

CONDITION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN POST-VEDIC PERIOD

Dr Nagamony PS*

Abstract

The influence of male domination in society, the high inflow of foreigners, physical and biological limitations of women had gradually changed the general attitude of society towards women in the post-Vedic period in India. The society as a whole viewed her as inferior to men physically, mentally and intellectually. Patriarchal system became a prominent feature of Indian society in the post-Vedic period and male domination was evident in almost all fields of individual and social life. The deterioration in the position of women too was first noticed in the field of education. The women lost their intellectual freedom and the power of creativity. Ill-effects of child marriage, custom of dowry, and property-right made her life miserable. The society had cultivated an unsympathetic attitude towards widows and prohibition of their remarriage forced them to lead an ascetic way of life.

Keywords:

Indian women;
Vedic;
Male domination;
Indian society;
Philosophy.

***Associate Professor and HoD, Department of Philosophy, NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, Kerala, India**

The history of India shows that the respectable position, intellectual and spiritual freedom and economic independence enjoyed by the ancient Indian women had deteriorated in the post-Vedic period. Male domination had appeared in almost all strata of the society. The influence of male domination in society, the heavy inflow of foreigners and, above all, the physical and biological limitations of women had gradually changed the general attitude of the society towards her and the society as a whole viewed her inferior to men physically, mentally and intellectually.

High rate of inflow of foreign invaders had adversely affected the security of Indian women. The crime against women by the foreign invaders had increased. “Women in the country are regarded no better than ‘goods’ which can be used, abused, molested, abducted, exploited, hated, raped and even burnt to death.”(1) In order to safeguard them from various unfavourable circumstances, the law-givers had imposed curbs on the society that restricted the individual freedom of women.

Patriarchal system became a prominent feature of Indian society in the post-Vedic period and the power of male domination had appeared in almost all fields of individual and social life. The tradition, culture and high ideals attributed to women by the ancient seers were overthrown by the newly evolved male dominated society. Frequent pregnancies and the problems connected with child rearing had forced women to depend on the male members and this dependency was exploited by the dominating males. “Patriarchal societies cleverly exploited this temporary weakness of women and linked the social system with the belief that woman by nature was dependent and therefore subordinated to man. Henceforth woman was perceived as a commodity which man might use in anyway he liked.”(2) This, in turn, brought the women to withdraw themselves from the mainstream of the society.

The deterioration in the position of women was first noticed in the field of education. The society in general was against imparting education to females and the ambition of the girls to gain knowledge and spiritual salvation became a mirage. They had lost their intellectual freedom and the power of creativity. The society had insisted on absolute virginity for the brides and the over-anxious parents feared about the security of their girl child. “Virgins who had the misfortune of being criminally assaulted, had therefore hardly any chance of an honourable marriage with any other person.”(3) So they preferred to give their

daughters in marriage at an early age. The girl who married at a very early age could not receive any education and so there was a considerable decline in the rate of female education. Thus the newly evolved custom of child marriage had put an end to the ceremonial initiation of Vedic studies to girl children and they were sidelined by the rest of the society.

When the Vedic sacrifices were replaced by ancestral worship, women were considered as impure due to their menstrual cycle. They were exempted from all religious activities. As a result, women participation in religious rites became gradually dwindled in society and men were regarded as eligible for offering religious rites. Adharva Veda observes marriage as the only sacrament in the life of a woman because, apart from the marriage ceremony, women were not allowed to perform any other sacrifices by reciting Vedic mantras. “It is evident that a female child was not considered worthy of all samskaras, and the only samskara to be performed in the case was marriage”(4) The custom that when an unmarried girl dies, she was made to unite with a male before she was cremated was also in practice.

