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Different facets of women empowerment in Ṛgveda

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Abstract:

Women today are ubiquitously seen as the forerunners of change. In almost every realm, they are flying with high colours. Today's society is quite unimaginable without their being in the limelight. However, another facet of this rather bright phenomenon stares humanity in its grimmest form where this so called fairer sex has to go through severe ordeals in the name of societal norms. Despite our constitution guaranteeing equality to them, it is far from reality where many of them are devoid even of their basic human rights. This observation led me to the study of the most ancient text of Sanskrit and I tried to explore whether this kind of discrimination persisted at that time too. This research article is an attempt to bring forth the honourable situation women enjoyed in that period.

Keyword: Women empowerment, ṛgveda, education, society, marital rights

Introduction

Women empowerment has of late become a burning topic of discussion when we talk of development. Women's empowerment may be defined in several ways, including accepting women's viewpoints or making an effort to seek them, raising the status of women through education, awareness and training ^[1]. Furthermore, it refers to women's ability to take decisions on their own and to access facilities that were earlier denied to them. In short, it's about their overall wellbeing that includes their being, and also feeling empowered in almost all aspects of their social, economic and political life.

The bare truth that faces all of us today is –where do we get to see this empowerment in general? Do common women really feel themselves empowered in the present day society? This reflection led me to the study of the most ancient text of one of the most ancient languages of the world, Samskr̥t. The text in question here is Ṛgveda that is well accepted as a treatise to the Vedic way of life. This Vedic way of life or Hinduism as it is commonly known has always treated men and women as equal. There is no space for gender inequality and the fact is accepted even by those who don't even belong to this tradition as we see manifested in the words that Hinduism considers the connection, interdependence and complementary nature of these two concepts- prakṛti and puruṣa, female and male-as the basis of all existence, which is a starting point of the position of women in Hindu traditions ^[2].

The present paper deals in:

finding out the status of women reflected in the Ṛgveda.

highlighting the relevance of these thoughts in the present time.

Ṛgveda contains the earliest recorded human thoughts that formed the very foundation of ancient society. This paper is an effort to look back to our ancient texts to find ways in which and in what ways our womenfolk can be empowered. Women are popularly known to have been deprived of their basic life freedoms for a long time in history, but if we go back to our Vedic tradition, the things manifest in another light. Ṛgveda, the oldest Samskr̥t text is replete with innumerable references to the fact that Vedic period was a time that witnessed empowered women in almost all facets of life. We find examples of women being empowered physically, financially, socially, emotionally and so on. There exist ample examples to prove that this empowerment came through education, and sometimes through spirituality too.

Education is a crucial tool for empowerment of all in general but here the discussion being focused on the empowerment of women, let's talk about their education in the text chosen for

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this study i.e. Ṛgveda. As goes the common knowledge, several hymns of Ṛgveda have been composed by women such as Maitreyī, Ghoṣā and Vāc. The composition of such highly sophisticated stanzas could not have been formulated, had these women not been well established in knowledge. Upanayana or the sacred thread ceremony denoting pursuance of Vedic studies for life was open to women. It was never the sole preserve of the males. Though not very common, if they desired, they went through upanayana saṁskāra and initiated Vedic studies^[3]. There is found a mention of several female scholars and sages such as Vāc, also known as Ambhṛṇī, Romaśā and Gārgī who had their own upanayana saṁskāra and went on to become experts in Vedic studies. Called brahmavādinī, these women demonstrate that women were allowed to pursue higher studies like their male counterparts. The Ṛgveda mentions that well educated women were invited to the sabhā. Female students were advised to mingle with the learned women wherever they went^[4].

Propounding gender equality, Vedic literature not only encourages girls and women to be scholarly but also expresses it as the duty of each parent to make sure that their daughter is well educated with great effort and care. It is clearly visible in Ṛgveda that women are the embodiment of great intellect and virtue. They are addressed as intellectual women- o scholarly women! The way a river breaks away mightiest of hills and rocks, you destroy myths and hypes through your intellect alone. May we bow to women through our polite words and noble action!^[5] It has been told that the entire life of society depends upon scholarly women as they provide the society with right knowledge. They have been requested to bring knowledge to all segments of society^[6].

In regard to this, Ṛgveda says that parents should get their daughter intellect and power of knowledge when she leaves for her husband's home. They should give her a dowry of knowledge^[7]. What a beautiful concept of empowerment through knowledge finds expression in this hymn!

We find examples of women being trained in warfare too as is the case with Viśpalā^[8] and Mudgalā^[9] whom we see going to the battlefield. It was never possible, had they not been trained in warfare in their early years.

In regard to equal participation of man and woman in religious rites, Ṛgveda says-O women! These hymns are given to you equally as to men. May your thoughts be harmonious! May your intellectual assemblies be open to all without any discrimination! Let your mind and consciousness be harmonious. I give you these hymns as equally to men and give you all and equal powers to absorb the full powers of these hymns^[10]. This approach emphasizes that a spirit of cooperation and appreciation between men and women is what leads to a progressive society.

Regarding marital rights, women enjoyed their own will and were well educated before marriage as is manifest in the hymn-An unmarried learned daughter should be married to a groom who like her is learned. Never think of giving in marriage a daughter of a very young age^[11]. The statement brings to light the fact that women, like men, were equally educated and learned, and were married at a mature age. There exist a number of allusions of women marrying at an older age. For instance, female seer Ghoṣā married sage Kakṣivān at a later age. Examples of freedom of choice in marriage clearly highlight the maturity level which characterizes the ancient Vedic religion.

A widowed woman was treated affectionately and with warmth. She had the freedom to remarry. The following verse from the Ṛgveda corroborates the fact- Rise up woman! You

are lying by one whose life is gone, come to the world of the living, away from your husband, and become the wife of him who holds your hand and is willing to marry you^[12]. This makes us know that knowledgeable women were found everywhere and a considerable number of them were well educated.

Women during this period also enjoyed religious rights under which they could perform sacrifices. We find Gārgī and Maitreyī distinguishing them in brahmavidyā, the highest knowledge. We also find Viśvavāra performing the duties of a ṛtvik in a sacrifice^[13]. Their status in fact has been described with great respect.

We also find references to their being indulged in political duties. The famous Saramāpāṇi episode describes Saramā as a messenger who was appointed to carry the messages to the Paṇi. She successfully fulfilled her duty^[14].

To conclude, it can safely be said that women in general enjoyed a prestigious position in the Vedic society and were held in high esteem. Different facets of women empowerment find expression in the Ṛgveda where women are seen as empowered in physical, educational, religious, social, political and spiritual realms. The earliest treatise in the world, the Ṛgveda holds the highest regard for women. It advocates female safety and empowerment. The Devī sūktam, also called the Ambhṛṇīsūktam^[15] of Ṛgveda declares the feminine energy as the essence of all matter and consciousness, the eternal and infinite, the metaphysical and empirical reality (brahman), the soul (supreme self) of everything.

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