**Paper- 3  Module- 3**

**Women in the rig   vedic   period**

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**(B) Description of Module**

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<tr>
<td>Subject Name</td>
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<td>Pre-requisites</td>
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<td>Objectives</td>
<td>To make the reader understand how the Vedic Sanskaras have developed throughout the Vedic period and what kind of contextual meanings they had for Vedic society.</td>
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Women in the *Rig Vedic* period

**Introduction**

The status of women in any society is a matter of great interest to scholars. This is because the status of women is seen as an indicator of a society’s progress in social, economic and political terms. A high status of women doesn’t necessarily mean that the society was egalitarian. But often, in patriarchal societies also, women may enjoy varying degrees of progress and freedom, while the actual control of the governance is in the hands of men. A truly women-controlled society has never been known in human history; not even in the matrilineal social systems.

The status of women in the *Rig Veda* became a very important subject of discussion in the Colonial period. This is because initially the Europeans had a condescending view of the Indian civilisation and held the opinion that this was a degenerate civilisation that needed uplifting under guidance of their superior European perspective. However, further study by later scholars showed that Indian civilisation was one of the oldest in the world and it was certainly the oldest civilisation that had remained continuously alive and had made many significant contributions to the progress of Humanity in ancient times. Sanskrit was one of the most ancient languages and was closely linked to the ancient European languages such as Latin and German and belonged to the same stock as these ancient European languages. These findings led to the notion of a great ancient Indian civilisation that had got degraded through
subsequent centuries, to the extent that now in the Colonial period, Indians had forgotten their ancient greatness and were leading a wretched existence. Since the *Rig Veda* was the most ancient Sanskrit text of India (its earliest layers datable to c. 1500 BCE or even a little older), the status of women as reflected in the Rig Vedic period became a very important tool to establish the intellectual superiority of the Indian civilisation. It was ascertained that the status of women reflected a fair degree of egalitarianism and was even better than the position of women in ancient Greece and Rome. In the following passages we discuss how various perspectives on the women in the Rig Vedic period have evolved and what we glean from the Rig Vedic texts about women and also some directions for future research in this area of inquiry.

1.1 PERSPECTIVES AND CRITIQUES

In this section we will explore the main perspectives and also offer some critical perspectives on them. It is to be noted that critical perspectives are not always negative, but may also be positive and constructive. The purpose behind these critical perspectives is to provide a balanced view of the issue being studied.

1.1.1 Women in the Rig Vedic Period – Various Viewpoints

The earliest European scholars of the *Rig Veda* brought out the important discovery that the women enjoyed a very high position which was almost equal to that of the men in the Rig Vedic period (C. Bader, Routledge 1925 1st Ed, 2013, pp. 1 – 74; Upinder Singh, Pearson, 2009, pp. 2-11). This was regarded as important because it helped to establish the image of the most ancient layer of the Indian civilisation as an intellectually superior one, which even surpassed ancient Greece and Rome. This generated a lot of interest in the *Vedas* in the 19th century and efforts began to be made by both European and Indian scholars to study the Vedas, translate them in English and other European languages and to maintain copies of these texts in various libraries and archives in India and Europe. This trend continued long into the 20th
century and has never really stopped. Even in the 21st century today, efforts are being made to highlight the high position of women in the Rig Vedic society. However, in the last quarter of the 20th century, especially Indian scholars also began to study the *Rig Veda* from a different viewpoint and began to highlight the different classes that existed in the Rig Vedic period and the different status of women that may have existed in these different strata of society, the highest position being enjoyed by the women of the highest stratum and the degree of exaltation decreasing as one went down the social order. They pointed out that the majority of women belonged to the middle and lower classes of the society and hence may not have enjoyed the high status enjoyed by a few high-class women that the earlier scholars had glorified as a marker for the entire Rig Vedic society (Kumkum Roy, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 9-19). Some other scholars also made a distinction between the Rig Vedic period and the later Vedic period characterised by the other three Vedas and related texts such as the *Upishads, Brahmanas* and the *Aranyakas*. They propounded the notion that the Rig Vedic society was egalitarian, but with the increasing complexity in the society as reflected in the other three Vedic texts, the status of the majority of women began to decline. In the following passages we will learn some of the critical perspectives on these viewpoints propounded by scholars on the Rig Vedic women.

