

Women in Epics and Upanishads

In the Epic Age or in Later Vedic Age, women enjoyed a respectable position as a mother, wife and friend to the men. Dishonouring them means disregard to Goddess Laxmi. Ramayana and Mahabharata were two important epics of that time, which have great effect in today's life too. The social lifestyle presented in those epics is relevant in today's society too. That was the hindu's way of life which is exemplary for us.

The practice of Swayamvara was a characteristic of marriage in that time, especially in higher castes. Women were enjoying greater freedom and autonomy to choose their husbands in ancient time. But in the age of epics, although the Swayamvara of Sita and Draupadi was held, but the freedom to choose the husband was limited at that time. They were compelled to choose to the winner of the contest as their bridegrooms.

In the Ramayana, on the two places, the Sita's Agni Pareeksha and her deportation to the forest, which is described in Uttar Ramayan, shows the conquest of a woman. To maintain the social status even, her Agni Pareeksha was held to prove her purity and chaste while living in Ravana's captivity, but she did not liked that. Sita was well known to her dharma and well versed in Vedic tradition, which taught her to stay always by the side of her husband. So, she refused to stay in Ayodhya in the absence of Rama. When Rama went in search of golden deer to fulfil her desire and entrusted Lakshmana with the protection of Sita but she told Laxmana to go for the help of Rama. She was told by Lakshmana not to cross the Lakshmana Rekha, but she crossed the line to feed the guest Ravana in disguise of Sadhu because feeding a hungry man is the Vedic tradition.

Again the deportation to the forest, although only Valmiki Ramayan says about this deportation, both are towering states of the royalty, which punishes a woman only after questioning of any one person or to show their high social standard to others. No one saw the cry of a woman's heart. But this time, she refused to go back to Ayodhya with Ram and embraced the earth lap because she was a self-respective woman. She knew dharma very much and this can be seen in her words to Hanuman about forgiveness, "Kindness is to be shown by a noble person either towards a sinner or to a virtuous person, or even to a person who deserves death, for there is none who never commits a wrong." (8.113.46).

Another woman character of the wife of Lakshman, Urmila had a great example of supreme sacrifice and love. She was the real partner of her husbands, who was far from her husband but gave full co-operation to her husband. Even all the sisters of Sita had played their role in Ramayana were example of ideal women full of love and dedication.

In Mahabharata, Gandhari was considered as most ideal wife as she tied a bandage on her eyes for the sake of her blind husband Dhritarashtra. Although this type of action taken by Gandhari is a matter of debate whether she was willing to do so or not. According to another noble character of Mahabharata, Bhishm Pitamah, mother was considered the greatest guru for a child. In this way he glorified the women in the role of mother. Again the character of Draupadi who was shared among five husbands whatever the reason was is not showing the worth of a woman. In spite of the unbearable grief of losing her five sons by Ashwathama at a time, she did not want to another woman suffer the loss of a child. This shows her moral strength to not accepting wrong action by her husbands.

Different scholars have different views on these female characters of Mahabharata. Some think that Gandhari knew that her husband's wrong doings and she revolted too. But instead of covering her eyes, she could help him to take right decisions. Another character, Kunti is the embodiment of patience, perseverance and self-sacrifice. The most important character is Draupadi who was very courageous, dignified and believing in justice. She could face any disaster with full spirit of self-sacrifice, morality and a brave, lustrous ideal of women. Both the epics had many examples of great women. During this period, a woman was considered to be a commodity, which could be kept on bet and could be sold or purchased as we saw the incidence of gambling in which Pandava staked Draupadi and defeated.

But we also get quite contrary views from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Sita is regarded as one of the five ideal and revered women in India, the other four being Ahalya, Draupati, Tara, and Mandodari. There are references in Mahabharata, which reflect that women used to guide men on religious and social questions.

Daughter's birth became a source of disaster for the father during the post-Vedic phase. Sati became popular during the later Vedic period where the widows either chose for themselves or were forced to jump into the pyre of their husbands so that they may not be spoiled afterward by others. Gradually it became an acceptable custom to safeguard the purity of the tribe.

Although religion manifest the idea of equality among men and women, but had little impact on rural society. Intellectuals had supporting the caste system strongly. Till the arrival of the Muslims, the Hindu philosophy was the guiding force for the masses in India. Society was following the patriarchal descent, which produced gender discrimination in economic, political and social life of traditional communities in India.

Women had freedom to get educated in Vedic period but later on education to the girls were totally refused. The position of women gradually deteriorated not only in the society but also in the family. The discontinuance of Upanayana, the neglect of education, and lowering of the marriage age had a negative consequence upon the position and status of woman.

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. There was gradual degeneration in the status of women in India after the Later Vedic age. Caste system and ritualism began to take deep root in the lives of common man. Child marriage and Sati became popular. Buddhism and Jainism emerged as alternative religious orders devoid of caste-based social order. Hindu scriptures are of two classes. Sruti is revealed scripture—the Vedas and the Upanishads. The smriti comprise lesser scriptural texts, composed by human beings—the Itihasas, Puranas and Dharmashastras.

