



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN SANGAM AGE IN TAMIL COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT :

This paper concentrated on the empowerment of women in an ancient period which dominated by women scholars' like yajnavalkya, Gargi, and Maitreyi. Women enjoyed the rights to choose their life partners and in the ancient Tamil country. In the context of the prevalence of gender parity, the researcher found out empowerment of women, political empowerment, gender equality, women reflected in the Goddess, status of women, and religious customs and convention. In short, the status of women was not low in Vedic India. Women of the Vedic period enjoyed ample rights in the social and religious fields, limited rights in economic and political fields.



KEYWORDS : Women empowerment, Sangam age, Vedic period, Political rights, Women goddess.

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SANGAM AGE

When Amartya Sen explained democracy as public reasoning, he refers to the argumentative tradition of the Indian past in which women also participated. In his famous book, *The Argumentative Indian*, he refers to Gargi, a women scholar challenging Yajnavalkya, an outstanding teacher and scholar of the day.¹ Gargi addressed the Assembly of intellectuals of the day thus: "Venerable Brahmins, with your permission I shall ask Yajnavalkya only two questions. If he is able to answer those questions of mine, the none of you can ever defeat him in expounding the nature of God".² Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkya, another women intellectual of the day, asked him whether she could attain immortality if she had all the wealth in the world. When Yajnavalkya answered her in the negative, she remarked: "What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal".³ Amartya Sen reports that he developed this remark into his famous statement that development cannot be measured by mere GDP growth.⁴

Even in the Sangam period, women enjoyed the right to choose their life partners and gender parity in the ancient Tamil country. They must also have enjoyed the freedom to education because Sangam literature refers to 28 poetesses the most were known among them was Avvaiyar.⁵ She is credited with many ethical works like *Atti Chudi* etc. It is interesting to recall that poet Kapilar, in the

¹ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, Allen Lane, England, 2005.

² Brihadaranyaka *Upanishad*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1951, Pp. 242 – 253.

³ Ibid, Pp. 352 – 354.

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p. 1.

⁵ Selvi Thiruchandran, *Some of the Historical Images : A Feminist Perspective*, Colombo, 1977, p. 5.

sangam work, Ain-Kurunooru, refers to a chief of the hilly area, who prayed to God for a girl child. This clearly indicated that women must have been honoured by the people of the sangam period.⁶

In the context of the above references to the prevalence of gender parity in the ancient period, the researcher wondered why empowerment of women, with special reference to political empowerment, should become a matter of concern in the modern period.⁷

CONCEPT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The concept of women empowerment is basically a paradigm shift – shift from the paradigm of patriarchy of the traditional society to the paradigm of women empowerment of the industrial society. Patriarchy was the governing principle of ancient family system, which formed the basic unit of a society. According to G.P. Murdock, family is a social group characterized by common residence economic cooperation and reproduction. This definition of a family also includes adults of both sexes at least two of whom maintain socially approved sexual relationship and one or more children, own or adopted of the sexually cohabiting adults.⁸

The stability of society is predicated upon the stability of family. It is in the family that the individual identity is formed in such a way that he ultimately becomes a social animal and facilitates a self-sustaining society. Some powerful force is required to make an individual commit himself to society and this powerful force was called patriarchal value system in the ancient period. In other words family may be seen as an example of society making use of the easily understood biological relationships (conjugal relationship) in order to provide the conditions necessary for stable, organized and co-operative group life. Coser sums it up clearly when he asserts that the family ensures the victory of the social order over the biological.⁹

According to the structural functional theory, generally known as the functionalist theory, social order requires conformity to institutionalized norms called status roles. In other words, people are taught certain fundamental values which lead them to maintain similar expectations about the behaviour appropriate to roles. These fundamental values were rooted in the concept of patriarchy in the ancient society.

GENERAL EQUALITY

Talcott Parsons, along with Bales develops two kinds of leadership in a family.¹⁰ The dominant leader accomplishes group tasks which involve adaptations to external physical and social conditions. This is referred to as Instrumental Role and in a patriarchal society, this role is male-dominated. The less dominant role called the Expressive role involves internal problems of the family and it maintains the warmth of group relationships and the gratification that comes from simply belonging.

