

Women's Education in Vedic India

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Introduction :

The Dharmaśāstras generally prescribe the norms for post-Vedic Indian society, when the position of women had somewhat a descending graph. This continued later and in Medieval India, when lots of restrictions were imposed on women for different reasons and particularly for the repeated attacks by foreigners. The situation in the Vedic India is, however, different and by large a better picture emerges in the texts of that period. Hence, discussion on *Women's Education in Vedic India* requires a survey of the entire background. At first, we are to confess here that there is hardly any direct evidence of imparting lessons to the girls. This absence of direct reference and assemblage of some other factors prevalent during the age of Dharmaśāstras, e.g. (1) girls' marriage at early age, (2) Manu's famous dictum against women's liberty (*na strī svātantryam arhati* - 5.148) and (3) Sāyaṇa's bold rejection of girls' right to the Vedic studies (*strī śūdrayostu satyāmapi jñānāpekṣāyām....vede 'dhikārahpratiṣiddhaḥ-Sā* on RV Intro.) - made the situation more confusing. But a careful and thorough study in the Vedic passages reveals the fact that the situation was not disappointing.

While discussing on the women's position in the field of education, A.S. Altekar¹ has observed a strange phenomenon of our country - "The history of the most of the known civilization shows that further back we go to the antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women. In this respect, Indian civilization is unique because here we find a surprising exception to the general rule. The further back we go, the more satisfactory is found to be the position of women in more spheres than one; and the field of education is most noteworthy among them. We can, however, understand this strange phenomenon when we remember that for long time education in ancient India meant Vedic education and that it had to be necessarily imparted to all who were expected to take part in Vedic sacrifices, irrespective of their sex."

It is true, that there is no explicit mention about the arrangement of girls' education, but from the references (scattered throughout Vedic texts) to women seers², teachers³, their active participation in Vedic sacrifices⁴, their investiture of holy thread⁵, their involvement in music and dance⁶, war-field⁷, as well as in different vocations⁸,

we can decipher that inspite of the absence of institution-based training system, girls in Vedic India were not deprived of education.

Women as Scholars/Savants :

P.V. Kane⁹ in his *History of Dharmaśāstras* says: "it appears that in very ancient times, status of women as to their education was much higher than in medieval and modern times in India." Even the orthodox tradition (Family books) admits that Ṛgvedic collection contains hymns composed by poetesses who were known as *rṣikā* or *brahmavādinī*. At least twenty such names of poetesses have been traced in the *Ṛgveda*. They were Romaśā (RV 1.126.7, Lopāmudrā (RV I.179.1-6), Apālā (VIII.91.1-7), Kadrū (II.6.8), Viśvavārā (V.28.3), Ghoṣā (X.39), Juhū (X.109), Yamī (X.10), Saramā (X.108), Āmbhr̥ṇī Vāk (X.125), Paulomī (X.159), Jaritā (X.142), Śraddhā-Kāmāyanī (X.151), Urvaśī (X.95), Rātri (X.127), Indramātar (X.153), Sūryā (X.85), Indrāṇī (X.145), Sarparājñī (X.189), Devajāmī (X.108), etc.

The names of Nodhā (*Sāmaveda*, Pūrvārcika XIII.1), Sikatānivāvarī (SV, Uttarārcika I.4), Gaupāyanā (SV, Uttarārcika XXII.4), Ākr̥ṣṭabhāṣā, etc. have been recorded in the *Sāmaveda* as immortal singers, Romaśā, the daughter of Bṛhaspati has been described as *brahmavādinī*¹⁰. In the AB¹¹, we have come across a maiden obsessed by a *gandharva* who could instruct people (regarding performance of rituals) in case of doubt. The BU¹² records names of Gārgī and Maitreyī who also had the epithet *brahmavādinī* before their names. The *Bṛhad-devatā* has enumerated a long list of twenty-seven women seers. From this long queue of female scholars/savants, we can rightly infer that they underwent some sort of training under the able guidance of teachers who might have been their fathers, brothers or husbands because parents had desire for learned daughters also. In this connection, we may mention here the custom of performing an interesting ritual with a desire to have a daughter who would be a learned lady¹³.