Women in Upanishads

In ancient times, the position of woman in India was one of power coupled with honor. Today the power remains, but the honor has been largely eliminated. John P. Jones, 1903.

Upanishads –were so called texts developed from the Vedic tradition, but largely reshaped Hinduism by providing believers with philosophical knowledge. They are collection of texts of religious and philosophical nature, , written in India probably between c.800 BCE and c.500 BCE, during the time when Indian society started to question the traditional vedic religious order. Some of their speculations and philosophy were compiled in Upanishads. In this male dominated world of the Upanishads, there are some light voices of scholarly women, dutiful wife or a responsible mother. Males of the society also composed Upanishads. Although women were not given much importance but they were not degraded too. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, people bear their mother's name with them as she played an important role in shaping their early development.

Upanishads are the text on meditation, philosophy and spiritual knowledge from Vedas. Women have always been regarded as the guardians of dharma, custodian and transmitter of patriarchal values. The Vedas and Upanishads are replete with anecdotes of how gods and sages from time immemorial have created, used and controlled women for their own benefits and other's destruction. In the age of the Upanishads, the women were enjoying high position. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, husbands were considered perfect in nature who takes care of his wife very much. He possessed the right of putramantha to get son from his wife. If she refuses to do so, the husband has right to symbolically renounce her and not share his glory to be his wife. There was no wife beating or torture. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (part of the Yajur Veda) presents an incidence of philosophical discussion between Gargi and sage Yajnavalkya about the soul, which confounded that learned man. In a spiritual teaching to Maitreyi by the Sage Yajnavalkya Upanishad declares that souls are neither male nor female. Apart from Gargi, Maitreyi, Jabali, Usati Chakrayana's wife, Janasruti's daughter, Uma Haimavati, Satyakama Jabala's wife are other women appeared in the Upanishads as the silent and subdued witnesses of their spiritual wisdom.

The teaching of Hinduism is same for both sexes and all have to follow the karma, ahimsa and non-hurtfulness for others. There is no gender discrimination in teachings of Hinduism.

In Chandogya Upanishad, women had getting very much regard. They had the right to wear yajnopavltini and entitled for upnayana sanskar. According to Gobhila Grhya Sutra and Kathaka Grhya Sutra, they were allowed to utter vedic mantras. In smriti shastra Before coming to Smriti Shastra, it may be mentioned that the word 'patni' implies equal participation of men and women in sacrifices..

Although the Upanishads contain deeper spiritual, philosophical and ritual information, we can also find in them a few important facts about the status of women who lived in those times. The women in the Upanishads never seemed to be in the limelight. The verses regard that women in the Upanishads were worshipped in matters, which dealt with procreation, sexual intercourse, planning of male childbirth, black magic to attain or destroy the peace of life.

Men shared their suffering with their women and cared for them and so as their wives. They share their knowledge, wisdom and thoughts with their wives as we have already seen in the case of Yajnavalkya who shares his philosophical thoughts with his wife Maitreyi who was possessing deep knowledge of self. Till the daughters get married, father had complete control over their daughters. He was free to choose the bridegroom for his daughters. This tradition continued in India for a long time until the last century. In ancient times, only the bride's father had the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal and his consent was essential for a lawful marriage. This was obligatory for a bridegroom to give gifts to the bride's father at the time of marriage in exchange for the bride.

In the Chandogya Upanishad the examples of the fathers who had greater control over the fate of their daughters, and in choosing the grooms for their daughters they often used them as a leverage to strike deals. Women took interest in the duties of their husbands and gave them counsel. But did not share the teaching responsibility with her husband, she had a role in the welfare of the students as a guardian mother and did not hesitate to interfere if the situation demanded. There are also the examples that all women were bound to their husbands or household duties by marriage. If women decided to live freely, she had the right to live single. The practice of single parenting and unwed motherhood could be seen in ancient India, although not very favoured. There was a provision of punishment for the men and women in case of cheating with their spouses.

In Hinduism, sexual intercourse is considered neither evil nor sinful nor dirty. Sex is divine, and the basis of creation and preservation. The Upanishads contain mostly statements of philosophical and spiritual truths. However, interspersed between the statements of wisdom and ritual details are verses that contain sexually explicit information. At least

in the principal Upanishads, and especially in the oldest and largest of them, namely the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads, do not find any negativity being associated with sexual acts. Sexual desire, like any other desire, may bind the souls to the mortal world, whereas sexual actions performed as one's duty towards God, gods, and ancestors, and for the purpose of procreation are considered obligatory, Religious duty, obligation and a ritual offering. References to sexual intercourse as a sacrifice are found in the Chandogya Upanishad (5.8.1-2), and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (6.2.13 and 6.4.2-3).

As the society got much more settled and was not subjected to the pressure of continuous invasion, the position of women became subject to deterioration. The majority religion in India, Hinduism assigned a lower status to women.