

Women education in ancient india

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[Abstract: *In the recent years, Worldwide, gender equity and Women empowerment is mostly discussed issue. Most of the discussions on women are centered around human resource development. Women empowerment issues had more concern in the ancient India which are reflected in Sanskrit literature and educating women was the strategy even in ancient time. To empower women, specific roles to women in Indian traditions are assigned to manage the households. Indian ancient knowledge provides a direction through a value system for gender equity and women empowerment so that women can be comfortable and in welfare. Therefore, there is a need to probe into Sanskrit literature to understand the traditions of women education, thereby their empowerment. This would help us to develop a suitable strategy for the gender equity and women empowerment. Such an attempt is made in this paper.*

The main purpose of this paper is to analyses the women education and their social status in the ancient India. The specific objectives are to review the women education in the ancient India and to understand the Strategy of women empowerment that Indian ancient knowledge provides. Paper is descriptive in nature and based on reviewing ancient literature. Women education, status of women in ancient society as reflected by Sanskrit literature are discussed in the paper.]

Keywords: Women education; Status of Women, Women empowerment; Ancient India

Introduction

Women in India have been experiencing different status since the inception of the civilisation. Though women form half of the population, yet the masculine principles made the women suffer a lot. They were denied equal opportunities and importance as men. India was no different from the rest of the world. Indian women have been struggling for equal rights over the past millennium. Hence, the history of women in India has been very eventful. The uprising of various female reform movements all over the country resolved the condition of women India gradually. However, in Indi women were assigned to certain rights in the ancient days. Interestingly, Women Education in ancient India augmented

The position of women in ancient India was vital. They used to take important decisions and were also allowed to choose their own husbands through the ancient system of "Swayamvara".

A woman in the ancient society in India was respected and was given due importance in the society. The Vedas find importance of the women philosophers and intellectuals. In the Vedic period, Women education was prevalent.

Indian Women during the ancient times was said to be superior to men. The women in ancient India were given significance and they held a prominent position in the Indian society during that time. Access to education was easy for the women in ancient times. Through the massive Women education in Ancient India, several women seers and thinkers originated in ancient times such as Gargi and Maitreyi. Women enjoyed the tremendous right to education and teaching. The women intellectuals in ancient India gathered eminence by participating in educational debates and discussions in the assemblies of intellectuals.

Gargi was a prominent participant in the ancient society beside men such as Uddalaka Arni. In Vedic period, educational system was developed and the main subject taught was the Veda. The Veda or the six *Vedangas* were taught including the performance of sacrifice, correct pronunciation, knowledge of prosody, etymology, grammar, and Jyotisha or the science of calendar (Astrology). Women education in ancient India produced women with significant authority. Ancient Indian texts describe the influence of the women in the society. Valmiki's Ramayana also depicts the influence of Seetha that resulted in the defeat of Ravana. Mahabharata by Veda Vyasa narrates the persuasion of Draupadi on the husbands to overthrow the Kauravas.

According to the Vedic teachings and ancient Aryan scriptures, women have been placed at a higher status than man. She has been given preference to man in every field, so much so that when giving a boy a joint name of a God and Goddess, the name of the Goddess was always placed before the God.

“Yatra Poojyante Nariastu Ramante Tatra Devah” indicates the prominence given to women in the ancient period. In the Vedic period women had all rights similar to men in studying the Vedas. It is important to remember that Vedas, *Shashtra's*, *Sanhitas*, Upanishads in ancient time were taught in *Gurukuls* is similar to schooling education in modern times. So denying this right to women in ancient times would have meant denying women the right to education. But, this was not the case, instead Women enjoyed equal liberty and freedom in their pursuit of knowledge in ancient India similar to men.

Ancient Women Education.

During the ancient period, two systems of education were developed, **Vedic, and Buddhist**. The medium of language during the Vedic system was Sanskrit, while those in the Buddhist

system were Pali. During those times the education was of Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, and Dharmasutras.

Unmarried women were required to attend school since only educated women were capable of performing Vedic ceremonies correctly. Women were permitted to participate in the Upanayana (Educational entrance rite) process. After the age of 16, women were allowed to marry and had the right to choose their life partners.

Formal schooling was given to young ladies and women, they were expected to present the mantras or the stanzas with clearness and proficiency. In ancient India, women were given equal opportunities as men in educational institutions but this privilege ended very soon as they grew and women were only exposed to domestic work and family responsibilities. Women who tried to overcome these barriers were cursed and got abandoned by society. Thus, women became unaware of issues taking part in society and lacked knowledge of larger society.

Co-education was also prevalent in ancient India in mild form. Sometimes boys and girls were educated together while receiving higher education. From the 'Malatimadhava' of Bhavabhuti, written in the 8th century A.D., we learn that the nun Kamandaki was educated along with Bhurivasu and Devarata at a famous centre of education.

