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The status of women during Rāmāyaṇa era

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Abstract

The history books of a particular period help us to know about its real state. However, to analyse the times of a certain period that is beyond the annals of the chronicled history, we need to depend on the literature of that period. That is the reason why the role of the epic verse Rāmāyaṇa is huge in delineating the times that transcends history. Therefore, the question on the position of women in society in ancient times is also a salient topic of discussion. Women's status, education, freedom and so on are being examined here through a comprehensive analysis of the Rāmāyaṇa. The Rāmāyaṇa, that sheds light into the status of women. As we conclude the study we can find that women enjoyed a better position in those times.

Keyword: Rāmāyaṇa period, Status of women, Epic period, Vālmīki.

Introduction

In every age, down the annals of history, the condition of women in India have been chronicled. Literatures are of the opinion that more than the historical remnants, the facts can be assessed by analysing the texts of the respective ages. However, there is a dispute among critics with regard to understanding the conditions of women by analysing the texts of those ages. While some argue that women of those ages enjoyed education and freedom, others point out that such instances were rare. While some say that the line in Manusmṛti, 'where women are revered, there the Gods shower bliss', highlight the importance of women in those days, the dissenters dispute that the line 'women don't deserve freedom' is controversial. Meanwhile, modern language and grammar experts suggest that the lines meant to say, woman should be protected by her father in her adolescence, by husband in her youth and by her son in her old age and that she should not be facing a situation where there is no one to help her.

The Rāmāyaṇa, one of the two epic texts is known as Ādikāvya. Language experts are of the opinion that the Rāmāyaṇa could be the first verse that happened in the world. What they point out as evidence are the topography, body language of people, events and so on of that age. The early life of Vālmīki and His meeting with Nārada tell us that the Rāmāyaṇa is a very ancient text. Pondering over the condition of women based on such an epic will help understand the condition of the women of yore, their status in society and know their mental and physical perspectives, the pattern of gender differences and so on.

What was exactly the condition of women during the Rāmāyaṇa era. Were they forbidden in any matter? Was being a woman an impediment to pursuing education or to following religious rituals? Was she someone who was destined forever to follow men? Why women had to be protected by men? Let us analyse all these factors on the basis of the Rāmāyaṇa. An exact finding could be possible only by analysing this subject without preconditions. This study attempts to find the answer by studying in detail certain characters, contexts, statements and so on. We find the answers if we examine minutely, certain factors.

The prominent women characters in the Rāmāyaṇa

The name of Sīta is the first one to be mentioned. Tāra, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Ūrmiḷa, Ahalya, Śūrpaṅkha, Mandhara, Śabari, Rāvaṇa's wife Maṇḍodari among others are featured in this verse. It is said that by remembering 'pañcha kanyakāratnam' (five women jewels) one will be absolved of five kinds of sins. It should be noted that in this Ahalya, Sīta, Tara and Maṇḍodari are from the Rāmāyaṇa.

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अहल्या द्रौपदी सीता तारा मन्दोदरी तथा।
पञ्चकन्याः स्मरेन्नित्यं पञ्चपातकनाशनम् ॥

The birth of a girl child was not considered an ill-omen.

We can see that King Janaka and his brother had two daughters each and that the former had brought up Sīta, who was recovered from a drain, with affection. She never had to face any kind of derision for being an orphan or a female child.

On another occasion, while Rāma was accompanying Viśwāmītra to the forest to salvage a yāga, Viśwāmītra tells about his ancestors to Rama. His grandfather, sage Kuśanabha, had a hundred daughters. The Sun God had even proposed to those beautiful women for marriage. They in turn replied, without losing a bit of resoluteness, that they would decide after thinking over it. Here, apart from the women's expression of their courage and opinion what should be noted is that even God Surya had only made a request and didn't insist or force them to obey. This is also an example of the approach towards women. This is present in the 33rd sarga of Bālakāṇḍa.

पितृमत्यः स्म भद्रं ते स्वच्छन्दो न वयं स्थिताः।
पितरं नो वृणीष्व त्वं यदि नो दास्यते तव।।

Women were allowed to perform yāga (Sacrifice)

It is an oft-repeated false statement that women did not perform yāga in ancient times. However, Vālmīki himself portrays a befitting reply to this. When Daśaratha asks Rama to embark on a journey to begin the life in the forest Rama goes to seek permission and bid good bye to mother Kausalya. But there he finds Kausalya who is performing a yajna. Rama who finds Kausalya consigning Havas (desire) to flames waits there till it is over.

