

Gender-related Issues in the Vedic Period

PULAK CHANDRA MAJUMDAR

The foundation of social life of the Vedic people was the patriarchal family. Parents had absolute control over their children (*Rigveda*, 1, 24.12-15, V.2.7). The family discipline was very strict. The strictness of this discipline was illustrated by the case of Rigrasva. He lost his eyesight as a punishment given by his father (*Rigveda*, 116, 16). In the same way, an insolvent gambler was disowned by his parents and brothers in front of his creditor (*Rigveda*, 10, 34, 4). This does not mean that there was bad relation between father and children. It was of warm affection. A father was looked upon as a type of all that was good and kind. A wedding hymn (*Rigveda*, 10, 35) indicates that though the newly married wife ruled over her brothers-in-law and even her husband's parents, yet she respected them. This is a clear evidence that there was joint family system in the Vedic period.

The Vedas were not written, nor they were the outcome of realization of a single sage. The Rishis among others included women such as Akru, Apālā, Aprasi, Aranyani, Atrey, Lopāmudrā, who had enriched different portions of the *Rigveda*. They belonged to the Rishi families.

In this paper an attempt has been made to examine some of the gender-related issues such as birth of children, education, marriage, married life and widow remarriage, right to property including inheritance of property and occupation in the Vedic period.

The birth of children

The Vedic society was patriarchal. The birth of a girl was not generally welcome. One reason was that a son lived with his aged parents till their death and did not migrate like a daughter to another family after marriage. Secondly, the son preserved the names of his father's family. Another reason why a son was preferred was that an adult son could protect his family members from the attack of an enemy. This was not assumed to be possible for the daughter because social customs forced the parents to bring up their daughters in such a way that the latter were made to believe that they did not have the fighting spirit like their brothers. This attitude also prevailed in the primitive society. A primitive man believed that in actual fighting a woman was a handicap rather than a help. He, therefore, did not welcome the birth of a daughter. Sometimes he abandoned her after her birth or even killed her. This fact has been mentioned by A. S. Altekar in his book—*The Position of Woman in Hindu Civilization from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. The hymns of the *Atharvaveda* and the *Rigveda* support this notion. The *Atharvaveda* contains charms and rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter (hymn III, stanza 23; hymn VI, stanza 11).

In spite of this preference, the daughter's birth did not sadden the family. In the early Upanishads, we find some

rituals which were prescribed for procuring a scholarly daughter. This aspect has been mentioned in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* (VI.4.17) that says,

Atha ya icchhedduhitā me panditā jāyeta sarvamāyuriāditi tiloudanam pācāivā sarpishmantamashniyātāmishvarau janaitavaih.

That is, who does not want his new born daughter to be a scholarly one? Then they (husband and wife) will eat cooked sesame (*til*) and rice together with clarified butter. However, though there are rituals prescribed for the birth of a scholarly daughter in the early Upanishad, yet it can be assumed from the trend of later social customs that these rituals had not been as popular as *pumsavana*—the ritual prescribed for ensuring the birth of a male child.

We do not get much information about the girl child from the *Rigveda*. What we frequently see is the earnest desire of parents for heroic sons. Nevertheless, in the hymns composed by Paulomi Saci, the delight of a proud mother to have a reigning daughter and several heroic sons is quite transparent. This is expressed in the *Rigveda* (X, 159, 3) in the following way:

My sons and slayers of the foe,
My daughter is a ruling Queen:
I am Victorious: O'er my Lord,
My son of triumph is supreme.

According to some scholars, there was extermination of girl children in the Vedic age. In support of their opinion they refer to the *Taittiriya Samhitā* (VI.5.10.3) where it is stated that the new born daughter was placed on the ground while the son was lifted. It says,

*Yadagrayanah sthalya grihnati
vayavyenajuhoti
tasmāt grabhenavijnatena bhrahmaha
babhritham.*

*avayanti para sthalir asyanty ud vayavyani
haranti
tasmāt striyam jātam para syanti ut
pumāmsam haranti.*

Zimmer, a Vedic scholar, depending upon a passage in the *Kathaka Samhitā* (XXVII-9), holds that the girl was exposed to die in the Vedic age which Bohtlinj refutes (Indra, *Status of Women in Ancient India*, Chapter I).