Talcott Parsons' typology, assigning instrumental function to man and expressive function to woman, could explain perfectly the ancient arrangement of family the ancient arrangement of family and in the process of the structure of society Rig vedic tradition clearly maintained that wife is the home and domestic life was built around her. According ancient Hindu scriptures, no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. In other words, wife's participation is essential to any religious ritual. No wonder wives are called ritual Ardhangani (Better half).¹¹ This concept of gender equality is reflected in the divine image of Ardhanarishwara (Half Siva and Half Parvathi) also. This image amply demonstrates the interdependence of man and woman in a family. Men in single without his wife, have no place in religious and social functions. But one must

⁶ S. K. Pandit, *Women in Society*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 26.

⁷ *New World Dictionary Websites*, Second College Edition, New York, 1982, p. 8.

⁸ Murdock, *Social Structure*, Free Press, New York, 1949, p. 2.

⁹ Quoted in Morgan, *Social Theory and the Family*, Rutledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975, p. 23.

¹⁰ Parsons and Bales (Ed.), *Family, Socialisation and Interactions Process*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1956.

¹¹ Sundar Lal, *Social Status of Women*, ABD Publishers, Jaipur, 2005, p. 65.

remember that this privileged position of woman was possible only within the home where the patriarch was the instrumental leader (external) and mother was the expressive leader (internal).¹²

PRIVILEGED POSITION OF WOMEN

The privileged position of women is reflected in the portrayal of goddesses whom Hindus worship for their blessings. Saraswathi bestows wisdom while Lakshmi showers wealth.¹³ But Sundar Rajan argues that Hindu goddess of the past was not a political feminist.¹⁴ In other words, the honourable position assigned to the women in the patriarchal household, was accepted rather than contested. In the ancient period, women did not fight for empowerment of the modern period because ancient period was governed by ascriptive values and roles were ascribed to women by birth. The modern paradigm of empowerment is based on another variable called achievement. This would explain the ambivalence in the position of women of ancient period. Even though they enjoyed a privileged position, it was linked to their role at home.

Manu, the law gives compliments women in the one place but runs them down in another place. According to Manu, where women are honoured, gods are pleased but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields any reward? But in another place, the same Manu had wanted men to consider women as things possessed as evident in the case of Yudhishtra pawning Drupadi in a game of dice. It is mentioned in Mahabharata that there is nothing more sinful than a woman. Woman is the root of all evils. Woman is a burning fire. She is the illusion that Daitya Maya created. She is the sharp edge of a razor. She is fire.¹⁵

STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT PERIOD

These contradictory statements about the status of women in the ancient period of India, can be explained. When women collaborate with men in the performance of rituals, they function as the expressive leaders in the structure of family. Hence Manu compliments them. In other place, Manu stresses the need to keep women in a position of subordination to the patriarch. According to Manu, father protects her in her childhood, husband protects her in her youth and the son protects her in her old age.¹⁶ In short, a woman is never fit for independent functioning, a point the modern feminists would vehemently challenge. In another place, many describes the circumstances under which women are likely to go astray. Drinking, associating with immoral people separating from her husband, roaming around, sleeping late and dwelling with other men are cited as the six causes for the ruin of women.¹⁷

If one were to look carefully into any one of the six reasons, which are likely to mislead women, one can find that drinking is given as one reason. When one is drunk, the drunk is driven by Dutch courage and the drunk is emboldened to challenge the patriarchal ideology which binds the family and in the process facilitates social order. Similarly, separating from her husband or roaming or associating with immoral people are likely to loosen the binding with the family and ultimately leading to social anarchy.

Despite the uncharitable remarks about women in ancient India, women generally enjoyed ample space in the social system. As Ardhagnis (better halves, women enjoyed a lot of freedom in the household). It is mentioned in Mahabharata, that the sweet-speeched wives are their husbands' friends on the occasion of joy; they are as their fathers on occasions of religious acts, and they are as mothers in

¹² *Ibid*, p. 67.

¹³ Shashi Bhuan Das Gupta, *Evolution of Mother Worship in India*, Advaita Ashrama Publication, Calcutta, 1993, Pp. 55 – 58.

¹⁴ Sundar Rajan, Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 44, 31, Oct. 1998, Pp. WS34-WS38.

¹⁵ Indira, *Status of Women in Ancient India*, Bombay, 1951, Pp. 12 – 13.

