

**1 . Status of Women in Rigveda in the Context of Indian Tradition****Aditya Kumar Vajpayee<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

*Rigveda Samhita is the oldest text which occupies the highest seat in Indian religious tradition. While discussing women's status as depicted in this earliest manifestation of sublime poetry, we must bear in mind that contemporary socioeconomic structure and political discourse was materially different from what is present today. Hence, it would not be appropriate to measure women's position of that period with the standards of the modern world. Nonetheless, women references appearing in the Rigveda enable us to understand the glorious tradition of continuity, in essence, whereby women have been treated respectfully and equitably. The present paper explores their position under three classes of the Rig Vedic hymns- (i) women represented as goddesses or deities, (ii) women depicted in social context, and (iii) women appearing in the dialogue hymns. Although, the number of hymns devoted to female deities is much lesser than those devoted to the male gods, they impress the reader with their sheer poetic charm and are a source of inspiration to all. In contrast to the masculinity of male gods, female gods are embodiments of tenderness, compassion and kindness. The social structure during the Rig Vedic period was patriarchic and the role of women was complimentary to men. However, they enjoyed freedom in many fields such as pursuance of studies, marriages and their intellectual development. In the dialogue hymns, women's characterization encompasses a wide range - from uninhibited expression of sexuality to a reasoned application of mind. Conclusively, we find that women enjoyed an equitable and respectful position in the Rigveda in the empirical as well as in the spiritual realm.*

**Rigveda Samhita** (ऋग्वेद संहिता), one of the earliest creations in the world literature, finds itself at the highest seat in Hindu religious tradition as being the oldest text containing 1028 Hymns (सूक्त) spread over 10 Books (मंडल), which constitute a perennial source of inspiration not only to Indians but also to those across the world who are interested in the study of the early Aryans. It would not be an exaggeration to call the Rigveda as an exposition in poetic

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words revealed to those scholarly seers, who were driven by divine inspiration. These learned seers, men as well as women, gave expressions to these revelations- ऋषयोः मंत्रं वृष्टारः. Govind Chandra Pande(2001) has very succinctly described Vedas as “not only the foundations of Indian tradition but also the earliest available documents of human thought and self-realization...”<sup>1</sup>. The tradition of the Rigveda is unique for its antiquity, purity and continuity in the history of the world literature and particularly in the history of the literatures of the Indogermanic family<sup>2</sup>. It is in this context, the study of the status of women in Rigveda finds its relevance in India.

It is not disputed that the Rigveda represents the most ancient chapter in the history of the Aryans, however, on the question of its timeline, there is no unanimity amongst scholars and the final word is yet to be determined. Some Indian scholars have opined that Vedic literature was created around 3000 BC whereas some others stretch it back to 6000 BC. In the words of S. Radhakrishnan(1923), “We assign them to the fifteenth century BC and trust that our date will not be challenged as being too early”<sup>3</sup>. Be that as it may, despite these varied assessments, it is certain that when we talk of women’s’ position in the period of the Rigveda, we must bear in mind that we are considering a social structure which was prevalent around four thousand years ago and also that there does not exist any document, except the Rigveda Samhita itself, which could be referred to for our appreciation although some literature of the subsequent period, such as Bramnans, Aranyakas etc., too help us derive some inferences. This fact assumes greater significance as the societal norms, despite maintaining continuity in essence, may change their expression with time making the analysis of the subject complex in the present times. Nonetheless, while appreciating the references in the Vedic texts, we must be cautious enough not to prejudice our mind with any preconceived dogma. As such, the Rigveda is a free expression in sublime poetic form by uninhibited minds. To quote Max Muller(2007), “In the history of the world the Veda fills a gap which no literary work in any other language could fill. It carries us back to times of which we have no records anywhere and gives us the very words of a generation of men of whom otherwise we could form but the vaguest estimate by means of conjectures and inferences. As long as man continues to take an interest in the history of his race and as long as we collect in libraries and museums the relics of former ages, the first place in that long row of books which contains the records of the Aryan branch of mankind, will belong forever to the Rigveda”<sup>4</sup>.

A western scholar has made an intriguing observation- “The Rig Veda is a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women who appear throughout the hymns as objects, though seldom as subjects”<sup>5</sup>. While one is entitled to hold one’s view on such a great and poetic masterpiece in all its vastness composed by a number of learned male as well as female seers prolonged over time, it reflects a skewed assessment of women characterization as depicted in this holy book that Rigveda is. In subsequent paragraphs, an attempt has been made to provide a perspective about the description of women in Rigveda which would help us to determine their rightful place in the society.

