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Tracing the Decline in the Status of Women from the Early to the Later Vedic Period

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ABSTRACT :

This paper studies the changing status of women across the Vedic period of ancient India. The Early Vedic period, associated mainly with the Rigveda, and the Later Vedic period, associated with the remaining Samhitas, the Brahmanas and the early Upanishads, are compared with respect to women's participation in public assemblies, their access to Vedic learning and their position within marriage. The decline observed between these two periods is argued to be connected not to one single cause but to four broader changes in Vedic society, namely a shift from pastoral to settled agrarian economy, growing complexity and specialisation of sacrificial ritual, the hardening of the varna system, and increasing political centralisation. Exceptions such as Gargi and Maitreyi are also discussed, since their presence in the Upanishads complicates any simple account of a uniform decline. It is concluded that the changes in the position of women in this period are best understood as a by-product of wider transformations in property, ritual authority and political power, a pattern that is found again in later periods of Indian history.

Keywords: *Vedic Period, Status of Women, Rigveda, Upanayana, Varna System, Ancient Indian Society*

1. Introduction

As noted in the Aitareya Brahmana, women are described as misery. Historians of ancient India have long been drawn to a paradox. The same civilisation that produced female seers such as Gargi and Maitreyi, women confident enough to debate philosophers in open assembly, also produced within a few centuries texts that describe the birth of a daughter as a misery. The Maitreyi–Yajnavalkya episode implies that the later subjection of women and their exclusion from Vedic studies had no basis in the Upanishads themselves [1]. This paper attempts to understand that paradox, not by taking a single image of the Vedic woman and projecting it backward or forward in time, but by tracing an actual movement across time. The Vedic age, spanning roughly a thousand years, is conventionally divided by historians into an Early phase, associated chiefly with the Rigveda, and a Later phase, associated with the remaining Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the early Upanishads. These are not watertight categories, and the transition between them was gradual rather than abrupt, but the difference in tone with respect to women is striking enough to merit closer attention.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it outlines what can reasonably be said about the position of women in the Early Vedic period on the basis of the hymns themselves. Second, it traces the specific changes visible in Later Vedic literature. Third, it asks why these changes occurred, situating them within the broader social and economic transformation of the period.

2. Sources and Their Limits

Any discussion of Vedic women encounters an immediate difficulty: the available sources are almost entirely religious and ritual in character, composed and transmitted by a Brahmanical elite, and overwhelmingly male authored. The Rigveda, the earliest of the four Vedas, contains hymns attributed to a handful of women, among them Lopamudra, Ghosha, Apala and Vishvavara, which is itself informative, but the collection as a whole reflects the outlook of a priestly class describing an idealised social order as much as a lived reality. The Later Vedic texts the Yajurveda, Samaveda, Brahmanas and Upanishads describe rituals in far greater detail, and women are rarely the direct subject of discussion. Most references to them occur in passing, while explaining how a sacrifice should be performed, rather than as a deliberate comment on their place in society. Modern historians such as Altekar [2], Thapar (2002) [3], Sharma (1983, 1968) [4, 5] and Chakravarti (2018) [6] have worked through these difficulties in different ways, and this paper relies on their readings while returning, where possible, to the primary hymns and passages themselves.

3. Women in the Early Vedic Period

3.1 Participation in Public and Ritual Life

The Rigveda suggests a society still organised loosely around pastoral, semi-nomadic tribal units, called jana, where the rigid ritual hierarchy of later centuries had not yet fully crystallised. Within this setting, women appear to have had a visible place in public deliberation. The sabha and the samiti, the two tribal assemblies frequently mentioned in the hymns, are described in a few places as spaces a woman could enter and address. The term

brahmavadini was used for women who engaged in philosophical and Vedic discussion. Women such as Apala and Ghosha are credited with composing hymns in their own right, implying that they underwent the same disciplined training in metre and recitation as their male counterparts [7]. Altekhar [2] treats this participation as evidence that the exclusion seen later was not an original feature of Vedic society but a subsequent development. Women participated in the Vidatha, an early Vedic assembly that had social, religious and political/military functions [5]. This signifies their role in public affairs as well.

3.2 Marriage and the Household

Marriage in the Early Vedic hymns, especially the well-known wedding hymn addressed to Surya in the tenth book of the Rigveda [7], is not described as a transaction so much as a partnership. The wife is called ardhangini, meaning half of the body, and is invited to take her place as mistress of the household and joint performer of domestic sacrifice with her husband. Clear textual evidence of child marriage is absent in this period. Marriage appears to follow puberty, and there are references to women who remained unmarried by choice in order to pursue Vedic study, an option that later became far more difficult to imagine. Husband and wife are both called *dampati* (masters of the house) [4]. The most frequently cited verse in Rigveda, part of the funeral hymn (antyeshti sukta), the verse addresses the widow standing beside her deceased husband's body and calls upon her to rise, leave the world of the dead, and return to the world of the living, this could have been a proof that widows were expected to reintegrate into society rather than be permanently secluded or destroyed, a marked contrast with later sati ideology. Niyoga was the practice whereby a widow, or a wife whose husband was impotent, diseased or otherwise unable to procreate, could conceive a son through a close relative of the husband, typically the husband's brother (devara) for the specific purpose of continuing the lineage. It was viewed as a socially sanctioned mechanism to prevent the extinction of a family line.