¹⁶ S.K. Pandit, *Women in Society*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 15.

hours of illness and woe'. Thus in the social field women's position was not one of complete disability but one dictated by justice and fairness. In short, women reigned supreme in domestic life and they were recognized as equals of men in the family structure.¹⁸

In the economic field also, women of the vedic period enjoyed freedom. They did not have to earn wages because it was not necessary for them. In fact, home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes were done at home. Women helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits. Women in ancient India also enjoyed limited property rights. A forsaken wife was entitled to one third of her husbands property.

Regarding political rights of women in ancient India, even men did not enjoy the right to vote because it was a monarchical system in which there was no place for an elected legislature. Women were not permitted to participate in the meetings of the Sabha because Sabha was used not only for political deliberations but also used as a den of entertainment in gambling, drinking etc. In other words, in the ancient days when even men did not have any women obviously had to be content with homebound activities.

In the religious field also, women of the ancient period enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with their husbands. In fact, the performance of religious ceremonies was not considered valid if wives did not participate with their husbands. It is interesting to note that women even participated in religious discourses, as mentioned earlier with reference to Gargi who challenged Yajnavalkya on the nature of God and Maitreyi who questioned Yajnavalkya on the worth of immortality. Hemadri refers to educated Kumaris (unmarried girls) as vidushis, who should be married to equally learned husbands called Manishis.¹⁹

In short, the status of women was not low in vedic India. Women of the vedic period enjoyed ample rights in the social and religious fields and limited rights in economic and political fields. The status of women declined in the later vedic period. In the social field, pre-puberty marriage came into practice, widow remarriage was prohibited, the status of husband was raised to the level of god, education was totally denied to women and custom of sati and use of Purdah gained currency, women were totally denied a share in their husbands' property. According to Prabhati Mukherji, imposition of Brahminical austerities imposed on the society, rigid restrictions of the caste system, joint family system and lack of education for women caused the decline of the status of women in the post-vedic period.²⁰

Women received a better deal during the Buddhist period. Several taboos imposed on them, were loosened because Buddhism was a reaction to Brahminical Hinduism. Buddhists had created a separate Sangha for women priests and it was called Bhikshuri sangh. This exclusive sangh for women priests opened avenues for their social and cultural activities. However, there was no change in their economic and political status during the Buddhist period.

Third century BC to third century AD, a period of 600 years, is known as the Sangam period in the history of Tamil Nadu. Sangam literature clearly indicates that patriarchal ideology informed the Sangam polity.²¹ Men performed the instrumental function and earned money while the women maintained the household through their expressive leadership.²²

There was no indication in the Sangam literature that a man was punished for leaving his wife and going to a prostitute, now called a sex worker.²³ This is a clear case of the power of patriarchal ideology. Incidentally, the ideology of patriarchy was originally built on the premise of separate but equal man to instrumental leadership and women to expressive leadership, each one reigning supreme

¹⁸ Rajpruti and Belarani Sharma, *Encyclopaedia of Women, Society and Culture*, Vol. 11, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p. 100.

¹⁹ Ram Ahuja *Indian Social System*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2009, p. 93.

²⁰ *Man in India*, July – September, Issue of 1964, p. 267.

²¹ Rosapoo and Kalyana Sundari, *India Mahaliriyal*, Maurai, 2005, p. 12.

²² A. Swaminathan, *History of Tamil Nadu*, Chennai, 2004, p. 71.

²³ R.Vijaya Lakshmi, *Tamilaka Mahalir Totaka Kalamuthal Aram Nurrantu Varai*, Chennai, 1997, p. vii.

in the assigned niche. In the pre-industrial, agricultural society of ancient times, man alone went out to work and met the needs of the family structure and naturally man's pre-eminence in the family structure was accepted. In course of time, patriarchy became a male-dominated ideology.

Nevertheless, women were decently treated. Sangam period was a period of violence because of the continuous wars. But it is interesting to note that Tamil society did not have the birth of a female child²⁴ even though they would have preferred a male child, who could be trained for war. It is worth noting that marriage age for women was not fixed during the Sangam period.²⁵

It is interesting to observe bridegroom paid the bride price called the 'Mulai vilai'.²⁶ Anthropologists claim that when man the hunter found that the woman at home was indulging in primitive form of agriculture, he attributed economic value to the woman at home. As a result, in primitive societies, men offered bride price because she was reckoned to possess economic value. This system persists even to this day in the Middle East. The wedding day was fixed on the basis of horoscope. It is worth recording that the 'Thaali' was not used to mark the solemnisation of the marriage. Instead they, used a garland of 'Arugam Pul' (a form of grass). They also did not solemnise the marriage in the presence of fire nor did they use a priests to conduct the marriage.²⁷