Participation in Sacrifice :

Not only they were scholars and composers of hymns, but they were also regular participants in the sacrifices of their husbands¹⁴. The ŚB¹⁵ has declared wife as the integral part of sacrifice. According to Pāṇini¹⁶, the word *patnī* denotes her special connection with her husband's sacrifice. Her presence is so much important that the person became eligible for sacrifice only when he had his wife by his side¹⁷. The TB¹⁸ has expressed unwillingness of gods to accept offerings from an unmarried person. Both

the husband and wife had to undergo a special type of initiation and take equal part in the entire procedure¹⁹. In the context of Horse Sacrifice, the ŚB²⁰ along with the king has assigned different duties to the four queens also. Not only they participated in sacrifice physically, but they uttered Vedic hymns also²¹. At the time of marriage, bride also had to utter some *mantras*. Gobhila²² prescribes that when the bride pushes forward with her foot a mat, the bridegroom should make her utter the hymns: "may the way, which my husband goes by, be also assigned to me." In the *Kāthaka Gṛhyasūtra*²³, it is said that the *anuvāka* beginning with "*sarasvatī predamate*", etc. should be recited by both the husband and wife. In the *srastarārohaṇa* ritual of *Āgrayaṇeṣṭi*²⁴, both the husband and wife had to utter Vedic *mantras*; and harvest sacrifices could be performed by women alone²⁵. As regards daily domestic rites, Gobhila²⁶ instructs the wife to offer the evening *bali*.

Investiture of Holy-thread (Upanayana) :

Now the question is, whether *upanayana* was ever performed for women? AV's reference to girls' marriage only after the completion of their *brahmacarya*²⁷, their eligibility and active participation in sacrifices indicate that system of girls' investiture of sacred thread was prevalent since Vedic period. However, *Smṛtikāras* opine differently on this point. Most orthodox Manu²⁸, was in favour of girls' *upanayana* just for the sanctification of their body, without uttering any *mantra*. But regarding performance of other rituals of *upanayana* (e.g. tending of fire, celibacy, begging of alms, etc.) he opined differently²⁹. However, *Yamasamhitā* and *Harītasamhitā* quoted in the *Samśkāraprakāśa* and *Smṛtiandrikā*³⁰ gave a verdict that just like boys, *upanayana* was obligatory for girls. By the term *purākalpa*, most probably *Smṛtikāra* wanted to mean Vedic age. Yama said that girls were entitled for thread ceremony, they studied Vedas and uttered *gāyatrī*.

Harīta³¹ observed two types of girl students of that period: (1) *brahmavādinī* (the student of sacred lore) and (2) *sadyovadhū* (girls direct given to marriage). The former were entitled for *upanayana*. They studied Vedas, tended fire and begged alms within their house. Girdle of *muñja*-grass was prescribed for them. But system of wearing matted hair or deerskin was not applicable for them. Normally, they were taught by their fathers, uncles or brothers³². In this connection (as an exception), here we may mention Bhavabhūti's description of society where nun Kāmandakī learnt at the feet of teacher³³ with other male students. Normally, these *brahmavādinīs* did not marry;

therefore, could be compared with *naiṣṭhika brahmacārī* (lifelong celibate). As an exception to this general rule, Maitreyī's name may be cited here, who inspite of being married was considered as *brahmavādinī*. The latter group was *sadyovadhū*, who were given to marriage after performing a brisk ceremony of *upanayana*³⁴; and they might be compared to *upakurvāṇa brahmacārīs*, who after the completion of their studies, rendered some token honorarium to the teacher and accordingly left *gurukula* for entering next stage of life. The education of *sadyovadhūs* comprised the study of important Vedic hymns necessary for usual prayers and sacrifices. Music and dance also were taught to them.

It is surprising to note that Harīta has indirectly indicated the age fo their *upanayana* also. According to Harīta's injunction quoted in *Saṁskāraprakāśa*³⁵, girls' education, convocation, everything was to be completed before the approach of their puberty, which indicates that *brahmavādinī* women had their *upanayana* performed in the 8th year from conception. Then they studied Vedic lore and finished student-hood at the age of puberty. It is interesting to note that in the context of convocation (*samāvartana*), the ĀGS³⁶ has mentioned the process of girls' anointment also.

This system of girls' *upanayana* was prevelant up to Sūtra period. Gobhila³⁷, the renowned author, ha stated that the bridegroom catches hold of bride's hands, who has been invested with holy thread and utter the hymn '*somo dadat gandharvāya*'. The MBh³⁸ also has referred to a brahmin who invested Kuntī with holy thread and taught her *Atharvaśiras mantra* of Veda. Even in the 7th century, Bāṇa³⁹ has referred to Mahāśvetā whose body was sanctified with *brahmasūtra*.

