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The Position of Women in the Vedic Ritual

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The civilization of a country is best understood by a thorough study of the position of its women. Manu said – where women are honored, divinity blossom there. In the long history of Indian civilization, our society has faced innumerable odds – constant invasion from outside, intermixture of heterogeneous faiths and thoughts, ruthless persecution and so on – and certainly changes there have been many with the consequence that, social conditions changed a good deal from period to period. Even then, Vedic literature exhibits a uniform spirit of reverence for womanhood and Vedic religion does not deny any right to women, not in the least the religious. Hindu religion upholds the Vedas as the highest authority and the view-points of the *Smṛtis* and *Purāṇas* contradicting those of the Vedas are simply to be ignored. In the Vedic literature daughter is just as important as the son. The *Saṃskāra* was performed for the daughter as well as the son and no discrimination ought to be made between them. In the Vedic period a daughter without a brother could be adopted as a *Putrikā* in which case she practically became a son. The pseudo Vedic attempts of a few scholars in Mediaeval India to prove the daughter an unwelcome member of the family must be discarded as absolutely unvedic, unholy and suicidal as the early Vedic ritual literature uncompromisingly compels just the reverse conclusion. In subsequent ages, women have been denied the honor of the *Puṃsavana* and the privilege and dignity of the *upanayana* in particular. But this attitude is absolutely unvedic.

In our society a general belief that women are not entitled to be initiated for Vedic studies. Such belief is absolutely wrong. The *Gṛhya Sūtras* say in connection with the initiation ceremony of the *Brāhmaṇa* “अष्टमवर्षे ब्राह्मणमुपनयेत्”¹ or “सप्तमवर्षे ब्राह्मणस्योपनयनम्”² or “गर्भाष्टमे ब्राह्मणमुपनयेत्”³ meaning that the *Brāhmaṇa* should be initiated in the 7th or 8th years after he was conceived or born; they make similar rules for the *Kṣatriyas* and *Vaiśyas* too – only extending the age-limit for them. Here by *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriyas* and *Vaiśyas* the *Sūtra-kāras* mean that both

¹ AsvGS. I.19.i

² kathGS. 41.i

³ ĀpGS. 10.i

the boy and girl of these castes are to be initiated. As in the case of ‘स्वर्गकामः’⁴ in “स्वर्गकामो यजेत”, here also the gender is not intended to designate the Masculine alone. By a rule like this “ब्राह्मणो न हन्तव्य” means the *Brāhmaṇa* should not be murdered, it is meant that the ब्राह्मणी also should not be murdered. Similarly by saying “मरणधर्मा मानवः or man is mortal” we mean that the woman is also mortal.

Without being initiated ceremonially, nobody is entitled to utter holy mantras. But the woman is found to utter sacred formulas in various sacrifices, *gr̥hya* as well as *śrauta*. In the *Sākamedha*, the third fourth monthly sacrifice, the girl uses the *Tryambaka* mantra.⁵ *Mahīdhara*⁶ in his commentary *Vedadīpa* says the unmarried girls of the sacrifices should walk round the fire three times along with the other males, the sons of the sacrifice and others while uttering the *Tryambaka* Mantra for *Tryambaka*’s blessing.

The *Purāṇas* and the *Smṛtis* as well furnish examples as to the right of women to utter the holy mantras. The *Skanda-purāṇa* says that the wife should sacrifice with the sacred formulas in the rituals in accordance with the regulations; so, in the funeral rite too, she, according to the sacred law, is entitled to utter the sacred mantras.

The *Kalpataru* says that “स्त्रीणामप्येवम्” etc. means: “यादृशेन सम्बन्धेन पितृव्यत्वादिना पुरुषाणामेकादशाहादि श्राद्धं, तादृशेन च सम्बन्धेन स्त्रीणामेतत् कर्तव्यमिति।” here it is evident that the women also utter the mantra in the *Srāddha*. *Yājñavalkya*⁷ says “This *sapiṇḍīkaraṇa* as well as *ekoddiṣṭa* should be offered to the women also” Āśvalāyana says in his *Gr̥hyasūtra* that from the time of marriage onwards the house-holder himself, the wife, the so, the unmarried girl, or a disciple, should offer regular oblations to the *Gr̥hya* fire. Gārgya Nārāyaṇa and Haradatta also cite the opinion of some schools according to whom the wife and the unmarried daughter are entitled to offer the oblation without any reservation. Khādīra⁸ says “Some says the wife should sacrifice: the wife is the house and the fire belongs to the house”. Gobhila⁹ also says the wife should verily offer the morning and evening oblation to the domestic fire for the same reason.