### 1.1.2 Women in the Rig Vedic Period – Critical Perspectives

It is essential to understand that the notion of “status of women” is a product of the modern system of education and the pre-modern texts of the world talk about the lives of women, notions about women’s responsibilities of women and how men view them etc., but they don’t talk about the “status of women” in clear-cut terms as the modern scholarly discourse understands it. It is left to the scholar to interpret from the existing material what kind of status the women had in a particular society and a subjective interpretation is inevitable in such a situation. The *Rig Veda* is no exception to this. This texts is essentially a
collection of hymns to the various deities worshipped by the people who followed this text, in addition to the accounts of deities, kings and other figures, some imagined and some real in that society. The entire notion of the status of women in the Rig Vedic period is based on these verses and hence, differences of opinions about what these verses reveal about the women are bound to happen.

Thus, there are references to female deities, hymns to whom have been visualised by the sages, some of whom are women. There are also references to highly learned women in the text. All this has been interpreted by the scholars as evidence of a high status of women. On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that there are references to dowry, and that obviously not every woman was as free to get educated as these highly-placed women. The commonplace women are not mentioned in the text. Hence, they contest the view of a high status of women in an egalitarian Rig Vedic society. The distinction between the Rig Vedic society and the society of the other 3 Vedas is essentially based on the more complex picture of the society in the other three Vedas, which are regarded as a few hundred years later than the Rig Veda based on their complex picture. Seen from the perspective of each scholar, all these notions appear to be correct. However, there is a need to critically look at these notions. For example, a text showing a more complex society need not be later than a text showing less complex society. No society in the world has ever been monolithic and uniform in nature. In every period in every region variations in the society have existed within the same time bracket. Hence, hypothetically speaking, it’s not necessary that one Veda shows an egalitarian society which declined gradually in the period of the other Vedas which came later. It’s quite possible that these texts show different degrees of complexities in the Vedic societies across a geographical expanse within the same long time bracket. This argument has not been historically researched and is being made purely from a hypothetical standpoint. The only purpose here is to show that what has been presumed to be evidence of chronologically vertical, linear progression may be the evidence of a horizontal, spatial
differentiation. If we accept the notion that there are always differentiations across a geographical expanse even within the same time bracket, which is almost always true, then it is possible to argue that it’s not necessary to accept that the entire society of the Rig Veda was a homogenous one, with no differences within the Rig Vedic evidences itself. Thus it’s not plausible to argue that all Rig Vedic people followed the same system. It’s more likely that different smaller communities within the society reflected in the Rig Veda might have followed different systems. Hence, there may have been some communities in which women enjoyed a high status, while in others they didn’t enjoy such a high status. Further, even within each community the situation may have differed from family to family. We are talking about a system of very large joint family groups, so this is in fact more plausible than accepting the notion that all families across the Rig Vedic society followed a uniform system. Hence, we cannot speak in terms of a uniform Rig Vedic society. We have to allow for variations within the same time bracket and within the same geographical expanse. The following sections discuss the picture of women that emerges from a reading of the Rig Veda and its associated texts and all of this is not a uniform picture.