However, though the son was preferred and the daughter was less welcome, still a daughter, once born, was not neglected. No discrimination was made between a son and a daughter in respect of care, affection, love and education. It is also known from the Vedic literature that women had to participate in the religious ceremonies along with their husbands and they needed some sort of education to perform those ceremonies. This fact has been mentioned in the *Rigveda* (1.173, 2cd, v 32cd; VIII 31.5). Women were also educated in temporal subjects. The spiritual education included training in religious lores and perhaps in the historical tradition and mythology. This has been mentioned by B. S. Upadhyya in his book—*Women in Rig-Veda* (p. 174).

A young daughter was enjoined to acquire a youthful husband through the observance of *brahmacharya*. However, scholars are not unanimous about the exact nature of *brahmacharya* recommended for girls. Dr Sukumari Bhattacharja, for example, in his book *Prachin Bharata : Samaj O Sahitya* (p. 31) opines that this *brahmacharya* is but a ritual (*vrata*) by which maidens obtained good husbands. In Vedic and later literature, however, *brahmacharya* meant austerity prescribed for the students while they stayed at their teachers' house and studied the Vedas. Be that as it may, some maidens got husbands

after the period of *brahmacharya* while some remained unmarried. The unmarried ones generally felt insecure in the society. Their sense of insecurity is reflected in the *Rigveda* (X 86, 9) in the following way:

This noxious creature looks on me
as one bereft of hero's love,
yet Heroes for my sons have I, the
Marut's Friend and Indra's Queen.
Supreme is Indra over all.

It is to be noted that Indrāni speaks this, and in the stanza, 'bereft of hero's love', means one who has no brave husband to protect her (unmarried maiden).

Education

The second issue of our study is education. Vedic parents wanted to impart education to children so that they could settle in life. The period before marriage was generally utilized for imparting education that was usually centred in the family. Brothers, sisters and cousins studied under the family elders. The *Atharvaveda* observes that the maiden can succeed in her marriage only if she has been properly trained during the period of studentship. The *Atharvaveda* (XI, 5, 18) expresses this in the following way: '*Brahmacaryena kanyānam yuvāvindate patim*'. That is to say, a daughter must be properly trained during her studentship in order to gain a husband in her young age through *brahmacharya*. *Brahmacharya* was compulsory for both boys and girls in this period.

Education was given free. Kings and rich men contributed to the establishment of āshramas where children (both boys and girls) received education. Education was divided into two—an obligatory part and an optional part. The obligatory part required all children to study only one Veda. Veda

meant the Samhitā. Brāhmana and Vedāngas. When the obligatory part was over, there came the ceremonial part, ie optional part of education. For learning the optional part students would go to the teachers in *āshramas* and would continue their study. One can compare the obligatory part with school education and the optional part with university education of modern times. School education (basic education) was compulsory for both boys and girls. Thus we can conclude that there was no inequality in getting the basic facility of education in Vedic times.

After completion of the obligatory part of education students (both male and female) left their homes and often would go to distant places to study under the celebrated teachers for specialization. Parents would send their daughters to competent lady teachers, though their number was not very large. However, most of the teachers of technical subjects like Theology, Philosophy and Medicine were usually male. Advanced lady students and male students would go to male teachers for specialization. This aspect of optional education has been discussed elaborately in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Vol. 1), published by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.

Let us now discuss the social custom of *Upanayana*, the ceremony when sacred thread is given. Both girls and boys were entitled to receive the sacred thread and both enjoyed the privilege of studying the Vedas. Again, both men and women performed religious rites after completing their education under a guru. Both were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods. The son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose. According to *Shrauta* and *Grihya Sutras*, both husband and wife chanted mantras while performing rituals. The gender

discrimination did not apparently exist during this period.

Three great lady scholars belonging to the Vedic period can be mentioned in this connection. They were Maitreyi, Gārgi, and Ātreyi. Maitreyi was the wife of Yājñavalkya. She was more interested in finding out the way to immortality than in earthly possessions. In the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* (11, 4) she revealed her unworldly aspiration while talking to Yājñavalkya. Gārgi was another scholar mentioned in the same Upanishad. In the philosophical contest held in the court of king Janaka, she raised some abstruse philosophical questions and launched an attack on Yājñavalkya. The searching cross-examination of Yājñavalkya by Gārgi showed that she was a philosopher of a very high order.