For the purposes of our study, references of women in Rigveda can be classified under three classes. First, there are hymns which adore women as goddesses (देवी) praising them either as personal gods or nature personified. In these hymns, women are shown to possess divine powers who bestow the welfare on to the human race. Second, there are a few hymns, either in full measure or, in certain cases, containing some verses (ऋचाएं) which depict the condition of woman folk in the contemporary society. Third, there are a few hymns which are in the form of a dialogue between two persons one of which is a woman. These hymns, though not many in number, draw our attention to some sensitive subjects and reflect, in their content, on the intellectual capacity of Vedic sages.

The first female deity is goddess Saraswati getting her mention in Book I, Hymn 3, Verses 10-12 of the Rigveda (RV.I.3.10-12). She has been addressed as the purifier and the inspirer of those who delight in truth<sup>6</sup>. She is invoked by the poet for her benevolence-

“पावका नः सरस्वती वाजेभिर्वाजिनीवती। यज्ञं वष्टु धियावसुः॥

चोदयित्री सूतानां चेतन्ती सुमतीनाम् । यज्ञं दधे सरस्वती॥”

Further, she is credited with creating a great body of water flowing with force, hence the name of the great river Saraswati, which is the most revered one of all rivers in the Rigveda-

“महो अर्णः सरस्वती प्र चेतयती केतुना। धियो विश्वा वि राजति॥”

Greatness of the river Saraswati has been praised in no uncertain terms calling it as a charioteer-

“प्र क्षोदसा धायसा सस्र एषा सरस्वती धरुणमायसी पूः ।

प्रबाबधाना रथ्येव याति विश्वा अपो महिना सिन्धुरन्याः ॥”

(RV.VII.95.1)

Nature gods have been prominently praised throughout the Rigveda. The poet in the Vedic period is overwhelmed by the nature's beauty and, at times, by its power to control human life. It is no wonder then that the poet often creates vivid imagery and uses magnificent metaphors to praise them and, in turn, solicit inspiration from them. There is a clear distinction between the description of male gods and female gods. In contrast to the masculine portrayal of male gods, female gods are embodiments of tenderness, compassion and kindness. Dawn (उषा) is visualized as the shining daughter of the sky showering riches on men and is invoked to reward strong men-

“भास्वती नेत्री सूनतां दिवः स्तवे दुहिता गोतमेभिः ।

प्रजावतो नृवतो अश्वबुध्यानुषो गोअग्रां उप मासि वाजां ॥”

(RV.I.92.7)

At another place, she is addressed as the finest of all shining (इदं श्रेष्ठम् ज्योतिषां) and is credited with the power to energize all creatures-

“उदीर्घ्वं जीवो असुर्न आगादप प्रागात्तम आ ज्योतिरेति।

आरेक्यपंथाम् यातवे सूर्यायागन्म यत्र प्रतिरन्त आयुः॥”

(RV.I.113.16)

In a hymn attributed to a female sage, namely, Vagambhrani, Speech goddess (वाग्देवी) has been depicted to be all pervasive amongst living creatures and all powerful-

“अहं राष्ट्री संगमनी वसूनां चिकितुषी प्रथमा यज्ञियानाम्।

तां मा देवा व्यदधुह पुरुत्रा भूरिस्थानाम् भूर्या वेश्यन्तीम्॥”

(RV.X.125.3)

She becomes to be identified with the creator and the absolute godhead, encompassing all gods<sup>7</sup>. Thus, speech as personified in this hymn is given the highest regard. Her emboldened pronouncement about herself is an expression of a confident woman in a world otherwise dominated by men.

Similarly, the night has also been personified as a goddess who vests mystical powers and keeps a vigil over all creatures. It is significant to note that the night, in a feminine characterization, is shown in all its brightness with shining stars as its innumerable vigilant eyes (देव्य अक्षभिः) in contrast to the darkness which one has to get rid of like a debt-

“उप मा पेपिशत्तमः कृष्णम् व्यक्तमस्थिता उष ऋणेव यातय ॥”

(RV.X.128.7)

Aditi, the mother of Adityas, is the goddess of eternity. She has been praised in many hymns as sustainer of all celestial lights, who bestows her blessings on children and cattle. Her gifts are all pervasive (“दीर्घम् वो दात्रमदितेखि व्रतम्”) and she holds great authority ruling over the whole world. Her profound status amongst all gods is best depicted in the following verse-

“स अदितिद्यौरदितिरन्तरिक्षमदितिर्माता पिता स पुत्रः ।

विश्वे देवा अदितिः पञ्च जना अदितिर्जातमदितिर्जनित्वम् ॥”

(RV.I.89.10)

However, it cannot be denied that the Rigveda is full of praises for male gods in contrast to a very few verses devoted to female gods. In subsequent times, though, female gods too were identified with power and strength but in Rigveda, this virtue was primarily ascribed to male gods such as Indra, Agni, Mitra, Varun, Marut, Rudra, Ashwins etc. to name a few.

