

## A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN VEDIC AND POST VEDIC PERIOD

**Dr. Manoj Kumar Dubey**

*Iswar Saran Degree College*

*University of Allahabad, Allahabad-211002*

### **Abstract:**

*Of all the religious practices and beliefs concerned with women in Indian culture, women granted supreme importance. In this tradition female is raised above the male as Durga described as Shakti, the energy of the cosmos. Without her we are told in one of the texts that the world is lifeless and even, the great Shiva is merely a corpse. An analysis of the legends, doctrines and abstract philosophies indicates the first, the Goddess is portrayed as power, and the female Shakti element is identified as the essence of reality, the male element playing a subservient role. Second she is identified with Prakriti, the primeval matter. As such she is identified with existence or that which underlines all existent things. Thirdly, she is described as giving food to all nourish all life and to cause decay. Fourthly, the Goddess incarnates in herself all the brilliance and power that the Gods collectively possess and her pervasive magic gives them sufficient power to be able to battle with all evil. It is an exuberant celebration of the various forms of women and their role in making and constructing society. As a Nation, we progressed when the Indian woman was accorded her rightful place in society. It is my belief that India will progress much faster if a greater number of women are educated, financially independent and realize that equality does not mean that you listen to yourself only. Let us resolve to allow her to blossom, flower and show her inner beauty.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, Religion, Vedic, Upanishad, Post Vedic.*

Through a myriad of cultural and political forces, ideal womanhood came to symbolize the nation. The demarcation of ideal womanhood was crucial to the formation of class and national culture.<sup>1</sup> As one commentator has summarized that 'the nations identity lay in the culture and more specifically in its womanhood'.<sup>2</sup> Thus women were the epicenter of cultural reconstruction and recreation, much of which centered on the need to recapture the grandeur of India's lost high Aryan past. The construction of an idealized past called for and depended upon the construction of a particular kind of womanhood. The way the women were conceptualized changed the way they could navigate the world. They could more within the public sphere, but only so long as their identity as cultural makers was upheld through symbols such as traditional dress.<sup>3</sup> But women have fought for their status and role in communities, religions and the nation for years. And women in Hinduism are no different. Women traditionally would live the life of a mother and a wife following the footsteps of their ancestors. Women's roles were laid out in Hindu law

books such as Dharma-Shastras, however, basic rules in the laws of Manu (200 B.C.) lays out how a women or wife should behave in the household and towards her husband. Nevertheless women's roles have evolved over time and women are going against the social norms of their tradition and even their way of life.

Hinduism is a complex religion and unlike many western religions. It is also a way of life. In Hinduism women play an important role in the tradition. Women are revealed in the sacred scriptures as presenting a duality of being benevolent and malevolent, exposing her with great contrasting powers. In times of prosperity she indeed is Lakshmi, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men, and in times of misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune and brings about ruins.<sup>4</sup> Because of these changing powers that a women possesses, it is rational that man should want to control this mysterious power. The females nature are like the soil where the male plants his seeds to grow into conjoined images.<sup>5</sup> And therefore the male controls the female, that nature is controlled by culture.<sup>6</sup> Culture or society controls nature as it is motivated to change and evolve just as the man tries to control the women.

Many Hindu scriptures says that women are to be honoured, as stated that 'religious deeds are says to be useless, if women are not honoured and cherished'.<sup>7</sup> So, in a small village in North India, women instigate and participate in twenty one of the thirty three annual rites and dominate nine of the twenty one annual rites.<sup>8</sup> Although women have developed a stronger religious status, but these consequences of perceiving the significance of women only in relation to men is seen most clearly in Hindu attitudes towards women which is rooted in the religious beliefs and practices.<sup>9</sup> The major problems faced by women in Hindu tradition arise because of patriarchal views that affirm the value and significance of women only in relation to men, but women have value and significance, not primarily because of their instrumental roles and relationships to us as wives and mothers, but because, like us, they equally embody the divine. Their worth is intrinsic one and does not come indirectly through males.