1.2 VARIOUS ASPECTS RELATED TO WOMEN IN THE RIG VEDIC PERIOD

1.2.1 The Goddess as the Supreme Deity

The Rig Veda shows a complex religious system that conceptualises a supreme divinity called Brahman. *The Nasadiya Suktam* in the 10.129 of the Rig Veda (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2nd Edition 1896 1st Edition 1889, p. 490) talks about the creation of the Universe by this formless Brahman. This supreme deity is formless and is neither man nor woman. However, it can assume innumerable forms according to different situations. It assumes the form of the Goddess to create the Universe. The Goddess is said to be omnipotent and omniscient. The entire Creation emanates from her and disappears into her. She assumes
innumerable forms to suit different situations. She imparts energy to the gods and goddesses who are her manifestations. The hymn known as the Devi Suktam or Vagambhriniya Suktam, composed by the woman sage Vak the daughter of sage Ambhrina in the 10.125 of the Rig Veda (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2nd Edition 1896 1st Edition 1889, p. 490), visualises this Cosmic form of the Goddess who is Brahman itself. Apart from this, the Rig Veda conceptualises of Prakriti and Purusha. Out of these two, Prakriti the feminine principle is the dynamic, creative principle and Purush the masculine principle is the passive principle and it becomes activated only when it comes in contact with the feminine Prakriti.

The above references show that the Rig Veda conceptualised the supreme deity as formless, but the feminine form took primacy over the masculine form in the process of Creation, sustenance and disappearance of the Universe. This suggests a prominent position given to the feminine power in the Rig Veda. However, at the same time, there is the Savitri Manta in 3.62.10 of the Rig Veda (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2nd Edition 1896 1st Edition 1889, p. 153), or what has come to be popularly referred to as the Gayatri Manta, which conceptualises the supreme Brahman as god Savitra who is also formless. Then there is the Purusha Suktain 10.90 of the Rig Veda (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2nd Edition 1896 1st Edition 1889, p. 469), which conceptualises Purusha in the masculine form, who is sacrificed to create the Universe. These references have been interpreted as the identification of the Goddess with Brahman as the oldest layer and the masculine layers evolving later within the period of the Rig Veda. However, if we attempt an alternative interpretation, it is plausible that the Goddess was identified with the Brahman and had the capability to assume a masculine form in certain situations. The two versions then need not have come one after the other in time, but may have existed simultaneously. This supports the notion that even within the Rig Vedic period, there was a possibility of diverse ideas to exist across society.
Apart from these conceptualizations of the supreme deity, there is a multitude of gods and goddesses for whom hymns have been conceptualised. Amongst the many goddesses mentioned are Usha the Dawn, Aditi the mother of gods and Niritti the Dark Goddess who is beyond the Cosmic Cycle. Because of her name, she has been interpreted as the fearful goddess associated with lawlessness. However, there are alternative interpretations possible of her name. She may have been a form of the Supreme Goddess identified with Brahman, who became associated with the divine principle that was beyond the structured systems of the Universe, interpreted as “lawlessness” in modern scholarship. The Supreme Goddess is of course, beyond the bounds of the Cosmic Cycle, which she controls. Hence, she may be referred to as Nirritti in etymological terms. At the same time, the dark forces of Nature can also be perceived as manifestations of the Goddess in the form of Nirritti. It is to be remembered that conceptually speaking, all these gods and goddesses were just manifestations of the Goddess who was identified with Brahman, although they were worshipped separately. They were supposed to derive their energy and power from the Supreme Goddess, without whose energy they were inert and powerless. This conceptualisation of the Universe is the reverse of the conceptualisation of the Universe in some other major religions, where God the creator is formless, but is imagined as closer to the likeness of man rather than woman. Thus, this is a multi-layered system where numerous gods and goddesses have arisen from a single formless divinity who primarily assumes the form of the Goddess to create and run the Universe. There is Indra, the king of gods and goddesses, but Indra is not above this Supreme Brahman and the Great Goddesses. Indeed, without the energy and power given by the Great Goddess, Indra is incapable of doing anything. He has to engage in penance to conquer his rivals many times. It is also important to remember that if we accept this interpretation of the Rig Vedic religion, then the interpretations that gave ritual and social authorities to masculine rather than feminine power in Hinduism have to be regarded
as later in evolution. It appears that at some stage the priestly class that worked in tandem with the ruling class, attempted to reverse this gender equation in ritual and social structure and began to assign a subordinate status to the feminine principle and therefore, to the women. However, this development was post Vedic in history.

