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The Religious Practices in Regard to the Female (Mortals and Divine) in the Upaniṣadic Literature

Pitas Das*

ABSTRACT

The nature of a civilization can be determined by the position of women given by the society. The women hold a very high position in regards to their participation in the religious matters in the Upaniṣad. The aim of this paper is to examine the religious practices of the women as depicted in the Upaniṣadic texts which dates back approximately to the 1400 BC. The study will be done on the basis of primary data and secondary data collection which include Upaniṣad and several other documents. Critical evaluation will be done on the basis of data. The study will reveal the contribution of women (Mortals and divine) in the sphere of religious practices in the Upaniṣad ages.

Key words: Women, Upaniṣad, Religious, Education, Goddesses

Introduction – Vedic literature has ample reference of women God woven in the texts. Thus, the earth, Nirriti is termed as the God of evil; IIā, Bharati and Sarasvatī are known as the three goddesses of sacrifice. Similarly Sarasvatī, Bhavānī and Laxmī are three prominent goddesses. Aditi is the common mother of Gods and man. The Vedic poets invoked her in the following manner.....

"O divine Aditi, patroness worthy of confidence and cherished, come with these wise Gods, these faithful protectors O divine and good Aditi, I call on thee to succour us Let us honour Aditi, who gives life to all."

In the age of the Upaniṣads our society was in the highest peak in terms of men-women social status. So, it has become very much necessary to focus on the religious status of women in the Upaniṣads. It has been observed that in all great and prosperous countries the status of women was very high. As it is mentioned earlier that a civilization can be determined by the position of women given by the society, it is evident from the above extract that women hold a very esteemed position in religious sphere; references of woman god are found likewise to determine the position of woman in the Upaniṣad society. The women in

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the Upaniṣad age held highly esteemed positions in the society. There are numerous references in the Upaniṣad literature that tell us how women shared the same status as of man in the society¹. In Manusmṛti (3.56) it is found -

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः।

यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः॥²

The birth places of the divine souls are there where women are praised and respected. According to Yājñavalkya women are the embodiment of all divine virtues and Gandharva has given them sweetness of speech, that some has bestowed all his purity on them. And fire was showered all his brilliance to make them most attractive.

According to Dr. Rādhākṛiṣṇan women took part in the composition of religious literature. Some women were called Brahmvādinis. They were trained with martial arts and they were efficient in using arms. Apart from this we have numerous evidences to prove that there were women saints, philosophers, politicians, administrators and teachers.

Objective of the study

The present paper aims at investigating Religious functionality imparted to women in the Upaniṣad context. It will give us an insight of the significance of women (both mortals and divine) in the religious context in Upaniṣad literature.

Methodology

The present research work is based on various primary and secondary sources. The method which is adopted in this paper is descriptive, while sometimes narrative technique has also been adopted. As this paper deals with the significance of women in the context of religion in Upaniṣad ages, the information were mainly collected from Bṛhadāranyak Upaniṣad, Chāndogyopaniṣad, Kenopaniṣad, Taittiriyopaniṣad, Kathopaniṣad, Svetasvatara Upaniṣad, Aitareya Upaniṣad, Kauṣitaki Upaniṣad, Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Praśnopaniṣad, Māṇḍūkyopaniṣad, Īsopaniṣad³ and other Upaniṣad.

The necessary data are accumulated from different secondary sources such as Vedas, Manusmṛti, and other critical studies regarding the status of religious rights and privileges of women (both mortals and divine).

Women in the religious Sphere of Upaniṣad Literature

The age of Upaniṣad is the age of golden era in terms of participation of women in the religious and spiritual practices in the society. Women can be seen holding esteemed position in handling religious affairs. The Upaniṣad literature informs us that the women of the age used to share the same social status as of men. Special interest is seen among people to have girl child. If a man wishes that learned daughter should be born to

him, and that she should like to reach her full age, then after having prepared boiled rice with sesame and butter, they should both eat, and become fit to have offspring. Since the wife and the husband were treated as equal halves of one entity they both took part in secular and religious occasions³. A man could not perform any religious exercise without the presence of his wife because in such activities the presence of his wife was mandatory. That is why the wife was called 'Ardhāṅgini' or the better half. However, during the menstrual period the wife was kept away from the husband along with the other members of the family and would eat on a bronze utensil "अथ यस्य जायामार्तवं विन्देन त्र्यहं कंसेन पिबेदहतवासा नैना वृषलो न वृषल्युपहन्याद् त्रिरात्रान्त आप्ल्युत्य व्रीहीनवघातयेत्" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 6.4.13, p. 492). In case of wife's death the husband was expected to bring another wife to keep sacred fire burning otherwise he would take Vānaprastha.