In the 'Uttara-Rama-charit' also (of the same author) we find Atreyi receiving her education along with Kusa and Lava.

It is difficult to determine the exact extent of education imparted to women during the early Vedic period in India. Upanayana ritual was obligatory for girls, and this must have ensured the imparting of a certain amount of Vedic and literary education to the girls of all classes. But female education received a great set-back during later Vedic period primarily owing to the deterioration of the religious status of women.

Upanayana began to be gradually prohibited to girls and by about 500 B.C. it had already become a formality. The discontinuance of Upanayana was disastrous to the religious status of women and they were declared unfit to recite Vedic Mantras and perform Vedic sacrifices. Thus Vedic education was prohibited to women. With the advent of foreigners, the Brahmanical society became rigid and conservative.

The pandits adopted measures of defence. For this the women lost their freedom. They were confined within the home. In the changed situation the right to study came to be denied to women. With the code of Manu (200 A.D.) (Manusmriti or Manusanghita) her dependent position was firmly established. According to Manu, "by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently". Manu further opines that "in childhood a

female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons”, a woman must never be independent.

“Day and night must women be kept in dependence by the males of their families. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence”. Thus, at the time of Manu, women were in low esteem and were not allowed to study the Vedas. Early marriage had become by now the custom.

The mischief caused by the discontinuance of Upanayana was further enhanced by the lowering of the marriageable age. In the Vedic period, girls were married at about the age of 16 or 17; but in the later Vedic period (from 500 B.C to 500 A.D.) girls were married at the age of 8 or 9. Early marriage of girls gave a death-blow to female education. Though in society, as a whole, female education received a great set-back during this period, it continued to receive attention in rich, aristocratic and royal families. Girls in these families were given a fairly good literary education but surely not Vedic literature.

The only education a girl of an ordinary family received was one which fitted her to fulfil her duties in the household of her husband. Her duties mainly confined to rearing up her children, keeping everything clean, preparing food for the members of the family and looking after the household utensils. Thus, the education of girls was entirely domestic. They used to receive education at homes.

Women in India were deprived of educational privileges for centuries, but there were always some exceptions to this general condition. Indian literature of all ages refers to educated women who took prominent part even in public affairs and showed finest skill in fine arts as well as in military art. Chandragupta Maurya had women bodyguards.

But, the daughters of princes and well-to-do families often received some education from their fathers or elders or family priests. Many female ascetics and mendicants used to learn some Sanskrit and were conversant with popular religious poems. Madhava Samhita on Parashara Smriti says “Yopanayanam krutwa pashcad vivaham karoti sa brahmavadini | tathaiva ya prathamata upanayanam krutwa sadya eva vivaham vidhaya tato vedamadhite sa sadyovadhuhThis means -

She who studies Vedas after upanayana and then gets married is brahmavadini, she who gets married immediately after upanayana and then studies Vedas is sadyovadhu.

This goes on to show that women were eligible to both the sacred threading ceremony as well as the Vedic studies in ancient times. This also means that women are also eligible to Gayatri Upadesha and to learn the Gayatri Mantra, because any person who has gone through the Yajnopavitam ceremony is eligible for Gayatri Upadesha. So, denying the women rights to study vedic knowledge, to Yajnopavitam Sanskara and Gayatri Upadesha is un-Vedic. In the Vedas there is not a single reference which denies the women these rights.

Even women Scholars got the name of – Rishika.

All the Vedic hymns were actually revealed to different Vedic scholars, which is why we find each Vedic hymn attributed to a particular Rishi. Now what is interesting to note is that, there are many Vedic hymns attributed to Rishikas (female Vedic scholars). In Rig Veda alone there are around 30 women Vedic scholars (Rishikas) to whom different hymns have been attributed to.

It would be lack of experience to say that women cannot study the Vedas, while there are hymns in the Vedas which were revealed to women sages!

Katyaayana in his Rig-Veda Sarvanukramani lists the 27 Rishikas as follows, saying these are the Brahnavadinya or female Vedic scholars.

*“Godha Ghosha Vishwavara Apalopanishannishat
Brahmajaya JuhUrnama Agastyasya Swasa Aditih
Indrani Indramata Sarama cha Romashorvashi
lopamudra cha Nadyashca yami Nari cha Shashwati
Shrirlaksha Sarparaj ji Vak Shraddha Medha cha Dakshina
Ratri Surya cha Savitri Brahnavadinya Iritah”.*

Even Panini in his Ashtadhyayi refers to *Kathi* as female students of the *Katha Shaakha* of the Vedic school. He also refers to *Bahvrichi* as female students who are well versed in many hymns of the Rig-Veda.

