

12. Unearthing Indian Feminism on the Backdrop of Ancient Indian Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to focus on the women scholars that belonged to the Vedic period (circa 1500-1200 BCE) who contributed immensely to the Ancient Indian Knowledge System. Few of them were also known as 'Brahmavadinis'. The Vedas exhibit a lot about the contribution of these women scholars namely Arundhati, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Maiteryi, Romasa, etc. These women experienced an equal status as that of men during those times. They actively participated in politics, excelled in education, composed hymns etc.

However, in the later years the status of women got deteriorated. It was further, thought of to be brought in order, through a western concept known as 'Feminism' in various parts of the world including India, in the 19th century. The present study attempts to root out these layers of misconception about Western feminism to be the saviour of womankind and bring forth the true essence of Indian feminism that existed and truly represented Indian ethos, since the Vedic period that prevailed much earlier.

Key words: Ancient Indian Knowledge System, Women, Brahmavadinis, 19th century, Vedic period, Feminism.

Introduction

This paper intends to focus on enlightening about the true status of women in Ancient India. It intends to throw some light on the women scholars that belonged to the Vedic period and their immense contribution to the Ancient Indian Knowledge System. They actively participated in politics, excelled in education, composed hymns etc. However, in the later years the status of women got deteriorated. It was further, thought of to be brought in order, through a western concept known as 'Feminism' in various parts of the world including India, in the 19th century. The present study attempts to root out these layers of misconception about Western feminism to be the savior of womankind and bring forth the true essence of Indian feminism that existed and truly represented Indian ethos, since the Vedic period that existed much earlier.

19th Century and the Beginning of Feminism

19th century was a period of social reformation in India and worldwide. The Indian perspective of it aimed at redefining the various social issues like caste system and untouchability as these were the issues prominently addressed by the Britishers that would deteriorate the functioning of the society. These issues were created in order to maintain the patriarchal setup of society that prevailed then to a larger extent and even today to a miniscule extent. Our society has culturally, politically and practically come a long way. This restructuring was happening rapidly and on a very large scale. However, resolving the issues relating to women came a little later as compared to the eradication of other social evils. The ill treatment and the subjugation of women was the same everywhere and were deep rooted. In order to resolve the issues faced by women, a concept called '**Feminism**' was born. It intended to preview women as not just a subordinate 'Other' but as an equally important other.

Feminism and its Phases

Feminism is a western concept. It was coined by a French Philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837. It was started in the early 19th century and gained impetus in late 19th century and got formalised

worldwide by the beginning of 20th century. This movement took place on 19th July 1848, at the Seneca Falls, New York at the first women's rights convention in the presence of a large number of women and a few men.

Feminism pointed at exterminating the hardships faced by the women and refining their position. It was a Western concept which kept filtering and updating itself in order to maintain its relatability. A literary critic and a theorist Toril Moi classified the movement of feminism into three waves:

- **First wave**-It focused on the political and literary aspect, wherein, women were considered incapable to make important political decisions and characterized as sexually objectified. Thereby, they were denied the right to vote. Hence, the main motive of this wave was to bestow upon women, the right to vote, married woman's right to property, right to equality. The right to vote was essential, as it not only helped women to solicit their right as a citizen of the country but also honour them to make their existence feel.

It also mentioned about how women were ill-treated in various spheres, literature being no exception to it. For instance, the women characters being portrayed by male writers e.g., Shakespeare and his various women characters e.g. Ophelia, Gertrude in Hamlet. They both were represented incompetent and were misunderstood. Their decisions were totally based on the men in their lives.

- **Second Wave**-A step forward, the second phase that ranged approximately from the 1960's to 1970's focused on the cultural aspect of feminism. Feminism had to be broken into various sectors, as it was widespread. Targeting a single aspect would have done no good to this movement. Hence, after the political and literary, it was the cultural facet that was worked upon along with breaking the patriarchal stereotypes. It questioned the very segregation of work distribution i.e., the household to be taken care of by the woman and the public by man. The earlier phase mentioned about the status of women in the literary world, this phase, identified and encouraged women writers. Thus, put forward the women's side from a women perspective and not as it would have been put across by a man.