Though nowadays this system has become obsolete in the Indo-Aryan branch of Aryan family but it is prevalent in the Iranian branch of Aryans. Even today in the Zoroastrian families, maidens undergo *upanyana* ceremony termed as '*navzot*', which has been explained as new birth in the *Avesta*.

Attainments of the Women Savants/Teachers :

It is interesting to note that girls' carrer was not confined in their student-hood. Names of women savants, e.g. Gārgī, Maitreyī have been recorded in the Upaniṣads who were renowned dialecticians. In later texts also we find some names who themselves were teachers. In the context of daily *ṛṣitarpaṇa*, the ĀGS⁴⁰ has mentioned a host of women teachers (e.g. Gārgī Vācaknavī, Vaḍavā Prātitheyī, Sulabhā Maitreyī) to whom water libations were offered.

The terms Vahvṛcī, Kaṭhī, Kalāpī meant the scholars who were well-versed in Vedas of Vahvṛca, Kaṭha or Kalāpa tradition. The *Mahābhāṣya*⁴¹ teaches formation of *ācāryā* and *upādhyāya* to mean lady-teachers and not merely the wife of teacher (*upādhyāyānī*). Further, *Mahābhāṣya*⁴² has stated how and why a brahmin woman was called *Āpiśālā* (the lady teacher proficient in the grammar of *Āpiśali*), which indicates that women were proficient grammarians also. In course of time, a new horizon, i.e. *Mīmāṃsā* was open to them. Though it was a difficult subject and drier than Mathematics, lady students took keen interest in it and in course of time, they became renowned with the appellations like '*Kāśakṛtsnā brāhmaṇī*' (lady who was proficient in the *Mīmāṃsā* text belonging to *Kāśakṛtsna* School) or *Audamedhā*⁴³ (the student of *Audamedhī* who herself was a *Mīmāṃsā* teacher). With the advancement of days, they took interest in the study of other branches of Philosophy. Such was the case of *Yājñavalkya*'s wife *Maitreyī*, who could ignore all the worldly assets just to get comprehensive knowledge of Ultimate Truth/Immortality from her husband⁴⁴. In this connection, we may refer to another competent philosopher *Gārgī Vācakanvī*, who by joining philosophical tournament held at *Janaka*'s court put forth a series of questions to *Yājñavalkya*⁴⁵. Her questions were so subtle and esoteric in character that *Yājñavalkya* refused to discuss it and stopped her by saying "*mā'ti prākṣiḥ gārgī mā te mūrdhā vyapaptat*".

Vocational Training :

Apart from lessons on Vedic studies, grammar and philosophical problems, some vocational training also were given to women. Existence of some female vocations (mentioned in the *VS* and *TB*⁴⁶ in the context of *Puruṣamedha*) proves the validity of the fact. For example, name of *vidalakarī* (basket-maker), *kaṇṭakīkarī* (thorn-worker), *koṣakarī* (scabbard-maker), *āñjanakarī* (ointment-maker), *peśaskarī* (female embroiderer), *vāsaḥpalpūlī* (landeress), *sirī* (weaver), *rajayitrī* (dyer), *upalaprakṣiṇī* (grinder of corns) can be mentioned. Existence and development of so many small-group cottage-industries must have required some sort of methodical training, existence of which can only be supposed in the absence of direct evidence from Vedas. Further, from the *ŚB* "*tad vā etat strīṇāṃ karma yad ūrṇāsūtraṃ karma*" (12.7.2.11) it appears that cultivation of crafts like sewing, knitting, etc. was mainly fixed for women.

Cultivation of Fine Arts :

Besides, fine arts like vocal music, dancing, etc. were mainly cultivated by ladies. *Brāhmaṇa*⁴⁷ texts frequently mention that singing and dancing were womanly

pastime, their partiality to these arts has been distinctly expressed in the ŚB⁴⁸. They can be easily won over by one who can sing and dance. It seems that women, i.e. wives of Sāmvedic priests were formerly entrusted with the singing of Sāma chants in sacrifices. Later on, they were replaced by their husbands. The ŚB⁴⁹ states: the Udgātṛs actually perform the duties of their wives (in singing Sāma chants).