To counteract such role of stereotyping and exclusivity, we need to highlight the many women in history of Hinduism who liberated themselves from traditional roles and made their own destinies. Most of them come from the devotional traditions of Hinduism that emphasize the centrality of love in the divine human relationship and that dispense with the role of priestly intermediaries. These movements have also employed vernacular languages of India as their mode of religious expressions. Prominent among these women are like Andal (12<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.) and Mirabai (14<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.).<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of divine immanence and the sanctity and worth of the human person that follows from it must become the foundation of a Hindu challenge and critique of all attitudes, values and actions that demean and trivialize women and reduce them to sexual object. Hinduism must resist and respond to the challenge of materialistic and consumer oriented culture in which people determine their own value and the values of

others by the worth of commodities that they own. A tradition that affirms unequivocally that the significance of the human being is to be found in the fact that human nature embodies the divine cannot condone the commercialization of human existence. It must champion the dignity of all human beings and attitudes of respect and reverence for all human life.

In the age of Rigveda the frequent reference to unmarried girls speaks in favor of a custom of girls marrying long after they had reached puberty. Among Aryans, marriage among brothers and sisters was prohibited. There seems to have been considerable freedom on the part of young persons in the selection of their life partners as they generally married at a mature age. Approval of the parent or the brother was not essential, the boy and the girl made up their minds and then informed the elders though their participation in the marriage ceremony was essential i.e. the blessings of the elders were sought.<sup>11</sup> The wife was respected in her new house and wielded authority over her husband's family. The wife participated in the sacrificial offerings of her husband. Abundance of sons was prayed for so, naturally so in a patriarchal society since the son performed the last rites and continued the line. Remarriage of widows was permitted under certain conditions. Female morality maintained a high standard although but the same degree of fidelity was not expected from the husband. Net yet women enjoyed much freedom. They took an active part in agriculture, manufacture of bows. They moved around freely, publicly attended feasts and dances.

In Later Vedic period freedom of marriage continued and remarriage of widows continued to be allowed. The sale of a daughter was known but viewed with extreme disfavor. Dowries continued to be given but not in the sense that we understand today. The marriage ceremony was the same as in the previous period except that the girl had to mount a stone before the boy caught her hand. As in the previous period the picture of an ideal family life continued. Gradually religious ceremonies increasingly were conducted by the priests resulting in losing her preeminent position in the household. This was the period during which the importance of rituals increased and so did the importance of the Brahmins. Desire for sons continued, but the position of women was not as high as it was in the Rig Vedic period. Female workers were involved in dying, embroidery and basket making.

In the age of Upanishad's, the anuloma system of marriage i.e. between the male of a higher caste and female of a lower caste prevailed during this period. The rules of Panini regarding Abhi-vadana (salutation as a mark of respect to elderly persons in the house) show that the presence of wives of the lower caste in a house and their association with ladies of a higher caste brought down the general level of womanly culture and led to a deterioration in their status.<sup>12</sup> The Grihya-sutras give detailed rules regarding the proper seasons for marriage, qualifications of bride and bridegroom. The various stages of a marriage ceremony are:

1. The wooers formally go to the girl's house.
2. When the bride's father gives his formal consent, the bridegroom performs a sacrifice.
3. Early in the morning of the first day of marriage celebrations, the bride is bathed.
4. A sacrifice is offered by the high priests of the bride's family and a dance of 4/8 women takes place as part of the Indrani karman.
5. The bridegroom goes to the girl's house and makes the gift of a garment, mirror to the bride who has been bathed earlier.
6. The Kanya-pradana, formal giving away of the bride takes place now followed by.
7. The clasping of the bride's right hand by the bridegroom's own right hand takes place now.
8. The treading on stone.
9. The leading of the bride round the fire by the bridegroom.
10. The sacrifice of the fried grains.
11. The Saptapadi i.e. the couple walking seven steps together as a symbol of their lifelong concord.
12. Finally, the bride is taken to her new house.
13. After the bride came home, the couple is expected to observe celibacy for three days after which the marriage was consummated. The logic was to emphasize at the outset that self-control was very much part of married life.

The women held an honored position in the household. She was allowed to sing, dance and enjoy life. Sati was not generally prevalent. Widow Remarriage was allowed under certain circumstances. On the whole the Dharma-sutras take a more lenient attitude than the Smritis of a later age.<sup>13</sup> The Apastamba imposes several penalties on a husband who unjustly forsakes his wife. On the other hand, a wife who forsakes her husband has to only perform penance. In case a grown up girl was not married at a proper time by her father, she could choose her husband after three years of waiting. The most pleasing feature of this period is the presence of women teachers, many of whom possessed highest spiritual knowledge. The famous dialogue between Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi and Gargi Vachaknavi show how enlightened the women of that age were. According to the Sarvanukramanika, there were as many as 20 women among the authors of the Rig Veda. These stories stand in contrast to the later age when the study of Vedic literature was forbidden to women under the most severe penalty.