3.3 Access to Learning

The upanayana, the sacred thread ceremony marking initiation into Vedic study, does not appear in Early Vedic sources as an exclusively male rite. Later tradition itself preserves the memory of this openness. The Harita Dharmasutra, though a later text, still records a category of women called brahmavadinis who underwent upanayana and lifelong study, distinguishing them from sadyodvahas, who married soon after a shorter and more symbolic initiation [2]. Women in early vedic period had right to education as is evident by the glorious names present in the Rigveda such as lopamudra, ghosha and vishvavara. Their presence in the Vedic corpus is important evidence of women's participation in the intellectual and religious culture of the period.

4. Women in the Later Vedic Period

4.1 Exclusion from Public Assembly

By the time of the Brahmana literature, the sabha is described in terms that exclude women outright. A well-known passage in the Maitrayani Samhita lists liquor, woman and dice as three social evils, suggesting a shift away from the assembly-hall presence implied earlier. Political and ritual authority had by now consolidated around a class of ruling chiefs and their Brahmin priests, and women's participation in collective decision-making, where mentioned at all, is described as symbolic rather than substantive.

4.2 The Birth of a Daughter

Perhaps the clearest textual marker of change is a passage from the Aitareya Brahmana describing the birth of a daughter as a source of misery to her parents, in direct contrast to the birth of a son, who is celebrated as a source of light in the household. Such a statement would have been almost unthinkable within the framework of the Rigvedic wedding hymn, where the wife is a partner rather than a burden to be transferred. This shift correlates closely with the growing importance of the son in performing ancestral rites and inheriting land and cattle, concerns that mattered far less to a mobile pastoral society than to a settled, landholding one.

4.3 Marriage, Age and Consent

Later Vedic and immediately post-Vedic texts show a gradual lowering of the age of marriage and a corresponding narrowing of a woman's say in the choice of husband. As the marriageable age of girls kept dropping, even the Vedic initiation ritual for girls was reduced to a formality and then abandoned; this put an end to their Vedic education [2]. Some smritis, such as the Yama Smriti, began to advocate the unfortunate view that since marriage was compulsory for girls, parents should marry them even to undesirable persons if suitable bridegrooms were not available before the time of puberty. This rule made the lot of a defective, deformed or diseased girl very pitiable [2]. Niyoga was still prevalent in the Later Vedic period.

4.4 Restriction from Vedic Study and Ritual

The upanayana ceremony, once open in principle to women of the brahmavadini category, becomes in Later Vedic and Sutra literature an overwhelmingly male rite tied to the three twice-born varnas. This is significant because access to Vedic recitation was, in this society, the single most important marker of ritual and intellectual standing. Vedic texts did not attribute much power to their goddesses who remained figures in the wing [3]. It is thought that a widow had to perform a symbolic self-immolation at the death of her husband and this may have been a sign of status, in later centuries this was cited as the origin of the practice of becoming a sati, with a small emendation of the text, which made it possible to insist that a widow actually burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre [3].

5. Explaining the Decline

It would be a mistake to treat this decline as though it were driven by a sudden change in social attitudes towards women alone. The gradual transformation in the position of women during the Later Vedic period formed part of a much broader reorganisation of Vedic society. Between the Early and Later Vedic phases, significant changes took place in the political structure, economy, social organisation and religious practices of the community. The expansion of settlements into the Gangetic region, the increasing importance of agriculture and territorial kingdoms, the growing authority of kings and Brahmanical specialists, and the gradual strengthening of social distinctions all contributed to the emergence of a more hierarchical social order. At the same time, institutions that had previously provided space for wider participation were transformed, while family, lineage, inheritance and ritual obligations acquired greater importance in determining an individual's social position. These changes did not affect men and women in identical ways. As society became increasingly organised around patrilineal descent, control over property and inheritance, hereditary social status, and ritual authority, women's roles became more closely associated with the household, marriage and reproduction. Their earlier visibility in certain religious and public spheres consequently became more restricted. The decline in women's position should therefore be understood not as an isolated development, but as one aspect of the wider political, economic, social and religious transformations that characterised the Later Vedic period. Four closely interconnected developments are particularly important in explaining this gradual change.

5.1 *The Shift from Pastoralism to Settled Agriculture*

The Early Vedic economy was centred on cattle and mobile pastoralism, in which property was less tied to fixed land and the joint labour of the household, including that of women, was directly productive. The society of the central Rigveda was predominantly pastoral, while the society of the Later Vedic texts was essentially agricultural, with agriculture having become the main occupation [4]. Land, unlike cattle, could be inherited, subdivided and disputed across generations, and this sharpened the importance of a legitimate male heir, with a corresponding devaluation of the birth of daughters.

