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## Role and Status of Women in Modern India

The Greek myth represents that human beings were originally composed of a man and a woman, that some god divided each being into two and these separated halves are continually searching for one another. To look upon husband and wife as complementaries which make up a whole is the true implication of married life. With this fact in mind, I approached the problem of women with the emphasis on the concept of equality between men and women in India. Before going straight into the topic, let us see the status of women in ancient India.

About twenty centuries before Christ a young, gay and sturdy race crossed the north-western frontier of India and stood in the threshold of the Sapta-sindhu, the land of the seven rivers. They were called the Indo-Aryans. The joyous songs, the hymns of gratitude, in admiration of the great immortal elements of nature, sent a thrill of joy through the views of the Aryans and created in them a never-dying faith in future. For the first time in the history of mankind, man started creating gods after his own image. "The process of God-making", says S. Radhakrishnan<sup>1</sup>, "in the factory of man's mind cannot be seen so clearly anywhere else as in the *Rgveda*." We have in it the freshness and splendour of the movings of man's mind still undulled by past customs or fixed routine. The *Rgvedic* society was founded on the home and the family as well-established institutions with the proper place assigned to women under an advanced system of maternal laws. The *Rgvedic* expression—"the wife is the home"<sup>2</sup>(*jāyedaśtm*)—shows how domestic life and sentiment centred round the woman.

The community had long turned patriarchal and the mother had ages ago ceased to be the head of the family although quite a large number of

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1. Indian Philosophy Vol. I, p. 73.
  2. *Rgveda*, III, 53, 4.

names still continued to be matronymic. About that age and earlier most of the social organisations worshipped mother-goddesses in the form of icons, but the Aryans almost replaced the icons with matronly women, real mothers human and humane. The godliness of the icons came to be installed in the woman generator of man. The mother in the household of the *Rgvedic* Aryan, set the model for the conception of the *Rgvedic* goddess.

The ancient conception of womanhood at its best may well be studied in the goddesses described in one of the first human literary documents, the *Rgveda*. The strength of the woman who ruled the household of the *r̥ṣi* and his *yajamāne* was unconsciously reflected in the pleasing counterparts whom he created and to whom he addressed his impassioned prayers. Human expression never extolled with such grandeur of character and imagery the form of its feminine world. On the fields of battle, in the assemblies of her people, in the household everywhere the mother seems to have captained the ship of affairs. First in the importance among the goddesses is Adhiti typifying motherhood.<sup>3</sup> She is the ideal mother like Maat of the Egyptians and Themis of the Greeks. Motherhood is the essential and most characteristic trait of this divinity personifying 'a pure abstraction'.<sup>4</sup> In later literature also Aditi's character as a mother is preserved. Thus in a hymn of the *Atharva Veda*<sup>5</sup> and in another of the *Vajasaneyi Samhita*<sup>6</sup>, she is invoked as the great mother of the devout, the mistress of the *r̥ṣi* mighty and powerful spacious, protecting and clearly guiding. What is important to note is that wherever she has been mentioned, her function has been to tenderly look after the living beings, and this is why her tie of relationship has varied according to the occasion as a mother, housewife, sister and daughter. Thus again, it is that she is spoken of as being both mother<sup>7</sup> and daughter<sup>8</sup> to Daksha. Her epithet *pastya*<sup>9</sup> clearly alludes to her status as a housewife which may also imply motherhood.

Her motherhood gives her a natural sway over her children. It is to the mother that the child looks up for allaying its fear and the ancient man

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3. *Ibid.*, I, 136, 3 : 94, 15 ; 162, 22.

4. A. A. Macdonell ; *Vedic Mythology*, p. 120.

5. VII. 6. 2.

6. XXI. 5.

7. *Ibid.*, II. 27. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, X. 72, 4-5. Here Aditi is said to have sprung from Daksa and Daksa from Aditi.