During the Upaniṣad era there were a number of noble women who were highly educated and were respected in the society. There were learned women like Gārgī, Maitreyī and many other who used to participate in philosophical and spiritual debates with man. Maitreyī is known to be a philosopher. The wife of the Guru called 'Ācharyānī' or 'Guru Mother' who was equally respected by the disciples. Some information can be found in Upaniṣad that suggest female dominating societal custom. The father always wanted to have wise daughter. Mothers were as respected as the God "मातृदेवो भव"⁴ (Taittirīya Upaniṣad - 1.11.2 - p. 384) One who insults his mother is humiliated publicly "स यदि पितरं वा मातरं वा भ्रातरं वा स्वसारं वार्चायं वा किञ्चिद् भृशमिव प्रत्याह धिक् त्वास्त्वित्येवैनमाहुः पितृहा वै त्वमसि॥" (Chāndogya-Upaniṣad - 7.5.2, p. 225). Gārgī, Vācā and Kānvī held discussions with Yājñavalkya and puzzled him. Maitreyī, the wife of Yājñavalkya, participated in several scholarly discourses. The Brahmvādinīs were scholarly women. They remained unmarried and culture the Veda throughout their lives. Sadyodvahas were the women who studied Veda until they got married. From the uttering's of Maitreyī we come to know that women were interested in acquiring spiritual knowledge of eternity rather than involving in the pursuit of getting material objects found in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad "सा होवाच मैत्रेयी येनाहं नामृता स्यां किमहं तेन कुर्या? यदेव भगवान् वेद तदेव मे ब्रूहीति॥ (2.4.3, p. 333) When Maitreyī asked Yājñavalkya about how to achieve immortality Yājñavalkya replied that there is no such way to achieve immortality merely by acquiring wealth and that the divine spirit is to be seen, to be heard, to be perceived and to be meditated upon the while universe is known to us if we can do the same. Sexual intercourse is taken as a spiritual exercise. Not only the Khatriyas but even Brāhmana and Rīṣis could enjoy sexual

pleasure. It is said that the nature of pleasure achieved from sexual act is similar to Mokṣha, though the pleasure of Mokṣha is a million times intense⁵.

After the birth of child the father places the child on the mother's lap for breast feeding while chanting the Mantra "यस्ते कः इति" Which is to request goddess Sarasvatī to give her breast to his wife so that the later can feed her offspring with divine nutrition.

Tripuropaniṣad has ample references of women goddesses. The divine power is illuminating in the form of nine yonis and nine cycles, nine yogas, nine yoginis, nine foundation powers of nine cycles, nine bhadras and magnificent nine postures. Nine yonis refer to the great powers like Mahā Tripura Sundarī. The foundation powers of nine chakras are Mahā Tripura Sundarī, Tripuramba, Tripura Siddha, Tripura Mālinī, Tripuraśrī, Tripura Vāsini, Tripura Sundarī, Tripureśī and Tripura. The number of the divine protecting power is fifteen including Madantikā, Mānini, Maṅgalā, Subhagā, Sundarī, Siddhimatā, Lajjā, Mati, Tuṣṭi, Iṣṭa, Puṣṭa Lakṣmī, Umā, Lalitā, and Lālapantī. Hantrimukha, the goddess, the universal mother, Svara Madhya the Bṛhattithi, Nitya, Saṣoḍaśika, Puramadhyā are the forms in which the goddess enshrines and appears before her devotees. The divine power exists in the form of a beautiful woman whose complexion is illuminated with the light of Sun and Moon. The goddess is offered with meat and liquor as prasāda in order to achieve success. The worshipper is thrown by goddess Sarasvatī, Gaurī and Laxmī in the dreadful whirlpool of this world and she shoots them with five arrows which stand for five sensitive organs. Sati is referred to as the universal mother. A devotee free from all attachment becomes reluctant to the worldly feelings and attains to the divine being⁶.

In Kālikā Upaniṣad the goddess Kālī and lord Śiva are described as a single entity. This Upaniṣad teaches us how to worship goddess Kālī. She possesses the three qualities (Sattva, Raja and Tama). She dwells in fifteen different places with fifteen different names - Kālī, Kapālinī, Kullā, kurukullā, Virodhinī, Viprachittā, Ūgrā, ugraprabhā, Dīptā, Nilā, Ghanā, Balākā, Mātrā, Mudrā, and Mitā. Brāhmī, Māhesvarī, Aindrī, Chāmundā, Kaumarī, Aparājitā, Bārāhī and Nārasimhī enthrone on a lotus with eight petals.

The great hermit Āśvalāyana described the essence of Mahā Sarasvatī. Sarasvatī vidyā contains ten hymns for the knowledge of essence (Tattva). The devotee attains to emancipation by virtue of the knowledge acquired through this Upaniṣad.

In the sixth stotras of Sarasvatī-Rahasyopaniṣad Devi Sarasvatī is invoked in the following way - may mother Sarasvatī, the goddesses provide us with the food etc. in abundance because she is the greatest donor, her stock of food is un-depleted and she provides her devotees. The persons

arrange offerings for her pleasure with sheer protection. In some of the stotras mother Sarasvatī is requested to give the devotee protection.

In Śrīrāmapūrvatāpanīya Upaniṣad mother Sītā is glorified. Lord Rāma is praised not because of his novelty but because he is the husband of mother Sītā as he embraces Sītā taking her to be his ornament. The demon Rāvana meets his death just because he abducted mother Sītā. In Śrīrāmamottaratāpanīya Upaniṣad Sītā is described as the ideal half of Rāma. She is blissful creator and destroyer⁷.

Conclusion

The status of Women in the Upaniṣadic age was very high. People in the Upaniṣad age worshipped Goddesses like Sarasvati, Kali, Uma, Sati, Gouri, Parvati, Ganga, and numerous other divine women deities. The mortal women also enjoyed esteemed position in the society. The Upaniṣadic era was predominantly male dominated. In spite of the fact, the women were respected and were given all the privileges to nourish their creative faculty. It is astonishing to know that gender equality was treated very seriously even by the ancient people of our country.

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