कौसल्यापि तदा देवी रात्रिं स्थित्वा समाहिता।
प्रभाते चाकरोत् पूजां विष्णोः पुत्र हितैषिणी।।
सा क्षौमवसना हृष्टा नित्यं व्रतपरायणा।
अग्निं जुहोति स्म तदा मन्त्रवत् कृतमङ्गला।।

Kausalya who wore a white attire and who had been observing the vrata every day then consigned to flames chanting incantations.

Examples for woman's efficiency

Vālmīki has characterised Daśaratha's wife Kaikeyi as an example of woman's smartness even though others might take an exception to it. When there was a war between the Devas and the Asuras (Gods and Demons). Daśaratha took Devas' side to fight the Asuras. His wife Kaikeyi too had accompanied him to the battlefield. While he was fighting Śabarāsura the nail of one of his chariot wheels suddenly came out and the wheel started slipping away. But then Kaikeyi who was standing in the chariot immediately put her finger into the hole to let the wheel run pivoting on it. The pain was unbearable but she saved the chariot. The battle lasted two more days and Daśaratha emerged victorious. Daśaratha gave two boons to Kaikeyi who showcased such an adventurous deed bearing excruciating pain. Vālmīki has been pointing out women's efficiency and adventure through this.

The polite and conscientious female voice

When Rama and Sīta decided to venture into the forest Lakṣmaṇa also expressed his desire to follow them. When he

went to seek permission of his mother Sumitra, the advice she gave is invaluable. 'View Rama as father Daśaratha, Sīta as mother Sumitra and the forest as Ayodhya and that the journey should be fine,' she advised.

रामं दशरथं विद्धि मां विद्धि जनकात्मजां।
अयोध्यामटवीं विद्धि गच्छतात यथा सुखम्॥

Also, when Rāma started departing, Kausalya, even though a scholar, started weeping. It was Sumitra who consoled her then. Sumitra says that there is no need to cry over a well-bred and the most perfect man like Rāma who is full of virtues.

तवार्ये सद्गुणैर्युक्तः स पुत्रः पुरुषोत्तमः।
किं ते विलपितेनैवं कृपणं रुदितेन वा।।

Sumitra, meanwhile, behaves gracefully as a wife, mother and a mother-in-law. When one son follows Rāma, the other one is Bharatha's right hand. By making Sumitra spell those most significant ślokas of Rāmāyaṇa, Vālmīki must have thought of conveying the message that the words of those who are selfless and are ready to bear sacrifices for the society and for the family worth the most.

Did women always walk behind men in Rāmāyaṇa?

While discussing ancient times, at least some make this erroneous statement that a woman was someone who always walked behind man and that she always strictly obeyed orders. If the Rāmāyaṇa is read comprehensively at least once, it would be clear as to how Vālmīki respected women. While he features Sīta, she is found to hold important discussions and debates all along the Rāmāyaṇa displaying exceptional maturity of intellect and conscience. Her conversations with Rāma are outstanding. At times Sīta is seen advising Rama and there are also occasions when Sīta is seen scolding him.

When Sīta expresses her desire to accompany Rāma to the forest the latter describes the troubles in the forest. But then Sīta argues that if either of the spouses wishes that they should be together, that wish shouldn't be denied. Sīta also says that she is ready to live in any circumstances and eat anything. Moreover, when Rama argues that Daśaratha had asked him alone to go to the forest Sīta successfully argues that there is no need for separate orders for a husband and his wife.

Meanwhile, in the journey through the forest Sīta is seen walking far ahead of the powerful Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa through the arduous forest path. Here, it's proved that Sīta is strong physically, mentally and intellectually. Once Sīta pointed out Rāma that, while carrying a weapon in his hands he should not feel that he is controlling her and should feel only he is protecting her.

स्नेहाश्च बहुमानाश्च स्मारये त्वां तु शिक्षये।
न कथंचन सा कार्या गृहीतधनुषा त्वया।।

Sīta was also a good governor. An excellent example of her governing knowledge is seen in Yuddhakāṇḍa. After Rāvaṇa gets killed by Rāma, Hanumān asks Sīta whether he should kill the rest of the demons. Sīta told him that they are obeying the orders of their leader. They had a bad leader in Rāvaṇa. If a good and noble leader comes, they will obey his orders also.

Does woman need to be protected by man?

