

Voices of Women in Vachanas

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Abstract

Woman it's, if one develops breast and plaits of hair; Man it's, if one grows moustache.

Tell me what is, The Knowledge of these, Whether female or male, O Nastinatha! (1)

It is a stark truth that male and female are the basic components of the human society. But over the years the misconstruction about physical differences between man and woman has overpowered in the society. Woman has been suppressed in the highly prejudiced male centric society. The patriarchal system rooted deeply then and prevailing even today, considered women as sinful, lustful, fickle-minded as illustrated in Manusmriti. This idea became inseparable part of Indian psyche. Further when we turn the pages of history, it is unveiled that the class – hierarchy, blind beliefs, rituals, sacrifices, selfish motives of the priest class, idol worship, fear of God, belief in fate, rebirth, heaven and hell, no rights for women, - entangled in all these evil, intricate practices, the society was paralyzed. The innocent and ignorant people were forced to follow the practices blindly. “Women were considered to be sinful on virtue of their being born as women and it was considered the result of particular sins in a previous birth. They were regarded as impure mainly due to the association of impurity with menstruation.”(2)

Such a chaotic and choking environment was prevailing all over India and Karnataka in particular in the beginning of the 12th century. There came a ray of hope through Vachana Movement, triggered by Basavanna- the social reformer. This social movement brought revolutionary changes in the society. People from all strata, caste, creed and color came together to build a new society. The movement sowed the seeds of equality in all the sections of the society i.e. Gender, Caste, and Class. The voiceless have gained their voices and these voices were revealed in the form of Vachanas.

This paper attempts to explore gender equality, emancipation of women and social position enjoyed by women during the 12th century.

Keywords: Vachanas, Voices, Gender Equality, Emancipation, Social Position.

Introduction

The status represents the position of an individual in the group. It is the position which an individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age, family, occupation, marriage and achievement. When we look at the status of women during various historical ages obviously it is not very satisfactory. During the Rig-Vedic period women were free as their male counterparts. Education was equally open for both. Women participated in religious ceremonies with their husbands. There were many women scholars who composed hymns of Rig-Veda. Lopmudra, Gargi and Maitreye were among them. This shows that women were equally important in social and religious

life as well as participated in the philosophical debates. Hence in ancient India, particularly during Rig-Vedic period women enjoyed a very good position compared to the later periods. The status of woman in the later Vedic and Medieval period was miserable.

Chaudhary writes, “Such bold and blessed, self-confident and independent women found themselves suddenly confined within four walls of dark and dreary homes, with their minds – desolate and depressing, with almost all their fundamental birthrights totally or almost cut off. They were deprived of any rights to justice, freedom, education, equality and were degraded domestically, socially, legally, economically, politically, in every other way”.(3)

In later Vedic period women were confined to the four walls of a house. Purity and pollution – such values are given importance and women began to be considered impure and kept away from many religious and social occasions. The strong belief of the day was that only a male heir could save from cycle of rebirth. A woman’s role ended only to home and bringing up children. They could neither know the reality nor question the existing practices.

During the age of later Smriti’s, it is said to be the darkest period so far, as the position of women deteriorated. Altekar, a historian says “In the history of India these dark and depressing days of total injustice, intolerance and inequality will remain as the darkest spot forever”.(4)

Moreover the Muslim invasions in India changed the entire society including women. Various evil practices began to creep into the social life such as child marriage, prohibition of widow marriage, sati system, denial of education and public life.

Even during the 12th century the women were controlled by the old laws. Totally women did not have their voice. Man’s control over woman continued unquestioned. “In her child hood she should be under the will of father, in youth of husband; her husband being dead, of sons, a woman should never enjoy her own will.” (5)

During such circumstances, Basavanna’s revolutionary ideas started to become viral and gave birth to a great socio – religious movement called Vachana Movement. Under the leadership of Basavanna, thousands of Sivasaranas started to question the evils in the society and envisioned to build a society in which men and women enjoyed equal opportunities in all walks of life. As a result women were not only given opportunities to realize physical and spiritual potentialities but also treated equally with men. Composition of Vachanas by thirty three and odd Sivasaraneyas itself is the proof that they were treated equally on par with the men. The women were able to scale the height of divinity.