9. *Ibid.*, IV. 55, 3 : VIII. 27. 5.

always took refuge in the protection of the mother goddess Aditi. Many a time is she spoken of as protecting men from distress and danger, and as granting complete welfare or safety.<sup>10</sup> She is frequently invoked to release men from guilt or sin. The idea is clearly connected with the etymology of her name. The word *a-diti* literally signifies 'unbinding', 'freedom', 'boundlessness' and is derived from the word *diti*, 'binding' from *ata*, to bind. "Aditi is the mother and the sire and son. Aditi is all gods. Aditi gives classed men. Aditi is all that have been born and shall be born."<sup>11</sup>

Ancient Indians were a race devoted to home. Affection was deeply rooted in their heart. Wife and children were their anxious concern who received all their love and care. We find a very frequent longing for a male child in the *Rgveda*<sup>12</sup> In such a state the importance of the woman becomes singular and the birth of a daughter as potential mother is not altogether unwelcome. It is surprising, however, that no desire for the birth of a daughter is ever expressed in the entire range of *Rgveda*. Her birth is even deprecated in the *Atharva veda*.<sup>13</sup> In this *Samhita*, references are made to mystic charms for undoing the effect of a female foetus and for changing it into a male one.<sup>14</sup> The *Aitareya Brahmana* preserves an ancient *gāthā* in which a daughter has been characterised as a misery (*krpanam*).<sup>15</sup> But it is heartening to find that the period of the *Upanisads*, that witnessed the glory of the Brahmvādins, endorsed, with acclamation, the birth of a daughter for which they prescribe certain rituals to be performed by the man who wants a learned daughter to be born.<sup>16</sup> We also find frequent references in the *Rgveda* to daughters being formally caressed and affectionately brought up by parents. They were lovingly treated by their mothers and shielded by the strength of their father and brother.

A simile has been drawn upon the relations of the female children with their parents to express the relation between the Heaven and Earth: "Faring together, young, with meeting limits, turn sisters lying

10. *Ibid.*, X. 100 and I. 94, 15.

11. *Kath. Up.*, IV. 7.

12. *Rgveda*, I. 91, 20 ; 92, 13 ; III. 1. 23 ; X. 85, 25, 41, 42, 45.

13. *Atharva Veda*, VIII. 6, 25 ; VI. 11. 3.

14. *Ibid.*, VI, 11 : III. 23.

15. *Aitareya Brahmana* ; VII. 15.

16. *Brahdaranyaha Up.*, IV. 4. 18.

on their parents' bosom (*pitrompasthe*).<sup>17</sup> What a contrast the daughter was to her Arabian sister, who met her death through burial. Before the appearance of Muhammad the horrible practice of burying alive female infants prevailed among the Arabs. Perhaps prompted by some savage superstition, and certainly for economic and martial reasons, the cruel custom was indulged in upto the time of the prophet, who denounced it. "Kill not your children for fear of improverishment," said he, "we will provide for them and for you ; varily their killing is a great sin."<sup>18</sup> The fate of the daughter in the mediaval Rajput community was no better. Many a time the cruel hand of man, a father or a brother, snapped the thread of her life. In the *Rgveda* we read the existence of the son and the daughter side by side, the former taking the profession of the father while the latter inheriting the glory and honour of her mother.<sup>19</sup> Here the reference to the daughter receiving honour is one to her potential motherhood. Since the wife and mother were held in high regard, the daughter also received her due share in the respect and love of her people. It is one desire of the couple to reach their full extent of life with sons and daughters, growing by their side.<sup>20</sup> In another passage a father is commended for having many excellent daughters as his quiver for containing unfailling darts, both being effective in assailing the hearts of men.<sup>21</sup> We have several allusions to daughters fondly nourished in their parents' family and even growing old while staying there. The *Apastamba Grhya sūtras* suggest the father to wish for good of the daughter as much as for his son.<sup>22</sup> The Mahabharata thinks with a well-established daughter the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, resides without fail.<sup>23</sup> It is the unmarried girls who first consecrate Rama with holy water during his auspicious bath.<sup>24</sup>

Thus we find that the maiden was mainly occupied with the domestic work. But it may be noted that material cares alone were

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17. *Rgveda* I. 185, 5.

