



WOMEN – YESTERDAY OR TODAY? – AN INDIAN CONTEXT.

Social Science

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ABSTRACT

The topic of Women Empowerment and Feminism is always ongoing. The debatable issue is presented here in Indian Context with an insight in the Indian culture, history and mythology. The women who are idealized in the Indian Society have also been through a lot many things – or not?

KEYWORDS

culture, Indian, mythology, society, women.

The historical processes support the dominant culture of any society. This culture forms the binding norms of the society, which regulates the social roles and the role expectations of men and women of the society. Thus, to understand the gender roles of any society, it is required to look at the history of the society in question, reaching far back into the past.

Each society has different ideologies and differentiation based on the logic, understanding and culture of the society, evolving through different ages and generations. Thus, the universality of the gender roles is illusionary.

In the Indian Society, the culture is highly influenced by the varied interpretations of the available literature. It includes The Vedas, Upanishads and the epic poems like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Each interpretation is made and accepted as per the need of the particular individual, family, society, region or religion, as demanded by the time.

Looking at the present position of women in the Indian Society and comparing it with the status of women in the Vedic age, it is evident that the women held a very respectable and almost equal footing as men in the Vedic age. The tag of 'orthodox' on the Indian Society needs to be removed. The society is presently seen through the tinted glass of the various cultures and rulers who have molded and presented India differently to suit their needs.

Looking at the famous female characters of the epics, the Sanskrit verse

*Ahalyaa Draupadi Sita Taara Mandodari Tathaa |
Panchkanyaa smaranenitya mahaapaatak naashini ||*

mentions that these five women of the Indian Scriptures (Ahalyaa, Draupadi, Sita, Taara and Mandodari) are so great that remembering them will dispel all our sins. In a different version, instead of Sita, Kunti is mentioned. This exemplifies these five great ladies and the Indian women are supposed to follow their traits. They might not be perfect but they fulfill their duties as a daughter, sister, wife and mother and this is what all the Indian women are supposed to do.

If we look at the lives of these five women, it is seen that they too are the victims of the patriarchal Indian Society and they have been exemplified to suit the needs of the male dominated society. All these five women were completely devoted to their husbands and they had suffered most in their lives. They were wronged and punished by their own husbands and even by the society. They lost their husbands except Sita. If we look at the other version of the same verse, where Kunti is mentioned in place of Sita, it can be seen that the five women according to that case (Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari) have been with more than one male. Ahalya, Maharshi Gautam's wife, was with Indra, Draupadi had five husbands, Kunti was married to Pandu but gave birth to six sons through five different gods, Tara and Mandodari married their husband's younger brother when their husband died.

Sita followed her husband into the exile by her own choice and shares his sufferings for more than a decade. Later, when she is abducted by the demon king Raavana, she firmly resists all his temptations and threats. Still, she is cast away by her husband on the context that she has

stayed in the house of another man (She did not even stay in the house, for that matter – she stayed in the garden – Ashok Vaatika) for so long. Her purity needs to be proved through the test of fire.

Gaandhaari, the Royal Queen of Hastinaapur, the wife of Dhritraashtra and the mother of the hundred Kauravas had blindfolded herself when she realized that her husband is blind (that too, she found on her wedding day).

Another major part of Mahabharata, Draupadi, is one of the most quoted characters. She has been victimized on every stage by the patriarchal society and presented as a woman who resisted it all for the sake of her husbands. The plurality of the word 'husband' itself mentions the first level of her life when she was 'distributed' among the five brothers although she had actually married only one of them – Arjuna. As a property, she was put to bet by her husband at a game of dice. She was 'lost' and dragged to the court by her hair. She was disrobed in front of the entire court. After this humiliation, she accompanied her husbands to an exile for 12 years and a year of incognito. She lost her sons at the war of Kurukshetra but did not flinch.

Every Indian girl knows the stories of such women who were so devoted that they did not question, criticize or go against their husbands. The *Pativrata* model is rooted in their minds since childhood. It is idealized. This applies an influential role in the thought process of the Indian Society and the social norms on the behavior of women, mostly as wives.

However, what is little known and what is 'overlooked' are many truths about these characters. Rig Veda clearly proclaims that "The entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is (the) symbol of prosperity and (the) daughter of brilliance. May we respect her so that she destroys the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society." (1.48.8) Atharva Veda states that women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of the family and society. When a bride enters a family through marriage, she is to "rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family. (14.1.43-44) Yajur Veda tells us, "The scholarly woman purifies our lives with her intellect. Through her actions, she purifies our action, she promotes virtue and efficient management of (the) society." (20.84) (Laungani)

Draupadi has always been in question because she shared five husbands – a case of polyandry – which could have signified her 'inferior' social status. However, the other case – polygamy – is 'overlooked'.

Sita was seen as a victim but what is overlooked is the fact that the societal rules of that time were strict. The people idealized the royals, who were held on a pedestal and highly respected by all. The '*Agni Pariksha*' or the 'Ordeal of Fire' was obligatory for Ram and Sita as they were to be the King and the Queen of Ayodhya. Also, the character of Sita is presented as submissive and docile, ever polite, never going against the wishes of her husband. However, there are instances which prove otherwise. She insisted on joining him in the exile even after persuasion from the husband and her in-laws to not to do so. She forced

Ram to go after the Golden Deer even when he explained that it was not a real deer. Later she also forced Lakshmana to follow Ram into the forest after the golden deer even though he was not ready to leave her alone. She even stepped out of the *Lakshman Rekha* – the protective barrier to feed the 'hungry ascetic' in spite of the fact that she was told not to do so. In the end, she also refused the conditions of being reunited with her husband and requested Mother Earth to take her back. (Laungani)

When it comes to the social status of women in India, the situation has hardly changed. The status of women has always remained inferior to the men. The Indian society is considered religious in nature and generally people quote and follow the scriptures when any judgments have to be taken. In the scriptures too, the status of women have been derogatory.

"Dhol, ganwaar; shudra, pashu, naari ; sabhi taadan ke adhikari"

There have been many possible meanings taken out of this verse by Tulsidas. However, the literal translation of the verse means drums, rustic persons, scheduled castes, animals and women: all need to be beaten. It is a verse that is quoted every time a woman is beaten up.

However, the overlooked part, which is contradictory:

Manu himself wrote, "Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased. Where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards," and "Strike not even with a blossom a woman guilty of a hundred faults." (Laungani) is never quoted in a general way.

Even today, in many families, the female child is not heartily welcomed under the pretext of carrying the family lineage. The male child is preferred as he will carry the 'seed' of the family and the family name will be continued to the next generation. The birth of a girl child is frowned upon many times. Customs like *doodh peeti* are accepted ways of female infanticide. The couple / family also opted for abortion in many cases when it was found out that the fetus was a female.

According to an old Indian saying, "The wife is a friend, the daughter a misery, the son is for the father light in the highest heaven." Already in the Veda it is written, "A new-born girl is put aside, a male child is held aloft (in joy)". (Mies)

To avoid this, the Government of India has formed a law. Prenatal sex determination was banned in India in 1994, under the Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act. The act aims to prevent sex-selective abortion, which, according to the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, "has its roots in India's long history of strong patriarchal influence in all spheres of life." Prenatal sex determination has caused the Child sex ratio to go down at alarming rates, in India, which is also another factor that led to its banning. (Contributors)

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