Military Training :

Apart from these, it is striking to note that the adventurous steps of Vedic women led them to martial field also. References to the female soldiers⁵⁰, women's involvement in war⁵¹, their heroic feats make us suppose that they were provided some military training also. Not only they were able to protect themselves, but in times of emergency, they faced enemy soldiers also. The statement of a puzzled Aryan soldier "*striyo hi dāsa āyudhāni cakre*" (RV 5.30.9) indicates that in the Army, there was female squad also. In this connection, we may mention the name of Mudgalānī⁵² who drove the chariot of her husband and helped him to encounter with enemy. The RV⁵³ describes her courageous heroic feats in the battlefield where she defeated thousands of soldiers. Viśpalā, the queen of king Khela, is another example who was severely wounded in the battle and undergone a surgery in her leg⁵⁴. Thus, heroic feats of confident ladies and their competence in warfare have been traced since the time of *R̥gveda*. Later on, Patañjali⁵⁵ has mentioned *śāktikīs* (ladies proficient in throwing lances) in his *Mahābhāṣya*. Lady security guards of Mauryan king Candragupta's palace have been referred to in the travel accounts of Megasthenes.

Conclusion :

In spite of this high-class enlightenment and elevation, gradually position of women became worse and worse. As a consequent result of repeated foreign attacks, various types of social detriments were being noticed. In order to check this social deterioration and to maintain the purity of our own heritage and family traditions, orthodox schools started imposing series of restrictions on women. As a result, in the Dharmasūtras (especially in *Manusm̐hitā* and *Yājñavalkyasm̐hitā*) women were assigned a position of dependence. Even women of higher class came to be looked upon as equal to *śūdras* so far as Vedic studies and several other matters were concerned. Most probably, Sāyaṇa's rejection of girls' right to the Vedic studies is also a reflection of the same thing.

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2. ṚV 1.126.7; 1.179.1-6; 2.6.8; 5.28.3; 8.91.1-7; etc.
3. *Kāśikā* on *Pāṇini* 3.21; 4.1.59; *Mahābhāṣya* on Pā 4.1.14; *ĀGS* 3.4; etc.
4. ṚV 1.112.2; 1.131.3; 3.53.4-6; 5.43.15; 8.31.5; 10.86.10; etc.
5. AV11.6.18; *Manu* 2.66; *Yama-Saṁhitā* quoted in *Smṛticandrikā I*, p.24; *ĀGS* 3.8.11
6. ŚB 3.2.4.6; 14.3.1.35
7. ṚV 1.116.15; 5.80.6; 8.33.19; 10.102.2; etc.
8. VS 30th Ch. and TB 3.12
9. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstras*, Vol. II. p.365
10. *Bṛhaspati*putrī romaśā brahmavādinī- ṚV 1.126.7
11. *etad u hovāca kumarī gandharvagrhitā vaktāsmo vā idam pitṛbhyo yad vaited agnihotram ubhayedyur āhūyatānyedyur vāva tad etarhi hūyata iti* - AB 5.29
12. *tayor ha maitreyī brahmavādinī babhūva* - BU 4.5.1
13. *atha ya icched duhitā me paṇḍitā jāyeta sarvam āyuriyāditi tilaudanam pācayitvā sarpiṣmantam aśnīyātām īśvarau janayitavai* - BU 6.4.17
14. ṚV 1.122.2; 1.131.3; 3.53.4-6; 5.43.15; etc.
15. *jaghanārdho ha vā eṣa yajñasya yat patnī* - ŚB 5.2.1.8
16. *Patyur no yajña saṁyoge* - Pā 4.1.33
17. *ayajñīyo vā eṣo yo'patnikah* - ŚB 5.1.6.10
18. *na vai apatnikasya hastādevābalim grhṇanti* - TB 3.8.2.4
19. TB 3.8.3
20. ŚB 13.5.2.1-8
21. GGS 2.3.9
22. *paścād agneḥ saṁveṣṭitam kaṭam evamjātīyam vānyatapadā pravartayantī vācayet pra me patiyānaḥ panthāḥ kalpatām* - GGS 2.1.19-20
23. *tato gāthām vācayati sarasvati predamatetyanuvākam* - Kāth GS 25.23
24. PGS 3.2.6-16
25. *striyaścopayajeran nācaritatvāt* - PGS 2.17.18
26. *strī ha vā sāyam prātar pumān iti* - GGS 1.4.19
27. *brahmacaryeṇa kanyā yuvānam vindate patim* - AV 11.5.18
28. *amantrikā tu kāryeyam strīṇām āvṛdaśeṣataḥ*
saṁskārārtham śarīrasya yathākālam yathākramam // *Manu* 2.66
29. *Manusāṁhitā* 2.67
30. *Yamopi*
purākalpe kumārīṇām mauñjībandhanm iṣyate
adhyāpanam ca vedānām sāvitṛī vācānam tathā //
Yamasāṁhitā quoted in *Saṁskāraprakāśa*, p.402