Ātreyi was another lady student of Vedanta in this period. She remained unmarried to pursue her spiritual aspirations.

The aim of education in the Vedic period was to equip students in such a way that they could become honourable citizens. After the completion of the obligatory part of education, the teacher would exhort the students to speak the truth and lead a virtuous life as responsible members of the society.

Marriage

Marriage was obligatory for both men and women for religious purposes in the Vedic period. If a man or woman remained unmarried, he or she could not participate in religious sacrifices and win heaven. Besides, the debt to the ancestors could only be paid by the married men and women. This information we get from the *Rigveda* (X, Hymn 136). A person who was unmarried

was considered unholy. This is expressed in the *Taittiriya Brāhmana* (11, 2, 6) in the following way: ‘*Athanjiyo vā esha yo apatnikah*’. Thus marriage opened a new period of holy life which was placed on the altar of truth and duty.

Girls were given in marriage when they became adult. There is no mention of child marriage in the *Rigvedic* literature. The parents did not control the marriage of their sons and daughters though they played an important part in arranging and financing their marriage. ‘*Svayamvara*’ or self-chosen system of marriage prevailed in the Vedic society. The beautiful brides could select their own husbands. The *Rigveda* (X, 27, 1/11/12) confirms this and says that the woman who is gentle, whose body formation is sound, could select her dearest one as her husband from many persons. After marriage, the bride was blessed to reign over her in-laws and she accompanied her husband till old age.

The *Rigvedic* Aryans were patriarchal and the husband had absolute power over his wife and children. Generally the bride brought gifts from her father’s house with her at the time of marriage. But it is mentioned in the *Rigveda* that a man of poor qualities gave plenty of wealth to his in-laws to get the bride. The bride price was not uncommon in those days, though it was not generally appreciated by the Aryans as reflected in the term *Vijamatur* in the *Rigveda* (I, 109, 2). Here the term *Vijamatur* meant worthless son-in-law or spouse’s brother who gave the bride price. However, in the later Dharma Shāstras the bride price had been mentioned as a characteristic of the ‘Asura’ form of marriage. This was condemned as a reproachable practice in the later Aryan society.

Married life

It is natural that happiness of a husband and a wife depends upon the relation between them. In Vedic period, the wife was the husband's truest friend and companion. The wife was also true to her husband. This is expressed in the marriage vows. In the same way, the husband was also truthful to his wife and did all his duties to her. Manu had observed that in the Vedic period the husband was identical with wife and vice-versa. He said (Manu, 9, 45), '*Viprāh prāhustathā caitadyo bharatā sāmritanganā*', 'The wise have rightly said that the husband is identical with the wife.'

From the above statement it is clear that husbands and wives were generally happy in married life in this period. Yet the wife bore all the household burdens. After going to her husband's house, the bride (wife) would take charge of the household from her parents-in-law. She would look after them and rule over the sisters and brothers of her husband. The husband shared very little of this burden. This aspect has been depicted in *Rigveda* (X, 85, 46) in the following way:

Over thy husband's father and mother
Thy husband's mother,
bear full sway,
Over the sister of thy lord,
Over his brother's rule Supreme.

From the above passage, it is clear that the family arrangement was quite unequal in terms of sharing the burden of the household works and care. According to Amartya Sen, this may be viewed as the inequality in household management. There were also other disparities. The marriage hymn (*Rigveda*, X, 85, 44) tells us that the bride (ie wife) may be the cause of her husband's sudden death if she had evil eye. Thus a bride should not have evil eyes and she was

advised to be kind enough to all animals. She was also advised to bring blessings to quadrupeds and bipeds (*Rigveda*, X, 85, 44). This is expressed in the hymn mentioned in the following way:

Not evil-eyed, no slayer of thy husband,
Bring weal to cattle, radiant, gentlehearted.
Loving the Gods, delightful, bearing heroes,
bring blessings to our quadrupeds and bipeds.

From this hymn, it is clear that the bride was made wholly responsible for the sudden death of her husband. But the husband was no way responsible if a sudden death of his wife occurred. This is also a kind of discrimination between the husband and the wife.