Rigveda is not a history book although it does contain some references which can provide us a historical insight of the period. We can deduce from hymns a broad idea of the social structure and customs practiced at that time. During the period of the Rigveda, the State was founded on the family as a unit. The structure of the society was patriarchic and father stood as the head of the family<sup>8</sup>. However, the women enjoyed no less important role in family matters, be it as a wife or as a mother. Welfare of the family was her prime responsibility- “अपाः सोममस्तमिन्द्र प्र याहि कल्याणीर्जाया सुरणम गृहे ते” (RV.III.53.6).

An important indicator of women’s’ position in society is how are they treated in the field of education. In the Rig Vedic period women could be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods. Following passage from the book “The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization” best illustrates the liberal outlook towards women’s education-

*“In prehistoric times lady poets themselves were composing hymns, some of which were destined to be included even in the Vedic Samhitas. According to the orthodox tradition itself as recorded in the Sarvanukramanika, there are as many as twenty women among the ‘seers’ or authors of Rigveda. Some of these may have been mythical personages; but internal evidence shows that Lopamudra, Vishwavara, Sikata Nivavari and Ghosha, the authors of Rigveda I.179, V.28, VIII.91, IX.81.11-20 and X.39 and 40 respectively, were women in flesh and blood, who once lived in Hindu society.”<sup>9</sup>*

Of the two classes of women students, namely, *Brahmavadinis* and *Sadyodvahas*, the former one used to pursue scholarship of a very high standard. However, such women were exceptions. In general, women pursued studentship till they attained the age of marriage and thereafter, led a family life with husband and children-

“इहैव स्तम् मा वि यौष्टम् विश्वमायुव्यश्रुतम्।

क्रीडन्तौ पुत्रैर्नमृभिर्मोमोदमानौ स्वे गृहे ॥”

(RV.X.85.42)

The high position of women is reflected at many references where wife is shown to accompany her husband during sacrifices and *yajnas*- “संहोत्रं स्म पुरा नारी समनंमवाव गच्छति (RV.X.86.10)”. After marriage, she enters her new home with her husband whom she is subject to but, at the same time, she is the mistress of all others in the family and taking care of cattle as well- “शान नो भव द्विष्यदे शान चतुष्पदे” (RV.X.85.44).

In the Rig Vedic period, the institution of marriage was supposed to be a holy sacrament, a facet which is still in vogue under the Hindu Law, thus reflecting the impact of Vedic tradition in general and Rigveda in particular on the Indian society over time. The woman at times enjoyed freedom in making her choices for selecting her prospective husband- “भद्रा वधूर्भवति यत्सुपेशाः स्वयं सा मित्रम् वसुते जने चित” (RV.X.27.12). The aim of the marriage, for husband and wife, was to lead together a life of mutual trust and respect in order to propagate their race. Abundance of sons is constantly praised for along with cattle and land, but no desire for daughters is expressed<sup>10</sup>. That is why, wish to beget a son of their own flesh has been emphasized over adopted son- “न शेषो अग्ने अन्य जातमस्तस्यचेतानस्य मा पथो वि दुक्षः (RV.VII.4.7)”. It has been further pronounced that the adopted son, however pleasing it might be, cannot take the same place as that of one’s own natural born son-

“नाह ग्रभयारणः सुषेवो अन्योदर्यो मनसा मंतवा उ ।

अधा चिदोकः पुनरित्स एत्या नो वाज्य भीषाडेतुनव्यः ॥”

(RV.VII.4.8)

Hymn 85 under Book X, which is also known as the marriage hymn (विवाह सूक्त) contains 47 verses and gives a detailed account of the marriage of Suryaa, the daughter of Sun god, with the twin brothers Ashwini Kumaras-“सूर्याया अश्विना वराम्निरासीत्पुरोगवः”. The marriage was said to have been witnessed and approved by all gods-

“यदश्विना पृच्छमानावयातं त्रिचक्रेण वहतुं सूर्यायाः।



विश्वे देवा अनु तद्वामजानन पुत्रः पितराववृणीत पूषा॥”

(RV.X.85.14)