The feeling of dejection on the birth of a daughter did not lead to Female Infanticide in ancient India. This custom crept into India during the medieval period. Once the disappointment on the birth of a daughter was over, the family did not distinguish between their son and daughter. In subsequent periods, growing incidence of Sati meant that parents saw their daughters jumping on to funeral pyres or if she became a widow, live a chaste life since widow remarriage was not permitted. In such an environment to

become a daughter's parent became a source of misery.

In the post Vedic period, the professions open to woman in higher sections of society were teaching, medical doctors and business. They suffered from no disabilities in doing business and could even pledge their husband's credit and enter into contracts on their behalf. Purdah system was not prevalent during this period. There is nothing in our tradition or literature to suggest that the father/elder brother in-law could not see the face of the daughter-in-law as is the case in North India today. Man is only one half, says a Vedic passage; he is not complete till he is united with his wife and gives birth to children. The husband is to treat his wife as his dearest friend. The wife is a companion friend of a man, says a Vedic passage. The Mahabharat and Buddhist thinkers concur with this view. Marriage between the same caste was preferred although inter caste marriages were prevalent. Of the eight forms of marriage prescribed by the Dharma-sutras, the Arhsa form of marriage was most popular which was the father gave his daughter after receiving from the bridegroom a cow and a bull or two pairs. The bridegroom was selected by the girl's father or guardian. According to Nearchus the Indians "marry without giving or taking dowries but the girls, as soon as they are marriageable, are brought forward by their fathers and exposed in public, to be selected by a person who excels in some form of physical exercise". This indicates a modified form of Svayamvara.<sup>14</sup> While girls continued to be married around 16, there was a tendency to marry them before they attained puberty. It was probably due to the anxiety to maintain their body purity. Lowering of the marriage age affected their education and culture adversely. After all, if she got married early then how could she study? Extreme emphasis was now laid on the physical chastity of women which discouraged widow remarriage, divorce and encouragement of sati. We must remember that India faced its first foreign invasion ie Greeks during this period.

During the earlier part of this period, there were highly educated women holding an honorable position in society and household. There were lifelong students of sacred texts or those who pursued their study till marriage. Women also read training in arts, music, painting and for some military training also. Female bodyguards are referred to in Kautilya's Arthasastra. Buddhist and Jain nuns renounced the world for the sake of spiritual salvation. Jain texts refer to Jayanti who carried on discussions with Mahavira himself and later on became a nun. In spite of the progress, there were growing disabilities. Earlier the girls went through the Upanayana ceremony but now it was only a formality. Manu laid down that marriage was equal to Upanayana while Yajnavalkya took the step of prohibiting Upanayana ceremony for girls.<sup>15</sup> The wife who performed Vedic sacrifices was denied the right to do so. Narada is however, more considerate towards women. Greek writers have stated that sati existed, was in vogue in Punjab, possibly confined to the warrior class only.

Social customs are a product of the environment we live in. India had never seen, till 327 BC, an

invasion like the Greeks. Rituals came to be performed without the Vedic mantras; the Vedic sacrifices were tabooed for the wife. Widow Remarriage and divorce were discouraged. On the other hand, Kautilya, in the matters of divorce, placed man and women on an equal footing. But as people with lax morals came into the social framework on account of the expanding frontiers of Dharma, the marital tie assumed greater sanctity. Their status deteriorated considerably during this period. With time and progress, one would expect the condition of people to improve but in this case it was the opposite. The introduction of slavery revolutionized the position of women in the classical period of Greek history, they lost esteem in society. The same thing happened in India when a semi servile status came to be assigned to the Sudra class whose only duty was service of the higher castes. Over time and due to various factors, inter caste marriages started happening during the period 1000 to 500 BC. The introduction of non-Aryan women into the Aryan household is the starting point to the deterioration in a women's status. Unfamiliar with religious customs, rituals and Sanskrit the non Aryan wife would have goofed making the priests angry. To avoid this problem it was decided that the whole class of woman were ineligible for Vedic studies and religious duties. Another reason was that Vedic sacrifices became complex making it difficult for the wife to have mastery over them. Although, the view that women must not be allowed to perform sacrifices was opposed by some parts of society.

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