\textit{(Devi Suktam from the Rig Veda, visualised by the woman sage Vak the daughter of Sage Ambhrina - https://youtu.be/F8jcgxH6qt8- Please take all copyright permission before using).}

\textit{(Usha Suktam from the Rig Veda – https://youtu.be/ohX7Ix8VlDU- please take all copyright permission before using).}

1.2.2 Women’s Education, Marriage and Rights

There are verses in the \textit{Rig Veda} which talk about the necessity of a woman to get well educated before she gets married. Husband requests his wife to give the discourse of knowledge to her in-laws’ family. It is advised that a well-educated girl should be married to a suitable groom of equal knowledge and social standing. There are no verses suggesting child marriage. \textit{Sati} or the practice of widow burning is nowhere referred to. There are references to \textit{Svayamvara} in which the girl chose her own husband amongst many suitors. A practice of \textit{Samana} is referred to where girls went to attend fairs and festivals and chose their own suitors. \textit{Gandharva Vivaha} or marriage by couples who chose each other by falling in love was a legitimate practice. There are many women sages who visualized verses of the \textit{Rig Veda} and were called \textit{Brahmavadinis}. Apala, Ghosa etc. were famous scholars who visualized Vedic verses. Gargi and Maitreyi were famous Vedic scholars who engaged in debates and defeated men in these debates. Women could get married at a late age and even could choose not to get married. \textit{Pardah} system is nowhere referred to. Women are said to participate in the law giving process. The wife is said to share equally the rights of her household along with her husband. She is the mistress of her household. They are said to be equal partners in marriage. Women could perform sacrifices and had the right
to go through the same *sanskaras* as the men, including the thread ceremony. Without the accompaniment of women, a sacrifice was not regarded as complete. Women also contributed towards agriculture, looking after the cattle and gave decisions regarding financial matters to the men in their families.

These references have been regarded as evidence that the Rig Vedic society was almost an egalitarian one, where women shared equal rights with the men and enjoyed a lot of freedom. However, there are also other kinds of references. For example, it was customary for the bride’s father to give wealth as gift to the groom at the time of the wedding. However, this was not a demand from the groom and entirely depended upon the wishes of the father of the bride. At the same time, *Brahma* marriage was the best form of marriage, in which no dowry was given and the father simply gave away his daughter by pouring water on the palms of the groom. *Arsha* marriage was also recommended, where the groom paid dowry to the bride because he was lesser in education and social status than the bride. Hence, dowry was not recommended but was practiced at the will of the father of the bride. More than this, a wife decided about the financial matters of her husband, but she didn’t own her separate property. This was because marriage was regarded as insoluble and the wife was regarded as inseparable part of her husband’s life. However, this was not a situation where the wife owned and dispensed with the property and the husband didn’t have any rights in these matters. Rather, the husband dispensed with the property by following the advice of his wife. This obviously gave the husband a leverage above his wife, although the Rig Vedic vision was that the husband should not try to disregard his wife in financial and property matters. Because divorce was not recommended, a wife had to live with an ill-treating husband, if he chose to be so. This was against the Rig Vedic vision, which expected the husband to treat his wife with respect and dignity (Upinder Singh, Pearson, 2009, pp. 182-255).
More recently, it has also been ascertained that certain references in the Rig Veda may arguably contain residues of homoeroticism, which may have been practiced by some people in the Rig Vedic society. According to this research, homoeroticism has very ancient roots in India going back to the Rig Vedic times and is not really an import from the decadent West (Nancy Bonvillain, Prentice Hall, 2001, p. 281).

Seeing the above, it again appears that even though the Rig Vedic vision gave a high status and a lot of freedom and respect to the women, in practice, there may have been a diversity within the Rig Vedic society. One should also keep in mind that these are interpretations gleaned by scholars from the verses which are essentially meant for religious rituals. The exact situation is not known to us. However, a latitude of diversity in social practices may not be completely impossible in this regard. But overall, the way the Rig Veda visualizes the status of women, it appears to be quite egalitarian and respectful and gave them a lot of freedom.

Books