Here a woman is depicted as getting married to twin brothers (अश्विनास्तामुभा वरा), which may raise a doubt in reader's mind about the presence of polyandry. However, keeping in mind the context, it would be erroneous to construe that polyandry was prevalent at that time. This hymn has a mythological connotation. In the Rigveda, twin Ashwini Kumaras have been represented as one entity. In these passages of the wedding hymn (X.85.37 & 38) in which husbands (plural) are spoken of in connection with a single wife can be explained on mythological basis<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, there are some traces of the existence of polygamy amongst a section of the society- “सं मा तपन्त्यभितः सपत्नीरिव पर्शवः” (RV.I.105.8). In fact, there is a full hymn (RV.X.145.1-6) describing various tricks adopted by a woman for gaining supremacy over her competing co-wife (सपत्नी)- “अथा सपत्नी या ममाधरा साधाराभ्यः”. In rich and royal families polygamy prevailed to some extent, but ordinarily monogamy was the rule<sup>12</sup>.

We do not find any direct reference of a child marriage in the Rigveda. On the contrary, some references imply that normally the marriageable age for the girls was after they had reached puberty<sup>13</sup>. In the marriage hymn, the bride was fully mature and grown up at the time of marriage (RV.X.85.22). Further, consummation of the marriage has been depicted to take place soon after the bride reaches her husband's home (भूल्या जाया विशते पतिम्) (RV.X.85.29). A hope is expressed that the bride would forthwith take over the reins of the household from the parents-in-law which suggested that she was appropriately grown up as this would have been possible only in the case of grown up brides, at least 16-18 years in age<sup>14</sup>. It is notable that women of old age could also be married.

Customs regarding widows show that the society was not a regressive one. No direct evidence of immolation of widows (सती प्रथा) has been noticed in the Rigveda. However, as learned Indian scholar Prof. V.S. Ghate puts it “yet, from other indications we have to accept the probability the custom was also observed now and then in the Vedic period”<sup>15</sup>. Surely, the custom was not compulsory as direct references are seen in the Rigveda exhorting a widow to return home after the death of her husband and discharge her responsibilities towards children-

“उदीर्ष्व नार्यभि जीवलोकं गतासुमेपमुत शेष एहि।

हस्तग्राभस्य दीधिषोस्तवेदं पत्युर्जनित्वमभि सं बभूथ॥”



(RV.X18.8)

Widow re-marriage was not prohibited. The widow could, if she liked, contract another marriage, either regularly or under the custom of Niyoga<sup>16</sup>. In the Rigveda hymn X.40.2, a reference is seen to infer that a widow could marry her deceased husband's brother- "को वां शयुत्रा विधवेव देवस् मर्यम् न योषा कृणुते सधस्थ आ". This inference gets further strength from subsequent mention of the practice in Atharva Veda and Manusmriti. An instance of marriage of a woman of elderly age, named Ghosha, is also seen (RV.I.117.7, X.39.3).

Thus, in the Rigveda women have generally been portrayed respectfully and with dignity. However, it would perhaps not be correct to say that the women at all times were held in high esteem. The famous hymn about gambling (RV.10.34.1-14), brings forth the darker side of the women's status amongst at least a section of the society wherein a husband put his wife at stake- "अक्षस्याहमेकपरस्य हेतोरनुव्रतामप जायामरोधम्". The command given under this hymn is undoubtedly against playing the game of dice ("अक्षैर्मा दीव्यः कृषिमित्कृषस्व वित्ते रमस्व बहु मन्यमानः"), however, staking away the wife in gambling continued to be practiced later too which is clear from the story of Mahabharata during the Epic period.

We find many verses in the Rigveda devoted to prayers for male offspring. As A.S. Altekar has mentioned, the daughter was not as welcome as the son- "The latter was preferred to the former even in the Indo-Iranian age. The same was the case in the Vedic period"<sup>17</sup>. Abundance of sons is constantly prayed for along with cattle and land, but no desire for daughters is expressed and sonlessness was much deplored<sup>18</sup>.

Allusions to conjugal infidelity and sexual immorality are only rarely met with<sup>19</sup> (Ghate). Also, some verses, although rare in numbers, contain such remarks against women, which look down upon them. They have been talked of having lesser intelligence and often as being ungovernable-

“इंद्रश्चिद्धा तदब्रवीत्स्त्रिया अशास्यम् मनः । उतो अह क्रतुम रघुम् ॥”

(RV.VIII.34.17)

In the same hymn, women are commanded to look down keeping legs together and wear a dress covering part of their face and vest area-

“अधः पश्यस्व मोपरि संतरम् पादकौ हर । मा ते कशप्लकौ दृषंस्त्री हि ब्रम्हा बभूविथ ॥”

(RV.VIII.34.19)



If these portrayals are any indication, male dominance in the society would be difficult to be controverted by any counter evidence.