Gender Equality

Saranas and Sivasaraneyas claimed that there is no difference between men and women except physical differences. Sivasaraneyas like Goggavve, Aydakki Lakkamma and Satyakka argued that there is no essential difference between man and woman. They condemned the discrimination of woman on the basis of physical differences.

In Aydakki Lakkamma’s Vachana, she asks;

Husband and wife are but two for union Are they two for sharing knowledge?

Don’t go another way, If you should know

Marayya priya Amalesvaralinga(6)

Through this Vachana, She wants to prove that there are no different bodies/gender for consciousness. Both husband and wife or male and female share the same consciousness.

Lingamma, the wife of Hadapada Appanna, brings out a revolutionary change in the outlook of men towards women and a woman’s ability to raise to mystic heights in her Vachana;

I was born in the lowest But grew up in the highest.

I held on to the feet of good saranas.

I saw Guru, Linga and Jangama I saw Padodaka and Prasada. By holding on to their feet.
On beholding these persons
The darkness looming before my eyes dissolved.
As soon as the darkness looming before my eyes dissolved,
I became happy, reveling in The auspicious glorious light,
O Appanna Priya Cennabasavanna! (7)

The above vachanas are the evidences that woman was not despised but respected in the society. She was liberated from the clutches of the impurity of menstruation and from all other wrong notions prevalent during the time.

Woman was given all the rights which were curbed for her in the latter periods. She was given all equal opportunities to enable her to reach to a greater height i.e. the height of divinity. She was considered as the goddess during this period. Sivasaranas advised men to see the image of their mother in every woman instead of seeing her as an object of pleasure. They created a new world where no gender discrimination prevailed.

They say wealth is Maya, but wealth is not Maya, They say Woman is Maya, but woman is not Maya It is desire that is Maya,

Which rides before one's mind.

Mark O Guhesvara (8)

The above vachana by Allama Prabhu silenced the people who accuse women of being sirens and temptresses.

In one of her vachanas Satyakka believes that the wise don't differentiate between the souls dwelling in male and female bodies. One of Her vachanas proves this;

Its not proved that

That person one is female Who has breast and plaits of hair

It's not proved that

That person one is male

Who has moustache and carries a dagger That is the way of the world,

But not that of the wise

The differentiating feature in fruits is sweetness Whatever fruit it be

The differentiating feature in a flower is fragrance, Whatever be its beauty.

You alone know its secret, O Sambu Jakkasvara (9)

The bodies are subjected to gender discrimination but not the soul. Ambigara Coudayya says Birth everywhere is in the same way.

In blood and uterus and foetus.

Mind, breath, life are held

With the eight – fold cage of the body.

woman if one develops The breasts and grows long hair. Its man if he grows moustache.

But the soul is neither male nor female.

If one makes any attempt To know why this is so.

Its beyond the ken of even the Srtis, Said Ambigara Coudayya. (10)

Sharana Dasimayya gives an analogy of 'a bamboo'

Suppose you cut a tall bamboo in two; make the bottom piece a woman,
the head piece a man ;

Rub them together till they kindle. tell me now,

the fire that's born, is it male or female, O Ramanatha? (11)

Thus the movement made the common people realize that knowledge has no barriers based on color, caste or gender. Basavanna and other Saranas criticized about the subordinate position of women. Such values led several women to join their husbands in the religious revival. Women participated in mystic discourses held in Anubhava Mantapa. The whole society witnessed the unique concept of social justice through Kayaka. The concepts of Kayaka, Dasoha and Prasada led women from lower caste to engage in the spiritual discourses and compose Vachanas which in turn rendered major contribution to Vachana Literature.

Being emancipated and given the identity as an individual, the women (shivashraneyas) became conscious of their rights of equality, significance of Kayaka and god experience. More than 33 Sivasaraneyas composed vachanas which explicate courage, will power, devotion, enlightenment, mystic experiences, loyalty, knowledge, good conduct, above all their social concern. Shivasaranas not only liberated woman from all discriminations but also gave them opportunities to live with honor. During this particular period woman as an individual led her life with dignity.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is every woman's right to live with dignity, honour, and worthy of human being. The Saranas of 12th century have set an example through abolishing superstitious beliefs and other ill practices in the society, at the same time they built a society based on equality and a robust society. The values and practices of the 12th century are applicable across times, places and people.

"We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know it is this – life has always to be made possible."(12)

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