The status of women during Rāmāyaṇa era

Jyothishmayi V

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22271/23947519.2021.v7.i4a.1410

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 reverenced, 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 Ādikāvyam. 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, Kaïkeyi, Sumitra, Īrmiḷa, Ahalya, Śūpanākha, Mandhara, Śabari, Rāvaṇa's wife Maṇḍodari among others are featured in this verse. It is said that by remembering 'pañcha kanyakāramm' (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.
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 Sītā, 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 Viśvāmitra to the forest to salvage a yāga, Viśvāmitra tells about his ancestors to Rama. His grandfather, sage Kuśānabha, 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 Sūrya 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.

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 they go to seek permission and bid good bye to mother Kausalya. But there he finds Kausalya who is performing a yāga. Rama who finds Kausalya consigning Havas (desire) to flames waits there till it is over.

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 Kikeyi too had accompanied him to the battlefield. While he was fighting Sabarāsura 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 Sītā 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, Sītā as mother Sumitra and the forest as Ayodhya and that the journey should be fine,’ she advised.

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.

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 Sītā, 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 Sītā is seen advising Rama and there are also occasions when Sītā is seen scolding him. When Sītā expresses her desire to accompany Rāma to the forest the latter describes the troubles in the forest. But then Sītā argues that if either of the spouses wishes that they should be together, that wish shouldn't be denied. Sītā 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 Sītā successfully argues that there is no need for separate orders for a husband and his wife.

Meanwhile, in the journey through the forest Sītā is seen walking far ahead of the powerful Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa through the arduous forest path. Here, it's proved that Sītā is strong physically, mentally and intellectually. Once Sītā 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.

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

Example for scholarly woman

As an example for scholarly woman, Vālmīki shows us Anasūya, wife of Athri Mahārṣi. Sage Athri and Anasūya used to hold frequent discussions based on scholarly treatises. Besides, Mahārṣi 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 Rāvana 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 women 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 Rāvana on every crucial instance. It's because of the greatness of her character that she radiates as one of the 'Paṅchakanyakaratna' (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 Ěrūmiṭa 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 obeingance.

Society's role in protecting women

Vālmīki underlines the role of each person in society towards protecting women through the bird Jātāyu. Through the challenge Jātāyu poses to Rāvana 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 Jātāyu falls down after one of its wings being severed by Rāvana, 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 Rāvana seized Sītā 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,

जनस्य जनममूलिका ज्ञानाधिकारी॥

We see the importance of mother and motherland.

Conclusion

यावत् स्थास्यिन्त िगरयः सरत्य महीतले।

ताबवत् रामायणसद कोयेपु प्रसारितली॥

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.

References


~ 3 ~