5.2 *The Growing Complexity of Ritual and the Rise of the Priesthood*

Sacrifice in the Early Vedic period was comparatively simple and domestic in character. The Later Vedic period saw the elaboration of large and expensive royal sacrifices like the rajasuya and the ashvamedha, as ritual became a technical profession requiring years of formal training, it became easier to justify the exclusion of women from it on grounds of specialisation, even though the exclusion was as much about guarding priestly privilege as about any inherent unsuitability. Consequently, religion became increasingly centred on ritual expertise and Brahmanical authority, contributing to the consolidation of social hierarchy during the Later Vedic period. This development also had implications for women, as their participation in major rituals increasingly occurred within prescribed roles particularly that of the wife of the sacrificer rather than as independent ritual specialists.

5.3 *The Hardening of Varna and Social Hierarchy*

The varna system, loosely functional in the Rigveda, hardens considerably by the Later Vedic period into something closer to a hereditary order. Chakravarti [6] explains that maintaining caste purity requires strict control over female sexuality, because women are central to reproduction and therefore to maintaining the boundaries of caste. Restricting a woman's independence was in this sense, not separate from the consolidation of caste but bound up with it. Earlier a person's varna was decided by profession, which later became ascriptive. This development also affected women, whose status increasingly became defined through their relationship to the household and male kin, while access to certain religious and public institutions became more restricted. Thus, the Later Vedic period witnessed not the sudden creation of social hierarchy, but the progressive institutionalisation and hardening of distinctions that had existed in earlier Vedic society.

5.4 *Political Centralisation*

Early Vedic tribal chiefs, referred to as rajan, ruled with the consent of assemblies in which the wider community, including women in a limited sense, had some voice. Later Vedic kingship moved toward hereditary and more centralised rule, supported by priestly sanction, and the assemblies that had once given ordinary people, women included, a nominal presence in public life declined in importance alongside them. The growing political centralisation of the Later Vedic period had important consequences for women's participation in public life. During this period, the earlier tribal political structure gradually developed into larger territorial kingdoms, while the authority of the rajan became stronger and increasingly hereditary. The emergence of rashtra and the performance of royal rituals such as the Rajasuya and Ashvamedha reflected the growing importance of kingship and territorial sovereignty. At the same time, the character of the traditional assemblies changed: the vidatha disappeared, while the sabha and samiti became increasingly associated with influential chiefs, nobles and Brahmanas. This narrowing of the political sphere was accompanied by a reduction in women's participation. The Maitrayani Samhita explicitly states that women did not attend the sabha, which had important judicial and public functions. Thus, the transition from a relatively flexible tribal polity to a more centralised and stratified monarchical order coincided with the restriction of women's access to public political institutions. However, this can not be understood as a complete disappearance of women from public or ritual life, since Later Vedic texts continue to preserve evidence of women's participation in certain religious and royal ceremonies.

6. Continuities and Exceptions

None of this amounts to a uniform, one-directional collapse. The Upanishads, composed toward the very end of the Vedic period, preserve two of the most memorable women in the entire tradition: Gargi Vachaknavi, who publicly questions the sage Yajnavalkya at length in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and Maitreyi, who chooses philosophical enquiry over inherited wealth in the same text [1]. Their presence suggests that intellectual space for women had not vanished so much as narrowed and become exceptional rather than ordinary. A woman of unusual standing, or a Brahmin household

of unusual standing, could still produce a Gargi, even as the general trend moved in the other direction. This tension between the rule and its exceptions is, if anything, what makes the Later Vedic period historically interesting rather than simply regrettable. Yajnavalkya tells Maitreyi that a husband is not dear for the husband's sake but for the self's sake, and in the very same breath says the identical thing for a wife, she isn't dear for the wife's sake but for the self's sake which shows wife and husband are given the exact same philosophical status[1].

7. Conclusion

Vedic literature charts a fall from samrajni to kripana: the Rigveda's bride as mistress of the household gives way, by the Aitareya Brahmana, to the daughter as an object of misery, her worth eclipsed by the son now hailed as his father's light. The movement from the Early to the Later Vedic period is not adequately captured by the idea of a single golden age followed by a fall. What the evidence more carefully supports is a set of overlapping shifts economic, ritual and political in nature that together narrowed the space available to women in public life, learning and marriage, while leaving certain doors only partially closed. Reading the decline in this way does not make it any less real, but it does make it more explicable. It is not the result of a sudden change of heart about women, but a by-product of a society reorganising itself around land, lineage and an increasingly professionalised priesthood. This connection remains useful well beyond the study of the Vedic age itself, since later shifts in the position of women in South Asian history have often been found to follow a similar pattern, changing alongside, rather than separately from, changes in property, ritual authority and political power. What emerges is that the Vedic story is less about women losing ground than about the ground itself shifting beneath them, reshaped by land, lineage and priesthood.

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