Child-bearing was considered a special function of women in the Vedic period. Evil spirits were believed to visit the women during the periods to prevent conception. The marriage hymn (*Rigveda*, X, 85, 29) tells us that evil spirit took the possession of the bride and attempted to do harm to her husband through her person. It was prayed therefore that the bride should not be the cause of her husband's death. The hymn is a magical formula intended to immunize the husband from the possible consequences of his contact with the evil spirits. The bride was advised to give up the woolen robe and distribute treasures to Brahmin priests to escape the evil spirit. The hymn smacks of gender discrimination as it claims that the bride may possess evil spirit, while her husband does not, and if he possesses, it is due to his wife.

Widow remarriage

Widow remarriage took place frequently in the Vedic period. The proposal for widow remarriage with her husband's brother was given at the funeral of her husband. The

proposal has been expressed in the *Rigveda* (X, 18, 8) in the following way.

Rise, come unto the world of life, O
Women: come, he is lifeless by whose
side thou liest.
Wifehood with this thy husband
was thy portion, who took thy hand and
Wooded thee as a lover.

The *Rigveda* (X, 40, 2) tells us that after the death of her husband, the widow would marry her brother-in-law. Besides the *Rigveda*, the *Atharvaveda* (IX, V, 27-28) also refers to a woman marrying a second time after her husband's death. It lays down the ritual to secure the union of the new couple in heaven.

Rights of inheritance

Now comes the question of the rights of inheritance. These rights are discussed under the following heads, namely rights of the wife, rights of brother-less daughter, rights of daughter with brothers, and rights of widow.

Rights of the wife : The wife occupied a respectable position in the Vedic society. But she had no independent legal rights over property. However, there are instances that the property was given to wife by husband. According to the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* (2, 4, 33) Yājñavalkya divided his wealth between his two wives.

In Vedic India, wife was generally regarded as the co-owner of the family property along with her husband as the term *dampati* would show. The husband took a solemn vow at the time of marriage that he would never transgress the rights and interests of his wife in economic matters. Jaimini referred to it for establishing the contention that wife could actually own property through receiving wedding gifts which later came to be known as *stridhana*.

A wedding hymn in the *Rigveda* contained two verses which indicate that gifts were sent with the bride to the bridegroom's house (X, 8 5, 8).

Gifts given to the bride consisted of ornaments. But the Vedic literature is silent on the point whether the wife could dispose of her property without her husband's permission. Again, there is no record to show that the wife retained the items of dowry for her own use. From the *Taittiriya Samhitā* (VI, 5, 8, 2), it is known that women (wives) are incapable of inheriting any property. The marriage vow by the husband related simply to household affairs. The marriage vow conferred no joint legal rights on wife in her husband's house. Thus, it can only be stated that the wife had ownership rights over her wedding gifts. Later these gifts were given wholly or partly to the daughter, as says Altekar in his 'The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization'.

Rights of brotherless daughter : In the Vedic age, daughters were usually well-educated and got full religious privileges. But she could not offer funeral oblations to her father. There are references in the text of the *Rigveda* (II, 17, 7 and IV, 5.5) about a brotherless daughter. Sometimes, a brotherless daughter would come back from her husband's house and live with her parents. This is just a record of an observed social fact and nothing more. The Vedic father would regard her daughter (who had no brother) to be as good as a son for all religious purposes. He had a strong prejudice against adopting a son. The Vedic father's prejudice against an adopted son is revealed in the *Rigveda* (VII, 4, 8) in the following way.

Unwelcome for adoption is the stranger, one to be thought of another's offspring. Though grown familiar by continued presence, may

our strong hero come, freshly triumphant.

The Vedic father would thus prefer to give his property to his daughter (who has no brother) instead of giving it to an adopted son. The right of inheritance of a brotherless daughter was first recognized in the Vedic period. A brotherless daughter became sole heir to her father's property even if she was married and she enjoyed the property right when she became a widow. The hymn of the *Rigveda* (I, 124, 7) refers to a brotherless daughter who got her share in patrimony. In the Vedic days, marriage was not easy for a brotherless daughter and often remained a spinster (*Atharvaveda*, 1.17.1). This is because the prospective bridegrooms feared that their son would be considered the son of their father-in-laws. People did not like this idea in the Vedic days.

