



The Institution of Marriage in the Vedic Period

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ABSTRACT: The custom of marriage, with its features, qualities and its role as a social institution determines, to a great extent, the position and the status of a woman. A good marriage is harbinger of peace, prosperity, and happiness for the woman, while a bad one is like a nightmare and is worse than a painful chain. Marriage and post marriage problems from the past to the present form an important part in the development of woman. This research paper explores the custom of marriage, its importance, the various forms of marriages that were prevalent in the Vedic age and the freedom and free will enjoyed by the women in Vedic period.

KEY WORDS: Vedas, Sacrosanct custom of marriage, Different forms of marriage in Vedic period, Polygamy, Monogamy, Child marriage.

I. INTRODUCTION

The custom of marriage, with its features, qualities and its role as a social institution determines, to a great extent, the position and the status of a woman. A good marriage is harbinger of peace, prosperity, and happiness for the woman, while a bad one is like a nightmare and is worse than a painful chain. Marriage and post marriage problems from the past to the present form an important part in the development of woman. Even in the 21st century, the custom of marriage is considered as a sacrosanct religious sacrament, and it is therefore necessary to understand its significance, in the light of historical facts. [1,2,3]

The institution of marriage was a sacred institution in the Vedic times. The need for an organized and settled life and the continuous requirement of the soldiers, for the society, soon led them to understand the significance of marriage as an institution. Moreover the prevalent notions that “gods accepted no oblations offered by the unmarried”, and “an unmarried man is unholy and therefore unworthy of doing yajnas” enhanced the esteem and acceptability of marriage in the Aryan society.¹ The aims of the marriage in Vedic times were dharma, praja (progeny), and rati (pleasure) and the ideal marriage of the Vedic period was a religious sacrament which made the couple joint owners of the household.

Considerable freedom seemed to be given to the girl and boy for selecting a match. There is no clear evidence whether the consent of the parents or brother(s) was essential or not. The latter appeared on the scene after the parties concerned had come to an understanding, and their participation as well as that of the wooer (vara) in the formal ‘wooing’ was a mere formality. However it was an essential preliminary to the marriage ceremony. Although the Vedic literature makes no direct comment on the forms of marriage prevalent at that time, yet five kinds of marriages can be inferred from whatever information we have from the scattered sources. They were the brahma, the prajapatya, the swayamvara, the rakshasa and the gandharva forms of marriage. In the brahma marriage, the bride was offered to a bridegroom who was specially invited for the purpose, by her parents. In the prajapatya form of marriage, the bride was offered according to due rights, but with an injunction to the couple that they should be always inseparable companions in the discharge of their religious duties. In these marriages, the parents, after a close scrutiny of the groom’s conduct, his character, his family background, his education, settled the marriage with the help and aid of family members and friends and it was expected from the bride that she would respect her parent’s decisions, as far as the choice of groom is concerned. The bride after a formal ceremony, left the house of her father and came to stay over with the bridegroom and his family. This form of marriage was considered as the most ideal and sacred and was popularly accepted, in the Vedic period.²

In the swayamvara form of marriage, the bride used to choose her husband, from the different contenders, who presented themselves, before her or her family, for that specific purpose. The details and other relevant information, regarding the different contenders, were passed on to the bride, before the ceremony of swayamvara, so that she could make up [4,5,6] her mind about her future husband. At times, in order to check the physical and mental capabilities, of the different contenders, some sort of competition was also held, where due time was given to everyone to prove his worth. In a hymn in the Rig Veda, regarding the marriage rituals of Surya, the germination of the swayamvara form of marriage can be traced out. Similarly, Ashwins were selected as bridegrooms after they defeated Soma in a chariot race.³



The gandharva form of marriage can be compared to that of the present day love marriages. Impressed and enamored by the physical and mental attributes of each other, some of the male and female members of the Aryan society, used to marry each other clandestinely and at times openly.

In the rakshasa form of marriage, the girl was abducted forcefully and was forced to marry her abductor. Since in this form of marriage the will and consent of the girl was not taken into consideration and the marriage ceremony was performed in the state of her helplessness, therefore it was considered as heinous and hence the name rakshasa marriage gained currency, as it was believed to be the work of rakshasas (devils) alone and not that of any decent and well-cultivated man. The story of the stealing of Shundhayuv (daughter of Purumitra) by Vimada against the will of her father, but probably with her consent, can be gathered from I.112.19; I.116.1; I.117.20 and X.39.7 in the Rig Veda, bears a testimony to the prevalence of this form of marriage in the Vedic times.⁴ The story of the marriage of Urvashi with Pururava in Chapter X.95 of the Rig Veda, suggests that some sort of contractual marriage was also known to the Rig Vedic Aryans.⁵ In the story it is mentioned that Pururava married the beautiful damsel Urvashi, who originally belonged to the Gandharvas, on the condition that he would not appear undressed before her, as it disturbed her aesthetic sense. The Gandharvas, who wished to reclaim Urvashi, managed to wake him up one night and Urvashi saw him in a flash of lightening. This rendered Urvashi free from Pururava instantaneously and she once again went back to the Gandharvas.