31. "dvividhā vai striyaḥ, brahmavādinīyaḥ sadyovadhvaśca| tatra brahmavādinīnām upanayanam agnyādhānam vedānām adhyanaṁ svagr̥he bhaikṣacaryā ca" - Harītasamhitā quoted in Smṛticandrikā, I, p.24
32. pitā pitṛvyo bhrātā vā nainām adhyāpayet paraḥ| svagr̥he caiva kanyāyā bhaikṣacaryām vidhīyate| varjayed ajinaṁ cīraṁ jaṭādhāraṇam eva ca| Yamasaṁhitā quoted in Saṁskāraprakāśa, p.403
33. ayi! kiṁ na vetsi yadekatra no vidyā parigrahāya nānādigantavāsinaṁ sāhacaryam āsīt - Mālatīmādhava, Act I.
34. sadyovadhūnām tūpasthite vivāhe yathākathañcit kṛtvā upanayanaḥ kāryaḥ - Harītasamhita quoted in Smṛticandrikā I, p.24
35. prāgrajasah samāvartanam - Ibid. I, p.25
36. anulepanena pānī pralipyā mukham agre brāhmaṇo'nulimpeṭ| bāhūrājanyaḥ| udaraṁ vaiśyaḥ| upasthaṁ strī I - ĀGS 3.8.11
37. prāvṛtām yajñopavītinām abhyudānayan japet somo dadadgandharvāya - Saṁskāraprakāśa, p.896
38. tatastām anavadyāṅgīm grāhyāmāsa sa dvijaḥ| mantragrāmaṁ tadārājannatharvaśīrasi śrutam| MBh 3.305.20
39. brahmasūtreṇa pavitrīkṛtāyām - Kādambarī, Para 133
40. sumantu-jaimini-vaiśampāyana-pāila-sūtra-bhāṣya-bhārata-mahābhārata dharmācāryā jānanti gārgī vācakanvī vaḍavā prāthitheyī sulabhā maitreyī ye cānye ācāryāste sarve tṛpyantviti - ĀGS 3.4.4
41. upetyādhiyate asyā upādhyāyī, upādhyāyā - Mahābhāṣya on Pā 3.3.21, Cf. Kāśikā, loc. cit.
42. āpīśalam adhīte brāhmaṇī āpīśālā brāhmaṇī - Mabh 4.11.14
43. (i) kāśakṛtsnīnā proktā mīmāṁsā kāśakṛtsnī| kāśakṛtsnīm adhīte kāśakṛtsnā brāhmaṇī- Mabh 4.1.14
- (ii) audamedhyāyāśchātrā audamedhāḥ - Mabh on Pā 4.1.78
44. sā hovāca maitreyi - yenāhaṁ nāmṛtāsyām kimahaṁ tena kuryām| yadeva bhagavān Veda tadeva me brūhīti - BU 2.4.3
45. BU 3.6.1
46. VS 3.8-14; TB 3.4.5.1 - 3.4.10.1
47. nṛttaṁ gītaṁ strīṇām karma - ŚB 3.2.4.6
48. moghasamhitā vai striyaḥ - Ibid., loc. cit.
49. patnī karmaive ete atra udgātāraḥ kurvanti yat sāmāni gāyanti - ŚB 14.3.1.35
50. RV 5.30.9; 5.61.5-8; 5.80.6; 7.78.5; 8.33.19; etc.
51. RV 1.116.15; 10.102.1-9; etc.
52. ut sma vāto vahati vāso asyā adhirathaṁ yadajayat sahasram|

rathirabhūn mudgalānī gaviṣṭau bhare kṛtaṁ vyacedindrasenā // - ṚV 10.102.2

53. ṚV 10.102-1-12

54. *caritraṁ hi verivācchedi paraṇamājā khelasya paritakmyāyām*

sadyo jaṅghām āyasīm viśpalāyai dhane hite sartave pratyadhattam // - ṚV 1.116.15

55. *Mahābhāṣya on Pā 4.4.59*

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