A concept called 'Gynocentrism' was coined by Elaine Showalter. 'Gyno' meaning woman and 'Kentrion' meaning, centre. It is similar to feminism yet different. It is a milder version. It yearns to know the status of women in different areas. It does not mean to compare anything with anyone.

- **Third Wave**-It dealt with one of the most effective and far-reach inside of the society i.e., Academics. Apart from promising medium like art, culture, politics, etc. it worked towards institutionalising feminism. Various Governmental, non- governmental organisations were established. Women started writing, expressing themselves. They wrote using male pseudonyms, as women writing was considered less serious. The themes of these women writing were their oppression, the pay disparity, other facilities that come to a man naturally but a woman had to fight for it.

Feminism is a movement that began in the west and was initiated by women to voice out against the western tradition that restricted women. It was a movement introduced by women. It has fiercely gotten what it aimed at, to a large extent. Still, it has done less good and more harm to womankind. This movement made women compete with men and feel that they can do

almost everything that a man can do and do it better than them. This is absolutely correct. But, this in a way has ruined her happiness. She is now performing the duties of both man and woman.

Indian Feminism

Unlike the West, the 19th century reformation of India was introduced by men like Jyoti Rao Phule, Madhav Govind Ranade to name a few. They functioned enormously towards the upliftment of women. They had to focus on various issues related to women, as they were also caste specific. There were issues like child-marriage, bearing a baby immediately after attaining puberty, mortality rate of women during early pregnancy, other issues like tonsuring of heads of widows, sati that prevailed only in upper caste so on and so forth.

These steps towards reformation were very badly received by the conservative men and women. They created innumerable hurdles in the path of these reformers. But the reformers and the female prodigies didn't fall prey to these obstacles and kept working. However, these reforms headed towards educating the women, especially the ones belonging to the family of the reformers as even their own family members were against the upliftment. It was a very difficult task as the women were mere followers of the men in their lives. The movement didn't result in women empowerment in a true sense. The reason being, Indians knew only two images of women. They have either worshipped her as a goddess or cursed her for being a witch. There was no in between. She was considered only as a child bearer, service provider and a punching bag.

Vedic Period (circa 1500-600c. BC)

The period in which the 'Vedas' were written is called the Vedic period. Vedas are the shlokas that were chanted in order to pay respect to Mother Nature through praying. It is a documentary evidence of the happenings, teachings, preaching, and rituals of the ancient India. It is treated with utmost respect and importance. The people who practised these rituals were known as 'Aryans' and the language they spoke was Sanskrit, the oldest language of Indian origin. After a vast period of approximately two to three centuries, these Aryans started migrating to various regions in search of land and thus, started evolving by following and not following the customs of their own and others. A lot of changes took place as a result of this ever-changing process. These cultural changes are marked in the Literature of that period and are differentiated as early-Vedic and later-Vedic literature.

The Vedas are divided into four: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda.

- Rig Veda-Is counted to be the largest and the oldest of the 4 Vedas. It is considered to cover more than half of the total Vedas.
- Yajur Veda- It is like a rule book that rules out the particular way to conduct the Pooja and Havanas. It depicts the formalized ways of conducting the religious offerings of the Aryans.
- Atharva Veda- Is very pertinent of the four Vedas even today. It describes the importance and availability of various medicinal plants and their use to treat which ailment. This was a part of the Vedas a little later.
- Sama Veda-Rig Veda being the longest of the Vedas, this is the shortest of them all. It is the musical form of Rig Veda

As mentioned above, our Vedas were much ahead of time and showcased discipline, planning and a scientific and thoughtful arrangement of hymns, verses. It was not just from the spiritual and religious point of view but it also talked about the medicines offered by Mother Nature through the medicinal plants and women empowerment as many of the hymns were written by women too.