Panini also mentions about the female students admitted to the study of Meemamsa and about chhatri (girl students) and Upadhyayi (women teachers). This clearly shows that even during the time of Panini, Vedic education was imparted to both men and women.

In his book “Siddhartha Kaumudi” Bhattoji Deekshita, the 17th century Sanskrit grammarian from Maharashtra wrote on the Ashtadhyayi of Panini. In this book the author refers to the

term *Upadhyayi* explicitly as ladies who are themselves teachers and not merely as wives of male teachers. This shows that, even in not so distant past, there were female teachers in Sanskrit education.

Isn't this an irony that on one hand we have the western civilization where women who were denied equal rights to that of men in the ancient times today enjoy equal rights with men in all sections of the society. And on the other hand our ancestors during the early Vedic civilization started off with equal rights to men and women, and today we have advocates who want to deny the very same Vedic education and Sanskrit to women.

Even during Sankaracharya period, 9th Century AD. It was the period when Muslim invaders had not come to India, he came to Mithila for a Shastrarth with Mandan Misra, in which Mandan Misra got defeated by Sankaracharya, that time Mandan Misra's wife came in front and said Mandan je only half defeated because you have not defeated me. A new Shastrarth took place between Sankaracharya and Bharti, wife of Mandan Misra. In first round Bharti was on the upper hand in the Shastrarth on Kama, Sankaracharya took time he got knowledge about Kamasashtra and only after that he defeated Bharti . That Shastrarth took more than 1 year. It shows that there was education in women till that time. Lilawati is a renowned Mathematician of her time. There is a book by her Lilawati. Gargi was a great scholar and is famous for his Shastrarth.

Status of women in Ancient Society

In ancient Indian culture, women were treated as equal to men, and there was no discrimination on the bases of gender, instead of that women were honored by society, and society at the time considered women as *Janani* which means mother, even in Hindu scripts women are considered as Devi.

The general position of women in ancient India was unique. They enjoyed high status and independence in the society. An unmarried young learned daughter ought to be married to a learned bridegroom. Early marriage was not in vogue in those days. Even girls could freely choice their husbands. The customs of infant marriage and enforced widowhood were not prevalent in Vedic India.

The Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Their condition was good. The women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage.

Women were expected to participate in Vedic sacrifices and utter mantras. Even some of the hymns of the Rigveda were composed by poetesses. We get references of such learned ladies as Visvavara, Lopamudra, Apala, Urvasi, Ghosa, Sulabha, Lilabati, Maitreyi, Saraswati, Kshana, Gargi and others. Maitreyi, the celebrated wife of the most learned philosopher of ancient India, Yajnavalka, used to hold discussion on abstruse philosophical questions with her husband.

Gargi also participated in debate with Yajnavalka on philosophical issues. Lilabati was a great mathematician of ancient India. Thus we find that ancient society was not conservative to provide education to women and that many of them attained to great proficiencies in learning. The ancient women had equal rights with men in respect of education.

In the Vedic period the women not only enjoyed privileged position but also possessed high standard of morality. They had contributed positively to the educational system. The number of women who used to receive general literary and cultural education was fairly large.

For a long time, family was the only educational institution, and even boys used to receive education only from their fathers or elders. The same naturally was the case with girls. But, in later times a class of women teachers came to being (Upadhyayani). There was no purdah custom in Hindu society down to the 12th century, and so there was no difficulty for women in taking to the teaching profession. Lady teachers may probably have confined themselves to the teaching of girl-students. Panini refers to boarding houses for lady-students, Chhatrisalas, and these probably were under the care of lady teachers.

The dancing girls in the South who often were attached to temples (Devadasis) received some education, particularly in dancing and music. These semi-prostitutes learnt to read, sing and dance. The education of prostitutes is a very ancient custom in India. The Arthashastra of Kautilya refers to the education of the prostitutes.

Conclusion

Women education in ancient India was prevailed without any inequality, but later due to various reasons women education declined and they remained mainly with house works. Now, Women's education in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country. It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside.

Educated women not only tend to promote education of their girl children, but also can provide better guidance to all their children. Moreover, educated women can also help in the reduction of infant mortality rate and growth of the population.

❖ Educating the women will empower them to seek gender equality in the society.

- ❖ Women will be able to earn that would raise their economic condition and their status in the society.
- ❖ They will be aware about the advantages of small and planned family and this will be a big step towards achieving stabilized population goals.
- ❖ Women on being educated would be able to rear their children in a better way, leading to their good health and provide them with better facilities.
- ❖ Education of women would mean narrowing down of social disparities and inequities. This would automatically lead to sustainable development of women in India .

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