II. DISCUSSION

In the Vedic period, we also find the prevalence of monogamous as well as polygamous marriages. But the monogamous marriages were more popular and recognized than the polygamous marriages. We come across a number of examples, where the former is commended as well as praised, in the Rig Veda. In its very first chapter, it is mentioned that :

“As the rays of the sun touch roaring clouds, and lightening goads on the burst of clouds, and the clouds thunder and quench the earth, with cooling, cozy showers of mirth; So does the husband shower all pleasures, to his mate of graceful treasures, when enchanted [7,8,9] by her hilarious touches, her smiling, bewitching, enfolding approaches; A sun like husband, luminous shining, and his wife alluring smiling, with their mutual attraction and love, like cloud and lightening shower heavenly love.”⁶

In the same chapter it is further mentioned that:

“When a man accepts as wife, a lady lustrous as twilight, emerging out of night of darkness, as a guiding light of life; Well-versed in medical science, who keeps her household disease-free, and by her myriad virtues refined, keeps her household full of spree; And so does a lady garland a man, calm like moon, yet vigorous as sun, whoever attracts the charming lady, to his virtues divinely spun. The chariot of such a happy life, moves on to paths of plenty and pleasure, and heavenly virtues all descend, to make such abode a bed of treasure”.⁷

Similarly at other places in the Rig Veda, it is stated that ⁸:

“I clasp thy hand and enter into the holy state of matrimony so that we may be blessed with prosperity and noble progeny. Mayst thou live with me happily throughout life! Through the grace of the almighty Lord, who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and in the presence of this august assemblage, thou art being given away in marriage so that we may together rightly perform our duties as householders.”

“With all my strength and resources, I have clasped thy hand; and thus united, we shall together follow the path of virtue. Thou art my lawfully wedded wife and I am thy lawfully wedded husband.”

“God, the protector and sustainer of all, has given thee to me. From today, it devolves upon me to protect and maintain thee. Blessed with children, mayst thou live happily with me as thy husband for the full span of human life (a hundred years).”

“Following the divine law and the words of wisdom uttered by the sages, may we make a good couple and may God vouchsafe unto us a shining life of virtue and happiness.”

“As God nourishes and sustains all creatures through His great forces like the sun, the moon, the earth, the air etc., so may He bless my wife with healthy and virtuous progeny and may you all assembled here bless her!”

“I accept thee as my partner for life. I will not keep away even mentally anything from thee. I will share with thee all I enjoy. We will persevere in the path of virtue, surmounting all obstacles.[10,11,12] Let us be devoted to each other. Let



us share each other's joys and sorrows, wish each other well and look upon each other with love and live happily for at least a hundred years. May we live, listening to sweet words for at least a hundred years. Distant though we were, one from the other, we now stand united. May we be of one mind and spirit!"

"Through the grace of God, may the eyes radiate benevolence. Be thou my shield. May thou have a cheerful heart and a smiling face. May thou be a true devotee of God and mother of heroes. May thou have at heart the welfare of all living beings!"

"I pray that henceforth I may follow thy path. May my body be free from disease and defect and may I ever enjoy the bliss of your companionship!"

"First gave the liberal gained a fragrant dwelling, and got themselves a bride in fair apparel (sic)."

"Agni hath given him the bride again with splendour and with ample life. Long lived be he who is her lord. A hundred autumns let him live."

The following hymns of the Atharva Veda,⁹ also reflect the same mood:

"Same be your drink and common your food, to the same yoke together I bind you; Worship Agni together in harmony like spokes round the nave of a wheel."

"Like in heart, of like intent, non-hostile do I make you; One another you should love, as the cow loves her new born calf."

These are some of the examples, which prove the preponderance of monogamous marriages over that of polygamous marriages.