But, due to the western influence, Indians have always turned a blind eye to our own rich legacy. E.g., Atharva Veda talked about the herbal plants and its significance. Indians realised this importance of our herbal healing when the westerners started appreciating it, by embracing it after proper research on the same.

Women in Ancient India

Women were happier and well treated in ancient India. There were many women scholars who immensely contributed to the literature of ancient India. The Vedas exhibit a lot about the contribution of these women scholars namely Arundhati, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Maiteryi, Romasa, etc. to name a few. These women experienced an equal status as that of men during those times. Gender inequality was nowhere a question. These women had the right to get education. That is why they could equally contribute in making important decisions. Decision making is a virtue that comes from education and proper knowledge of anything. The women in this period were well educated and therefore, good at decision making. They also enjoyed the right to choose their life partner. The process to do so was called 'Swyamavar' 'Swayam' means self and 'Var' is the groom. i.e., the groom is chosen by her. Right to choose one's life partner, was a biggest example of women empowerment in the true sense.

The participation of women in fields like art, culture, finance, politics, etc. was nowhere different to that of men in ancient India. In fact, women were respected for being a mother, wife and even as a daughter. The dignity with which woman were treated was a feature found only in ancient India.

Contribution of few of the Women scholars of Ancient India

A few prominently known women scholars would be Ghosha, Lopamudra, and Lomasha etc. These women scholars immensely contributed during the Vedic period and were divided into two kinds:

- The 'Brahmavadinis'- The ones who remained unmarried and practiced Vedas throughout their lives.
- The 'Sadyodvahas'- The ones who studied Vedas till their marriage. The women teachers were called 'Upadhyayini'. This also means that the ancient India had a provision of women educators and education to women.
- **Arundhati**-A scholarly woman who was given her well-deserved position in the epic 'Mahabharata'. She was considered equally as the seven revered sages (Saptarshi). Many Sanskrit poems were written on her that represented her several virtues.
- **Gargi**-She was the one who wrote hymns that questioned the existence of all beings and their origin. She was appointed by King Janaka as one of the 9 gems for their intellectual supremacy. She was a daughter of Rishi Vachakanu. She was courageous enough to participate in knowledgeable debates. She was a Brahmavadini.

- **Ghoshha**-She was a child that suffered from leprosy (skin disease) since her childhood. She was spiritually very sound. However, due to her disease she was not considered eligible for marriage. She was very loyal towards her father but also kept praying to the god of medicine, Ashwini Kumar, to release her from the agony due to her disease. Her hard work and genuine prayers got answered and she got a good groom for her. She composed hymns in Rig Veda. They mentioned about her gratitude towards the divine doctor, Ashwini Kumar and about her desire to get married and be loved.
- **Lopamudra**-One of the most intellectual women. She was known to be born to become the wife of Agastya Rishi to fulfil his duties towards his deceased ancestors. He was a scholar and so was she. Agastya was away from all the riches as he worshipped and preached knowledge. She was born with a golden spoon yet preferred marrying him to gain his knowledge and his love. She also wrote hymns of two stanzas.
- **Maitreyi**-She was a niece of Gargi. She had knowledge of shastras taught to her by her father since a very young age. He taught her to be away from material benefits and become spiritually strong. She composed ten of the thousand hymns. She happened to become a prime example to all the women who wish to gain knowledge that they simply need to follow the path of Vedas. She also debated with the men of those times as a result of her perfection of knowledge.
- **Romasa**-She was a Brahnavadini who underwent the 'Upanayana' (thread ceremony). She is also responsible for the 126th Hymn of the first book of the Rig Veda along with a lot of mantras of Sama Veda.

Further, there were others like:

- Samrat Asoka, who got his daughter Sanghamitra, imbibes the skill of preaching Buddhism.
- Like the 'Brahnavadinis' even the Jain princess, Jayanti opted to remain unmarried to study religion and philosophy.

Apart from religion, women were active in politics too.

