand for the sake of prosperity.”¹⁶

“You have an affectionate authority over your father-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and brother-in-law.”¹⁷ This clearly shows that right from the day of marriage the daughter-in-law was held in high esteem and given an important place in her husband’s family. Similar sentiments are expressed in marriage hymns of Atharvaṇveda.

“Husband and wife constitute one personality.”¹⁸

“The wife is half of the husband’s personality in the

performance of duties and responsibilities.”¹⁹ Nothing should be done which may bring her pain or which may be opposed to her feelings.

“A man’s prosperity is incomplete without his getting a wife. It is complete only when he acquires a wife and begets a son. The husband’s personality is the wife’s personality, and wife’s personality is the husband’s.”²⁰ The unity of the personalities of husband and wife is well brought out here. Unity necessarily implies duality also.

A woman always has many roles to play: mother, wife, daughter, sister and many others. In all these, she is primarily entrusted with the responsibility for the physical care and spiritual well-being of man. She fulfils this responsibility happily bestowing her affection on him. In return the man has to take care of her needs and return her affection. Hence, it appears that female education in the Veda-s, is rooted and developed on the ideology of family system. Without

strengthening the family system, Indian culture seizes to flourish.

Conclusion

Women are goddess incarnated.²¹ A knowledgeable woman makes the family educated and thereby becomes responsible for creating knowledgeable society, which is otherwise known as ‘sane society’. Therefore educating a girl is nothing less than educating family. Inculcating Bhāratīya values in girls, by which the next generation grows stronger and potent; empowering girls through knowledge, culture, fine arts and skills; creating women representation in society; creating cultural ambassadors; inspiring antevāsi-s to make their homes into centers of gurukulam; providing Vedic education to girls; promoting girls in advanced studies of Sanskrit; creating strong women force for propagation of ‘Bhāratīyatā’ in thought, faith, food, customs and practices, dress, medicine and use of languages; inspiring girls to take up ‘gurukula as life-mission’ and motivating them to serve as mātṛśrī-s in gurukulam; promoting female education and making them self-reliant, knowledgeable, pro-active and responsible citizens; imparting education based on dharma, patriotism and faith in god; reviving the tradition of brahmavādini (one who can lead spiritual life by sacrificing marital life); creating sane-society; making our country a world-ācārya.

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¹⁶ गृह्णामि ते सौभगत्वाय हस्तम् ॥ (ऋ.वे.-१०-८५-३६)

¹⁷ सम्राज्ञी श्वशुरे भव सम्राज्ञी श्वश्व भव। ननान्दरी सम्राज्ञी भव सम्राज्ञी अधिदेवेषु ॥ (ऋ.वे.-१०-८५-४६)

¹⁸ अर्घो वा एष आत्मनो यत्पत्नी ॥ (तै.सं.-६-१-८-५)

¹⁹ जाया त्वर्धं शरीरस्य नृणां धर्मादिसाधने ॥ (तै.सं.-१-८-३७)

²⁰ अर्घो वा एष आत्मनः ॥ तस्मात् जायां न विन्दते नैतावत् प्रजायते असर्वो हि तावत् भवति अथ यदैव जायां विन्दतेऽथ प्रजायते तर्हि सर्वो भवति। तथा चैतद्वेदविदो विप्रा वदन्ति ‘यो भर्ता सैव भार्या स्मृता’ इति ॥ (वा.सं.)

²¹ विद्याः समस्ताः तव देवि भेदाः स्त्रियः समस्ताः सकला जगत्सु ॥