III. RESULTS

Similarly, the very word *dampatti*, denotes the inseparable duality of husband and wife, and excludes the third person from the conjugal life.¹⁰ The Vedic Index says.... "the evidence points to the first wife wedded alone(sic) being a wife in the fullest sense."¹¹ The ritual, too, did not provide for the association of more than one wife in the normal sacrifice. But in the Rig Veda itself, there are evidences of polygamous marriage. "The Rigveda", observes Dr. R.C.Majumdar¹², "certainly permits polygamy (1.62.11; 71.1; 104.3; 105.8; 112.19; 186.7; VI.53.4; VII.18.2; 26.3; X.43.1; 101.11, etc.), though monogamy may have been the rule (I.124.7; IV.3.2; X.71.4). Whether monogamy developed from polygamy in the Rigveda age as Zimmer thinks, or whether polygamy is secondary as Weber believes cannot be decided. Probably polygamy, though allowed, was practically confined to the *rajanya* class. Polyandry is not referred to anywhere in the Rigveda. The few passages in the wedding hymn (X.85.37,38) in which "husbands" (plural) are spoken of in connection with a single wife can be explained on a mythological basis." Perhaps it was the result of the problem of surplus[13,14,15] women, since the Aryans were going through a period of long and continuous struggle with the non Aryans and this created a shortage of grown-up male members in the society. The large number of casualties faced by both the sides, forced them to find some way to solve the riddle of surplus women and hence polygamy was adopted by the Aryan society.

Some of the examples, which prove the existence of polygamy, are given below:¹³

"Between both poles, the car horse goes pressed closely as in his dwelling moves, the doubly wedded."

"Like rival wives on every side, enclosing ribs oppress me sore."

"..... as yearning wives cleave to their yearning husband."¹⁴

"The favourite wife neglected.... The favourite wife most dearly loved."¹⁵

Similarly, the expressions such as "like a king among his spouses, 'and as wives embrace their lord, found in the Rig Veda prove, beyond doubt, the existence of polygamy in the Vedic times.

According to Dr. B.S. Upadhyaya¹⁶, "the close association of Aryans with Indo-Aryans may have led the former to conform to some of the customs of the natives. Further, the temptation of the victorious warriors, to appropriate to themselves the 'belles' of the enemy, must have led to the extenuation of the practice."

The paramountcy of sons for reasons secular and religious and the ardent desire for the continuance and preservation of the family line, further motivated the people to opt for polygamy. But in general, the practice far from being esteemed, was an object of social disapprobation and condemnation.¹⁷

In the Vedic period, the practice of child marriage was not prevalent in India. A perusal of the marriage hymn, which reflects a great deal on the status and age of the bride, shows her to be fully grown and mature at the time of her marriage. Similarly, at another place in the Rig Veda there is mention "beautiful damsels who selected their own life



partners”¹⁸. The tradition of imparting education to the girls and the freedom enjoyed by them in the selection of their husbands, coupled with the respect and love they enjoyed, created an atmosphere of enlightenment in the society and as such the custom of child marriage was not prevalent. There are many hymns in the Rig Veda which clearly show that marriages were held, when both the parties were quite grown up. Dr.R.C.Majumdar,¹⁹ observes that “the frequent mention of unmarried girls like Ghosha, who grew up in the houses of their parents (1.117.7; X.39.3; 40.5), the references to the ornaments worn by the maidens at festival occasions in order to win lovers (1.123.11; V11.2.5), reference to a youth’s courtship of the maiden he loves (1.115.2), to the lover’s gifts (1.117.18), their mutual love (1.167.3; IX.32.5, etc.) and to the spell (V11.55.5.8) by which a lover hopes to lull the whole [16,17,18] household to sleep while he visits his beloved—are evidences which speak in favour of the custom of girls normally marrying long after they had reached puberty. ”Thus, ‘Surya’ is given in marriage by her father only when she is youthful and yearns for a husband.”²⁰ The very use of different words for marriage like udvaah (i.e. carrying away,) parinay, upayam, panigrahan etc. in Sanskrit language suggests of post-puberty marriage. In the Rig Veda, a hope is expressed that the bride would immediately take over the command, not only of the entire household, but also of the relatives.²¹ This naturally implies that the bride must be mature enough to handle all the affairs of the family, otherwise such thing would not have been said there. In a similar manner, there are several mantras in the Atharva Veda through the use of which women’s hearts could be captured;^{22(a)} also there are mantras, the recitation of which ensured a sooner marriage^{22(b)} and there are mantras, to increase the reproductive power of both males and females^{22(c)}, as well as to keep away the ‘other’ man or woman from mutual love or married life^{22(d)}. These references again contradict the possibility of child marriage in the Vedic society.

IV. CONCLUSION

This description reveals that marriage was a sacred and sacrosanct ritual in the Vedic period. Considerable freedom was enjoyed by both the girls and the boys and they were given full freedom to select their own life partners, after completing their studies. Different types of marriage practices like the brahma, the prajapatya, the swayamvara, the rakshasa and the gandharva forms of marriage were in vogue in that time. As the girls were married after they had completed their studies, there was not any possibility of child marriage at that time. In fact, women enjoyed a position which was unparalleled in the Indian history. [19,20,21, 22 a,b,c,d]

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