18. Quran, Ch. XII.

19. *Rgveda* III. 31, 1 - 2.

20. *Ibid.*, VIII. 31, 8.

21. *Ibid.*, VI. 75, 5.

22. XV. 12, 3.

23. XIII, 11, 14.

24. *Ramayana*, VI. 131, 38 and 61.

not her lot and that she also received a liberal education, for side by side with men *r̥ṣis*, lady seers have also been credited with the composition of hymns. The affection that was bestowed on the maiden by her relatives and the place of importance that she enjoyed in the family would make Zimmer's description of children's plight a myth. Apart from her parents, her brother had some control over the maiden. This was bound to be for he was soon to occupy the place of the pater familias after the death of his father. He therefore looked after the social relation of his sister. It was therefore feared that a free girl in the absence of a brother might go astray<sup>25</sup> and that gallants might take advantages of her helplessness. Her claim to the protection which she required in her weakness is well recognised in the *Rgveda*. The *r̥ṣi* implores: "As a virtuous maiden, who lives with her father and mother, and expects from them the support to which her devotion to them gives her the claim, as such I come to ask thee for a share in thy favour."<sup>26</sup>

It will be well to consider here the legal status of the daughter. The evidence on this point is slightly conflicting and not quite conclusive. It would seem that she had some share in the property of her father in as much as she was allowed as an unmarried daughter of the family not only to stay with her parents and brothers, but even to grow old in her father's family.<sup>27</sup> The *Atharva Veda* even refers to daughter's remaining in the parental family until death. Unless she had some share in her father's property in her own right, it is difficult to comprehend how her long stay in the family was not resented. The stay of a maiden in her father's family until she is married may be considered her birth right exercisable in any situation of life but her residence there until old age, or death, or even after her marriageable age is passed, would indicate the existence of such privileges in her favour as in certain cases would bind her almost perpetually to her father's family and permit her to enjoy its pleasures not as an act of paternal bounty but in her own right. Thus her maintenance was her legal right and a charge on her father's property. It ceased to have an effect only when she severed her connection from her paternal

25. *Rgveda*, IV. 5, 5.

26. H. H. Wilson : *Rgveda*, Vol. II, p. 257.

27. *Rgveda* : I. 117, 7.

family after her marriage. But if she choose to remain unmarried all her life she could yet depend on her right of maintenance in the family she was born into.

Mention is made about the wealth being given away by the girl's brother to his brother-in-law.<sup>28</sup> This is a clear reference to dowry and would go a long way to prove the girl's right in the ancestral property. Wealth thus dowered passed to her as her separate property, the *stridhana* of later times. An unmarried daughter had her own ornaments which she could dispose of as she liked.<sup>29</sup>

The brother, a father's legitimate son — of the body,<sup>30</sup> was the sole inheritor of the ancestral property, and in a passage of the *Rgveda*<sup>31</sup> he is even referred to as leaving no share of that property to his sister. But this very allusion would indirectly show that in the absence of her brother she inherited the property of her father in her own right and not through her son, though her son also elsewhere has been made the heir to the property of his maternal grandfather. The latter case refers to a different context when the daughter had become a mother. The former reference would clearly place the claim of the daughter to her father's property over adopted and such other sons or over other cognate relations. As a matter of fact the idea of adoption was abhorrent to the *Rgvedic* man. There is another allusion in which it is said that 'many a maid is pleasing to the suitor who fain would marry for her splendid riches!<sup>32</sup> Here is a clear evidence of inheritance of the ancestral property on the part of the daughter in her own right before her marriage. The above discussion may show that the daughter had an assigned share in the property. It is obvious that the *Rgvedic* system was more alive to the rights and susceptibilities of the woman.

The maiden enjoyed singular freedom which may appear almost exceptionable to the modern Hindu accustomed to impose endless restrictions upon his women. Seclusion of women was absolutely unknown, and the maiden was free to move anywhere she liked. The daughter

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28. *Rgveda* I. 109, 2.