The dialogue hymns (संवाद सूक्त) of the Rigveda are rich in contemplation and emotions. A very intense conversation takes place between Yami and Yam, the twin siblings (RV.X.10.01-14), which has not been free from controversy in its interpretation by various scholars. It touches upon the discourse on canons of morality with reference to incestuous relationship. Yami solicited copulation with Yama and desired to beget a child from him, which the latter declined arguing that they were born of the same womb and such an act was improper for them. Yami strongly counters pleading that they were made husband-wife in the womb itself by the Creator-

“गर्भे नु नौ जनिता दंपति कर्देवस्त्वष्टा सविता विश्वरूपः ।

नकिरस्य प्र मिनन्ति व्रतानि वेद नावस्य पृथिवी उत द्यौः ॥”

(RV.X.10.10.5)

Ultimately, Yama prevails upon her and sets a norm forthwith that such a relationship between a brother and sister was a sin-

“न वा उ ते तन्वा तन्वं सं प्रपच्याम् पापमाहुर्यः स्वसारं निगच्छात् ।

अन्येन मत्प्रमुदः कल्पयस्व न ते भ्राता सुभगे वष्ट्येतत् ॥”

(RV.X.10.10.12)

The norm so set by Yama, who is also called the Lord of *Dharma* (धर्मराज), was the first one propounding, in clear words in the Rigveda, the law to hold forever and no wonders that it was the genesis for prohibiting *sapinda* relationships (सपिंड सम्बन्ध) under the Hindu law. What is striking in the above hymn is the uncommonly bold and forceful expression of sexual urges by a woman, even though it may sound hurting the general perception about them.

Yami fails to convince Yama in her endeavor. However, in another dialogue hymn, in a conversation between wife Lopamudra and her husband sage Agastya, the former prevails over him reminding his worldly obligations even while leading an ascetic life. Her argument is irrefutable-

“ये चिद्धि पूर्व ऋतसाप आसंत्साकम् देवेभिरवदन्तानि ।

ते चिदवासुर्नहयंतमापुः समू नु पत्नीवृषभिर्जगम्युः ॥”

(RV.I.179.2)

Lopamudra herself was an accomplished scholar and composer of a few hymns of the Rigveda. Her dialogue with sage Agastya shows a glimpse of women's freedom to pursue education and develop intellectual faculties.

Another famous dialogue hymn (RV.X.95.1-18) revolves around the myth of Urvashi, an immortal nymph and Pururavas, a mortal king. The conversation took place at a time when the Pururavas finds her although she had left him after the breach of an agreement between them. All his laments and plea to her to return to him go in vain as she politely but resolutely turns down his request. At one stage, she says that there could be no lasting friendship with women and that their hearts are akin to that of hyenas-

“पुरुवो मा पृथा मा प्र पशो मा त्वा वृकासो अशिवास उ क्षना  
न वै स्त्रैरानि सख्यानि सन्ति सालावृकाणाम् हृदयान्येता॥”

(RV.X.95.15)

Clearly, the poet has depicted Urvashi's character as a woman of firm resolve. Her words comparing them with a predatory animal is only to dissuade her former husband and not her real intent to denounce a woman as in the last verse of this hymn, she motivates Pururavas to perform his worldly duties and wishes him heavenly comforts.

### Conclusion

It would be fair to say that women, in general, occupied a respectable and equitable place in the hymns of the Rigveda. The socioeconomic structure and political discourse in the Rigvedic period was not like what it is today and hence, measuring their position with a standard of the modern world would be unfair. In all, “The position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we orderly expect is to have been”<sup>20</sup>. Vedic feminism talks about women at the spiritual level as well as the social, empirical and familial levels<sup>21</sup> (Shashi Prabha Kumar). In the physical world, they complimented men in all respects in so much so that there is a reference in the Rigveda that Vishpala, the wife of king Khela, accompanied her husband during a battle-

“चरित्रं हि वेरिवाच्छेदि पर्णमाजा खेलस्य परितक्म्यायाम् ।

सद्यो जङ्घामायसीं विश्पलायै धने हिते सर्तवे प्रत्यधत्तम् ॥”

(RV.I.116.15)

In the spiritual realm too, women's place was in no way inferior to men. A number of female seers (ऋषिका), such as Apala, Ghosha, Aditi, Vishwavara, Lopamudra, Suryaa to name a few,

have earned their high position due to their knowledge and great contribution. The term Ardhangini (अर्धांगिनी) describes best their position implying that they were treated to be equal and inseparable part of a married couple. Surely, Rigveda provides us a glorious framework for understanding women's status and their stupendous contribution to our cultural heritage.

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