⁴ katSS. I.i.7

⁵ VājSamh III, त्र्यम्बकं यजामहे सुगन्धि....

⁶ Weber’s edition of the White Yajurveda.

⁷ Y.S.I.2.254

⁸ K.Gr.S I.5.17-18

⁹ G.Gr.S I.3.15

According to the Prayogaratna too, the wife, the unmarried daughter, the son, or the disciple, should offer the sacrifice in accordance with the above mentioned order. The Smṛty-artha-sāra also holds that the sacrifice offered by the wife, the daughter, etc. is to be considered just the same as offered by the sacrificer though the wife and the daughter should offer without the besprinkling. So the wife and the unmarried daughter are entitled to offer the oblation along with the utterance of the mantras unquestionable, together with the Om at the beginning and end of each mantra. The connection between the domestic fire and the wife is so close that the fasting in case of its extinction devolves on the wife.¹⁰

Tarkālaṅkāra in his commentary on Gobhila,¹¹ however, thinks that the wife should be given, on this account, so much education as would suffice for this, because “without studies she cannot sacrifice, nor does the *Sūtra* say that she should offer silently”. Anyway, this much confession is sufficient to show that the wife is entitled to the Initiation ceremony so that she may be entitled to read at all, not to speak of uttering the Vedic mantras.

Pāraskara¹² says that the wife should, if she is desirous of conception, offer the first oblation in the evening as well as in the morning along with the utterance of the prescribed mantra wherein she should utter the “Svāhā” again. All the commentators, Karka, Jayarāma. Harihara, Gadādhara and Viśvanātha agree that the wife should worship the fire with the first oblation in the morning as well as in the evening with the above mantra. The mantra prescribed for her is a Homa-mantra ending with “Svāhā : Hail” ; as she is to offer the first oblation with this, it is she who is to utter the *praṇava* also. Without the *upanayana*, the wife can never do so.

Gobhila says expressly that the bride should wear the sacred thread when the bridegroom leads her to the altar – “प्रावृतां यज्ञोपवीतिनीमभ्युदानयन् जपेत् सीमोऽदाद् गन्धर्वायेति”¹³ Leading her forward who is clothed in the proper way and wears the sacrificial cord (over the left shoulder), he should murmur the verse “Soma gave her to the Gandharva, etc”. Prāvṛtā here means evidently प्रकर्षण आवृता वेषपरिहिता यज्ञोपवीतिनी यज्ञोपवीतविशिष्टा i.e. she who has worn the dress properly and the sacred thread. In the Adhikāra Sūtra, Gobhila himself as well as Kātyāyana say that one must always wear the sacred thread. So the repetition of yajñopavīta here

¹⁰ Ā. Gr.S. I.7.3

¹¹ G. Gr.S. I.5.15

¹² P. Gr.S. I.9.3-5

¹³ ṚV. X.85.41

means that for ceremonial purpose the bride should change her former yajñopavīta and wear a new one.

In a sacrifice to be performed even by the widow, she should wear the sacred cord on the right or left should as prescribed and should herself offer the annual or other śrāddhas to her husband, father-in-law, etc. When she performs an ekoddiṣṭa śrāddha for a son, daughter, etc. she should herself do all the initial ceremonial necessities up to the initial resolution (Samkalpa) and may then give permission to a priest to perform the śrāddha on her behalf.

In the Rāmāyaṇa,¹⁴ queen Kauśalyā and in the Mahābhārata,¹⁵ Sāvitrī and Ambā offer oblations along with sacred formulas.

In the Vedic ritual women have a recognised position for their songs and aptitude in music. Most probably these were parts of their Sāmavedic learning. The ṚV bears testimony to women's songs on ceremonial occasions.¹⁶ According to Lāṭyāyana, the wives should sit to the west of the Udgāṭṛ and each wife should alternately play lutes.¹⁷

From our above arguments the conclusion follows that the girl is entitled to have the Upanayana, wear the sacrificial thread and utter the mantras together with the praṇava. The daughter after her Samśkāra is entitled to perform the śrāddha rites for her parents. Women are participated in the Domestic and Śrouta ceremonies.

¹⁴ Rāmāyaṇa, II.20

¹⁵ Mahābhārata. III.296; V.186

¹⁶ ṚV. ix. 66.8, ix.56

¹⁷ LātSS. IV.2.5

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