Right of daughters with brothers

At first, the daughter with brothers had no right over her paternal property. In the *Rigveda* (III, 31, 2) we find a verse in which a brother is advised that he should not give any share of his paternal wealth to his sister, because, after all, she will migrate to a different family. This aspect has been expressed in the following way:

*na jāmaye tānvo rikthamāraik cakāra
garbham saniturnidhānam;
yadi mātaro janayanta vahnimanyah kartā
sukritoranya randhan.*

However, the *Rigvedic* advice has been followed as precedence in all ages and it shows that the practice of division of property was well established in the Vedic period amongst sons. Then there arose the custom of succession of sons to the property of a deceased person even when the father had not made the division of property among his sons in his lifetime. This does not mean

that a daughter was left unprotected economically.

For unmarried daughter, some provision was made over the share of her father's property (*Rigveda*, 11, 17, 7). Indeed, an unmarried daughter had not only the right over her father's property, but also she had the right to stay with her parents and brothers up to her old age. Such an unmarried daughter who lived all her life with parents or brothers was called a 'maju' (*Rigveda*, 1, 117, 7; 11, 17, 7; X, 39, 3).

The *Atharvaveda* too refers to some unmarried daughters who lived in the parental family until their death (1, 14, 3) and they had the absolute right over her personal belongings including ornaments which she could dispose of as she liked (*Rigveda* I, 109, 2). B. S. Upadhyay therefore concludes that an unmarried daughter had the share over her father's property in the Vedic period. Upadhyay, however, has not defined the word 'share'. We maintain that an unmarried daughter with brother did not have a legal right to inherit her father's property. She had a privilege of maintenance only.

Rights of widow

The widow's right to inherit her husband's property remained unrecognized. The Vedic texts declare that women, particularly widows, are incapable of inheriting any property of their dead husbands (*Taittiriya Samhitā*, VI, 5, 8, 2; *Shatapatha Brāhmana*, 4, 2, 13; *Maitrāyani Samhitā*, IV, 6, 4). But in early times, the custom of *niyoga* was very common. Widows without sons were rare. A vast majority of widows, therefore, used to acquire their husband's share not directly as their heirs. In fact, the widows acquired their husband's share as the guardians of their

minor sons. If widows were remarried, they did not get a share of their husband's property.

Occupation

Vedic people were engaged in different occupations. A short account of the different occupations is given here to see if there existed any gender discrimination in occupations at that time.

(i) Crafts and industries : Crafts and industries expanded among the Vedic Aryans for their agricultural and military needs. The wood worker had a place of honour in society as they made chariots for war and the crafts for agricultural purpose. Only men were engaged in this profession.

(ii) Weaving industry : Weaving industry was developed in the Vedic period. Only women were engaged in this industry. It is also known that mothers weaved garments for their sons.

(iii) Metal industry : Metal industry included six metals—iron, bronze, gold, silver, lead and tin. They are mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* and other Samhitās and Brāhmanas. Only men were engaged in this industry.

(iv) Carpentry : The carpenter made carts, seats and houses made of woods (*Rigveda*, V.60.4). The *Atharvaveda* (ix.3.53) describes the different features of a dwelling house by saying 'Like a woman O dwelling, we carry thee we will'. This suggests that the house was made of wood, light enough, to be carried whenever required. The carpenters were not looked down upon in the rural societies for their usefulness. There is no mention of women carpenters.

So far as the other industries such as house-building, pottery and leather industry are concerned, only men were employed in

these occupations. From the above facts, it is clear that women were only engaged in weaving industry, but men were engaged in other occupations. This suggests that there was gender discrimination in respect of different occupations.

Conclusions

From the present study the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (i) Parents wanted new born to be a boy rather than a girl. Thus, natal inequality is noticed. But once a girl was born she was treated with the same care and affection like a boy.
- (ii) The Vedic education was family centric. Both boys and girls studied under the family head at the beginning of education. Thus, no gender discrimination was found in the dissemination of basic education. Again, for higher studies both male and female students would go to the distant places to study under the celebrated teachers. Thus, there was no gender discrimination in terms of the special opportunity in pursuing higher education.
- (iii) So far as *brahmacharya* during the period of education was concerned, both male and female students followed it with the same rigorous discipline. Thus, there was no gender discrimination in terms of *brahmacharya* practice.
- (iv) Marriage was obligatory for both men and women for religious purposes.
- (v) Both girls and boys were entitled to *Upanayana* and both had the privilege of studying the Vedas.
- (vi) Though both the husband and wife were happy in terms of trust towards

(Continued to page 30)