Vālmīki propounds a relevant and significant argument in the Rāmāyaṇa. He says there are three types of strengths - Balam, Ojas and Sahas - physical strength (Balam), strength of senses and intellect (Ojas) and the strength of mind (Sahas). In this regard woman are far ahead of men in terms of Ojas and Sahas and men outweigh women only in terms of physical strength. Hence, it was a norm that the physically strong men should be protecting women who are mentally and intellectually stronger. But this protection is in no way meant to wield a control over her freedom. On the other hand, the intent is to provide her more freedom by means of physical protection lend by men.

The woman who encounters difficult situations

Vālmīki presented Bālī's wife Tāra also as a woman jewel. Tāra asks Bali several times to forgive his brother Sugrīva. But after fell down Bali was realising Tāra's words. Sugrīva becomes the king after promising his help to Rama to find Sīta and later forgets about his word. When Lakṣmaṇa comes to kill him enraged over this we see Tara trying to calm him down with her diplomatic and sensible dialogues. Tāra diffuses the tense situation by telling that Sugrīva is not someone who is a cheat, ungrateful, harsh or one who forgets a helping hand.

नैवाकृतज्ञः सुग्रीवो न शठो नापि दारुणः।
नैवानृतकथां वीर न जिह्वश्च कपीश्वरः॥

Example for scholarly woman

As an example for scholarly woman, Vālmīki shows us Anasūya, wife of Athri Maharṣi. Sage Athri and Anasūya used to hold frequent discussions based on scholarly treatises. Besides, Maharṣi very much liked Anasūya's scholastic interpretations and assumptions. Anasūya testifies the fact that erudite women were present in society in those days.

Will a ruthless person's wife too be ruthless?

There is a common notion that society would consider the wife of a ruthless person like Rāvaṇa too to be ruthless and that people would generally detest her. However, Vālmīki 's portrayal of Maṇḍodari entirely undermines this notion. Throughout the Rāmāyaṇa Maṇḍodari shines as woman jewel who possesses virtues like affection, mercy, pity and so on and she is shown as a person who has her own opinion and individuality. She always opposes her husband's unjust actions. Besides, she is fearless in advising the valiant and cruel Rāvaṇa on every crucial instance. It's because of the greatness of her character that she radiates as one of the 'Pañchakanyakarātna' (five women jewels).

Caste was not a hindrance in approaching God

Through the character of Śabari, Vālmīki is able to convey a message that caste is not at all a blockade in reaching God. On the contrary, by giving fruits to Rama after they are tasted by her it is highlighted that there is no limit or control on bhakti (piety).

In addition, we see Ūrmiḷa symbolising women who are able to take decisions as the situation demands and volunteers to endure troubles and tribulations. Perhaps it's because of her willingness to keep aside her personal interests for the sake of the need of the hour that even Lord Rāma touches her feet in obeysance.

Society's role in protecting women

Vālmīki underlines the role of each person in society towards protecting women through the bird Jaṭāyu. Through the challenge Jaṭāyu poses to Rāvaṇa we are made to understand that no matter how strong an aggressor is his assault on a woman should be resisted and that voice should be raised against it. Even as Jaṭāyu falls down after one of its wings being severed by Rāvaṇa, it cherishes contentment for attempting to protect a woman in its own capacity.

We need to factor in certain others aspects too

Vālmīki never uses the Prakrit language for the women characters to converse in Ramayana. However, in later ages some poets are seen using Prakrit for women and less educated people. From this we can infer that in the Rāmāyaṇa era women also used Sanskrit just like men. Similarly, although Rāvaṇa seized Sīta and brought her to Lanka he doesn't even attempts to touch her without her permission. This also underscores the need for a civilized behaviour towards women. In the words of Rama to Lakṣmaṇa after the war,

जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी।

We see the importance of mother and motherland.

Conclusion

यावत् स्थास्यन्ति गिरयः सरितश्च महीतले।
तावत् रामायणकथा लोकेषु प्रचरिष्यति॥

Regarding the prominence of Rāmāyaṇa it is said that as long as the mountains stand and rivers flow the saga of Ramayana will continue to spread. In view of this, society can imbibe women's freedom of opinion and thought and the general approach towards women exhibited in the epic.

The message of Rāmāyaṇa in a nutshell can be summed up as 'if anyone troubles a woman his downfall is certain, no matter how wise, efficient and powerful he is.'

Through this study we reach the conclusion that women in the Rāmāyaṇa era had a unique streak of individuality.

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