- The Pandya women who were considered to be very good administrators.
- The first queen to have ruled an Indian Kingdom was considered to be Nayanika, the queen of the Satavahana dynasty during her son's minority.
- Another example of similar kind is of queen Prabhavati Gupta ruled the Vakatah dynasty during her son's minority. She was a dynamic queen as she not only conserved her husband's kingdom by ruling it efficiently but also fulfilled her father's dream to become the King of an undisputed kingdom.

Status of women during Post-Vedic, Colonial and Present times

Ancient India believed in gender equality. The evidence lies in the excavations that took place in Mohenjodaro, Harrappa, Lothal and many such discoveries. They are the oldest of the human civilizations with prominent traces of women playing central roles in everyday life. Even the greatest epics of India, Ramayana and Mahabharat, prove as an example of what can happen if a woman is disrespected. The abduction of Sita by Ravan in Ramayan caused him his death and the insult of Draupadi by the Kauravas in Mahabharata invited the death of 100

Kaurava. Ancient India was very much concerned about the dignity of women. If such was the case of women in ancient India, why does the contemporary status not match with it?

India and Indian culture, peace, serenity had started declining since the invasion of the Mughals in the 8th century. They focused entirely on exercising control on the women and especially the Hindu women. In 11th century Mohammad Ghazni came to India and stayed till the 18th century. This resulted in restrictions to be levied on the earlier independent women. Due to this prolonged stay of the Mughals, the practice of looking down upon women and making them dependant on man began. They were denied access to everything that made them confident and self-sufficient. They were restricted from talking, moving freely, no right of choosing their groom, were made to take permissions from the men of the family for everything. They were denied the right to education. Out of the other unpleasant side effects of the attack, the worst was the ill treatment given to women, due to the mere fact of being a woman by birth. This newly introduced and compelled practice taken forward by India was the reason for the misery of India.

The British entered India in the 1600's with overtly an intention to do business, but their hidden motive was to rule India and make the Indians believe that they were superior and they need to obey and follow them. The Mughals had begun the damage; it was the Britishers who took it further. They passed bills to show that they are willing to develop India. They initiated the abolishment of customs like Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, but it was the Indian social reformers who actually made it happen. They strived to make it happen.

As a result of the constant effort to give women an equal treatment, institutionalizing the same, laws like the right to vote, the right to property, the right to education etc. were made to protect them, motivate and encourage them. Yet, women are still not whole-heartedly accepted by the male-dominated patriarchal society. This acceptance will be visible on a large scale and in the true sense, only if the Indian education system starts implementing the old Vedic values of equality. This sense of equality cannot be followed and implemented just by making laws and legalizing them, this has to happen from the very birth of a child. Inequality was never an issue in ancient India; therefore, laws need not be made. Indians need to know that we are not empowering women because of 'Feminism' exported from the West. In fact, it is a very much deep-rooted Indian concept to treat women as a human being and with equal respect as a man. It is just that we are following, what belonged to us and what was there with us long ago and the reason for the betterment of the society.

Conclusion:

How much ever we hate the invaders and most importantly the Britishers, we have to accept that we were and we still are, in an awe of the Western culture. We feel honoured to be acknowledged by them or considered as one of them. There is enormous amount of treasure hidden in our culture, the great Indian culture. Unfortunately, it has been refrained from the respect and lime light that it deserves. Its affluence needs to be owned, accepted and flaunted by every Indian. India has always been accommodating people from all walks of life along with their culture, tradition, language etc. But it's high time that Indians realize what belongs to us? What are our roots? If we are unaware of what we have, someone else, more confident, will teach us the same thing in their name. Due to lack of knowledge, we might accept it as theirs and be thankful to them and be made fun of.

Therefore, at the outset of New Education policy, the Indianness is bound to sink in. The rich and varied heritage has to be brought in forefront. The only way to exhibit and percolate our hitherto enriched Indian Knowledge System is by indulging into the process of unearthing our own values.

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