With the denial of education, the intellectual development of women was ceased and they were forced to follow the path of devotion, instead of reflective reasoning. They started sticking on to superstitions and taboos without making any reasoning upon them. As a result, they became more emotional rather than rational. In the custom of pre-puberty marriage, the girl child was incapable of choosing her life-partner owing to her immature age and had no voice in the settlement of her marriage. It was the parents who used to select the bridegroom for their daughter according to their own interests.

The early marriage and periodic recurrence of maternity presented her many health problems, forcing her to depend completely on her husband and other members of his family. She was not even cared and consoled by the authoritarian husband and other family members. Ill-effects of the custom of dowry, which demands a high price for the bridegroom in the marriage market, coupled with the recurring demand for financial support from her parents, made her life miserable.

Lack of education and social awareness and the huge domestic responsibility fell upon her owing to early marriage forced the women to remain away from public activities. The

feeling of insecurity caused by the male domination, threat posed by the foreign invaders and her physical and biological limitations had restricted women from moving out from her house without male escort. Taking advantage of these discomforts of women, the dominating selfish male members, under the pretension of their protectors, prevented them from mingling with the public. With strict rules of sex morality, they secluded her from the social mainstream.

The miserable condition of the women further worsened with the custom of polygamy which was allowed to the male members. The dominating husband entering into a second marriage without the consent of his first wife and compelling her to stay in the same house along with his second wife was a mental torture to her. Her physical and mental harassment at the hands of the husband and his family members too became hard with the arrival of his second wife. Along with this, the society had given the husband the freedom to supersede his wife, if he felt any discomfort from her side. The society had also given him the right to abandon her or torture her mentally, if she failed to deliver a boy child.

The society had cultivated an unsympathetic attitude towards the widows too. They were sidelined from the mainstream of the society and subjected to severe sufferings with the irrational customs prevailed in the society. 'Sati' was one such custom by which the widow of the deceased man had to burn herself in the funeral pyre of her husband in order to 'purify' him from those sins which he had committed during his lifetime. There also existed a custom known as 'Sankalpa', in which the widow was forcefully tied with the body of her husband and burned with him in the funeral pyre. At the same time, the society permitted the widower to remarry immediately after the funeral rites of the deceased wife. "Having thus, at the funeral, given the sacred fires to his wife who dies before him, he may marry again, and again kindle (the fires)." (5) This custom is a clear proof of the male domination existed in the society at that time.

Remarriage was prohibited to the widows and they were forced to lead an ascetic way of life. This was the main intention behind the irrational custom of 'Tonsure'. But the widows who did not wish to lead such a life became concubines which in turn had adversely affected the spiritual and cultural values of the society. Another custom called 'niyoga' or temporary union of the widow with her brother-in-law that became the order of the day was against India's cultural heritage which had given the sister-in-law, the noble position

of mother. The brother-in-law who himself could not consider her as his temporary wife, causing mental discomfort to both of them. Again, this custom was an unpleasant event which had cultivated a feeling of rivalry in the minds of both the widow and the wife of the brother-in-law. But they never received any attention from any members of the husband's family.

The society had also shown injustice towards woman with regard to her property rights. In real life, women had enjoyed no freedom in his family and had no legal right on his property. Even 'Stridhana' which was regarded as the woman's private property was in the hands of the husband and other members of his family. As a result, the woman had also lost her economic independence under the domination of the male. Thus the deterioration in the status and position of women had badly affected the existing social order, disturbing the social equilibrium in the post-Vedic period.

References

- 1.Chakrapani C & Kumar, S, Vijaya (ed), Changing status of women in Indian Society, (M.D. Pub, Delhi,1994), p.56.
- 2.Ibid., p.293.
3. Altekar, A, S, Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, (Motilal Banarasidass pub,Delhi,1959), p. 36.
- 4..Kapadia, K, M, Marriage and Family in India , (Oxford university press,1966) , p.140).
- 5.Muller, F.Max,(ed), Buhler, G. (tr), Sacred Books of the East- The law book of Manu, (Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi,1988), Vol-XXV, p.198, (Manu, V,168).