29. *Ibid.*, X. 85, 29.

30. *Ibid.*, III. 31, 2.

31. *Ibid.*,

32. *Ibid.*, X. 27, 12.

in a *Rgveda* family was thus not a meek, shy and weak creature like her modern representative in the Hindu family, but she was bold, free, and strong.

But in the modern period, questions of equality between women and men are of concern on the highest political level. Modern women claim the right of women to have equal employment, opportunities outside the home. They also claim a new division of work, based on solidarity and equality in working life and in the home. They also claim better working conditions that are adaptive to tasks and conditions outside the job. All these goals are based on a secular idea of work. Religion has no place in women's employment and education. It is secular education that people prefer. People seek only material benefits. Religious values are no longer on record. People need no religion at the cost of their living.

The first goal can be established only if adequate arrangements are made for looking after children. One of the urgent tasks in India today, therefore is to provide Good day-care centres for pre-schoolage, and after-school centres for children of school age, when women have gainful employment outside the home and take part in political and trade union activities, men must participate more in looking after the home and children. The so-called double work-load of home and career need no longer be a burden when it is divided between men and women — such division can be the means to a richer and more varied life for both participants.

Another group of women demand a shorter working day for all. This demand is an essential pre-condition for effecting the right of women to have an equal opportunity to work outside the home. It will not be enough to pass equal rights laws or to abolish direct and obvious discrimination. Steps must be taken in a number of areas — employment, education, housing, child care, social relationships and attitudes — to encourage and assure true equality between the sexes.

A basic principle behind equality between women and men is that women must have the same right as men to employment. This right must be enjoyed regardless of marital status. A less understood principle, however, which is just as fundamental to equality, is that women and men must participate in work in life on equal terms. But this aim cannot be achieved so long as women must bear the greatest burden

in looking after houses and children. It also cannot be achieved so long as the labour market remains divided into "male" and "female" occupations. A change in the traditional role of women, therefore, must be accompanied by a change in the traditional role of men. In a society based on solidarity, secularism and equality, a new role characterised by similar opportunities and responsibilities for men and women must be the norm. Both men and women must have the opportunity to have double roles — one working role and one active role in the family.

Many Indian citizens have come to realize that special measures may have to be taken on behalf of women in the labour market to enable them to attain true equality and to overcome such handicaps as insufficient education, limited business experience following several years of domestic employment and so on. Special measures may also be necessary concerning relief employment for women, since in practice unemployed women do not always enjoy the same relief employment rights as men within their occupational sector.

Both primary and secondary schools in India have official curricula that describe the general goals for education and the specific goals for different subjects. These curricula point out the importance of making students aware of issues having to do with equality between men and women. According to the curriculum, the school should promote equality between the sexes — in the labour market, in the family and in the community at large. This should be achieved, partly by treating boys and girls equally, partly by the school counteracting in its work the traditional attitudes to sex roles, and stimulating the pupils to question the differences between men and women in respect of influence, working duties and wages that exist in many sectors of society. The school should assure that men and women will play the same role in the future, that preparation for the parental role is just as important for boys as for girls, and that girls have reason to be just as interested in their careers as boys.

Again, vocational training for adults and young people is indispensable towards realising the goal of everyone's right to work. In recent years, many of the women who have begun to work would have obtained a weaker status on the labour market but for the vigorous expansion of vocational training. Both adult and youth educa-



tion play an important role in the democratic process, strengthening the people's ability to uphold their political and union responsibilities. Since women stand outside political and union activities in such great numbers, education for them becomes all the more necessary for bringing about true equality between men and women. Despite the advances in practice, the majority of men in India still follow traditional roles. Men still dominate the labour market and do not assume the dual role that working women do in taking responsibility for home and child care. What is needed, then, is an analysis of the male role leading to change and adaptaton in both the traditional male and female roles. For true equality between the sexes, the traditional masculine role must not become the pattern for women to follow. The roles of both men and women must be transformed.