In the Sangam period, the life of a woman was divided into seven stages 1. Paedai (upto five years), 2. Pedumai (5 - 10), 3. Mangai (10- 16), 4. Madanthai (16 - 25), 5. Arivai (25 - 45), 6. Therivai (45 - 60), 7. Perilam (above 60 years). Normally marriage was conducted only after puberty.²⁸ However, child marriages were not rare. Megasthenis, in his book, *Indica*, reports the marriage of a six year old girl.²⁹ Love marriages were common the Sangam period. Some richmen promised their daughters to young braves who could win the bullfight.³⁰ Incidentally, the possibility of marriages arranged through bullfights, is a clearly indication that Sangam period did not experience the rigidity of a caste structure.

Economically speaking, women of the Sangam period enjoyed a certain measure of economic independence, as evident from the fact that half of the bride price could be retained by the bride-while only one half of the bride price would go to the bridal parents.³¹ According to Aganaanuru, women of Sangam period did enjoy the right to choose their husbands. The worship of goddesses like Lakshmi indicates the honoured status of women in the sangam period. The presence of several women poets like Kakkai Padiniyar, Avvaiyar, Okkur Masattiyar, Peymakal Ilaveyini, Nettiimaiyar, Nachellaiyur, Kavarpandu amply illustrated the intellectual attainments of women in the sangam period.³²

Avvai occupies a unique position in the galaxy of poetesses of the sangam period. Since sage poetess remained unmarried throughout her life in order to carry out per spiritual experiments unhampered.³³ Avvai played the dual role of staying at home and composing ethical poems of enduring value while at the same time, also played a significant role in the public space also. Avvaiyar was advisor to Adhiyaman who rules Thagadur and engaged herself in political discussions and policy making decisions. Thus Avvaiyar presented a platform for feminist resistance even as early as the sangam period.³⁴

²⁴ O.V. Saminatha Iyer (Ed.), *Purananuru*, VII Edition, Chennai, 1971, p. 3.

²⁵ M. Shanmuga Pillai (Ed.), *Kurunthogai*, Tanjore, 1985, p. 396.

²⁶ A. Devanesan, *History of Tamil Nadu upto 200 AD*, Marthandam, 2004, p. 67.

²⁷ N.K. Mangala Murugesan, *Social History of India*, Chennai, 1975, Pp. 173 - 174.

²⁸ *Op. Cit.*, Rosapoo and Kalyana Sundari, p. 13.

²⁹ *Op. Cit.*, A. Devanesan, p. 67.

³⁰ *Op. Cit.*, Shantharam, p. 20.

³¹ *Op. Cit.*, R. Vijayalakshmi, p. 47.

³² C. Balasubramaniam, *The Status of Women in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam Age*, University of Madras, Chennai, 1976, p. 5.

³³ Shanta Bhatt, *Women Parliamentarians of India*, Shiva Publishers, Udaipur, 1995, p. 17.

³⁴ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Introduction: Feminism and the Politics of Resistance, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 7, July - Dec, 2001, p. 156.

Regarding education, women of sangam period were given equal importance. But the education received by women, was the different from the education received by men.³⁵ The curriculum of women education consisted of Iyal (literature), Isai (Music) and Naatakam (Drama), while curriculum of men emphasized developing their muscular prowess.³⁶ It is interesting to note that women, who distinguished themselves in the departments of Iyal, Isai and Naatakam, were honoured with the title of MUDUKKURAVAI. It is evident from the fact that Ilango Adigal refers to Kannaki as Madukkuravi.³⁷

In the sangam period, while Naanam (shyness) was considered a virtue among women, Veeram (bravery) was a virtue for men. During periods of wars, mothers bravely sent their sons to war and these brave women were celebrated as Mudin Magalir or Maraikudi Magalir.³⁸



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³⁵ C. Balasubramaniam, Op. Cit., p. 5.

³⁶ K.K. Pillai, *Educational System of the Ancient Tamil*, South Indian Saiva Sithantha Works Publications, Tirunelveli, 1972, pp. 46 – 47.

³⁷ Op. Cit., Shantharam, p. 19.

³⁸ Op. Cit., Rosapoo and Kalyana Sundari, p. 15.