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Presence of Women in the Major Upaniṣad Literature

Pitas Das *

The Upaniṣad was composed during 1400 B.C. Upaniṣad is the part of Veda, to be very specific; it is the conclusion part of Veda. The term 'Upaniṣad' comes from Sanskrit word 'Upa' means near, 'Ni' meaning down, and 'Sad' means to sit. The objectives of the Upaniṣad are threefold –

- a) To develop detachment from material life,
- b) To eradicate ignorance,
- c) To acquire knowledge in Brh̥ma-Vidya or spiritual wisdom.

The literal meaning of Upaniṣad is to surrender one's complete self to Guru or the teacher for acquiring knowledge. So a Guru is indispensable in order to acquire knowledge in Upaniṣad.

The Upaniṣad scriptures have ample references of the status of women in the society. The scripture tell us about the treatment of the society towards women in ancient India. It was a male dominated society where a family followed patriarchal system. In spite of this fact, numerous references are found in Upaniṣad to confirm that women education was present in the society. There were a number of scholarly women who were celebrated by the society for their excellent intelligent and deep philosophical knowledge in Vedic scriptures. My present paper tries to find the presence of women in Upaniṣad Literature which is, without any doubt, a male domain.

Key Words: Women, Upaniṣad, Philosophy, Debate, Umā, Jābalā, Maitreyī, Kātyāyanī, GārgīVācaknavī

Introduction : A civilization can be determined by the position of women given by the society. Upaniṣad era is the contribution of the golden tradition of Vedic era. But the position of women seems in decline in the Upaniṣad era. Generally women were refrained from enjoying the privileges men enjoyed in the society. Women were allowed to take education at home by private teachers or by someone educated in the family. In the Upaniṣad age learned women were highly respected by all.

There are numerous references in the Upaniṣad literature to tell us how women shared the same status as of men. During the age of Upaniṣad Gārgī, Maitreyī were noble women. They participated in philosophical debates with Yājñavalkya. In that age the wife of the Guru was equally respected by the students¹. In Upaniṣad more than one marriage was regarded as a legal practice. As an example Yājñavalkya had two wives named Kātyāyanī and Maitreyī. Kātyāyanī was an average intelligent woman whereas Maitreyī was a philosopher. They had a very significant role in the sphere of literary and spiritual philosophy in the society. It is a fact that the status of women was not on the pinnacle like it once was in the Vedic age, but women emerged from the male dominated society to show their creative faculty and the society gladly accepted them and admired their intelligent minds².

Objective of the Study : This paper aims at investigating about the presence of women in the Indian society in the Upaniṣad literature. It will give us an insight of the place of women in the society in ancient India.

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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 expository 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 Brhadāranyak Upaniṣad, Chāndogyopaniṣad, Kenopaniṣad, Taittirīyopaniṣad, Kathopaniṣad, Svetasvatara Upaniṣad, Aitareya Upaniṣad, Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad, Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Praśnopaniṣad, Māṇḍūkyopaniṣad, Īsopaniṣad and other Upaniṣad. The necessary data are accumulated from different secondary sources such as Vedas, Manusmṛti, other critical studies and different web sources.

Result and discussion : Upaniṣad literature has many references of female characters. They were highly educated and were celebrated by the society. Women like Umā, Jābalā, Maitreyī, Kātyāyanī and GārgīVācaknavī etc. were mothers, daughters or wives of wise sages. They represent women in the Upaniṣad society. They were the icons and source of inspiration to every woman in the society. As woman education was a common practice in the society it, undoubtedly, helped building the educated race for we know that mothers play a very significant role in building the society.

Jābalā : In the fourth chapter of the fourth volume of Chāndogya- Upaniṣad she is depicted as the mother of Satyakāma. During her young life, while serving as a servant in her master's house she had to yield too many of the guests. So, she gave birth to Satyakāma without knowing about the identity of her new born child's biological father. She challenged the patriarchal society when Satyakāma enquired about his father. Jābalā replied that the identify of his father is unknown because she could not determine the identity of the biological father of Satyakāma for during her youth she served many of the guests in her masters home where she worked as a maid servant. She further tells Satyakāma to be known as the mother's child by giving him the name Satyakāma Jābalā. Jābalā was most possibly a Sūdra. When Satyakāma went to the sage Hāridrumata Gautama to request her to take him as a student then, teacher wanted to know which family he belonged to. Satyakāma honestly informed the teacher about the problem of his father's identity. The teacher got impressed by the boy's honesty which is considered to be the sign of a Brāhmana. Thus Satyakāma was accepted as a student. This story gives us a true picture of caste system in the Upaniṣadic society where family lineage was considered to be the most important criteria for education. It is to be noted that in the Brāhmanical society only children of higher caste had the privilege to get Vedic education. But Jābalā's story tells us that the educationists gave emphasis not on lineage but they considered that only the seekers of truth deserve the spiritual education one should enjoy the right to education irrespective of any caste if he deserves the same. Thus, the true Brāhmana is considered the one whose life is committed to truthfulness. This proves the stotras in Muṇḍakopaniṣad 'Satyameva Jayate' (Sen 321) meaning victory of the truth.³ Later Satyakāma Jābalā became a great scholar and Jābalā-Upaniṣad was written in his name.

GārgīVācaknavī : The GārgīVācaknavī the daughter of sage Vacaknu Ṛṣi was named after her father's. In Upaniṣad period she emerged as a natural philosopher. She was scholar in Veda and composed some of the hymns of the Vedas. She had a deep knowledge in the Vedic scriptures. Brhadāranyaka- Upaniṣad has a description of an Rājasūya-yajña organized by king Janaka. Many wise people and scholars gathered in this ceremony from all over the places to take part in a debate. Gārgī was present in the debate as the only one lady among the crowd of scholarly people. When Yājñavalkya was defeating the other scholars in the debate Gārgī's turn came. She started asking very intelligent questions and critical questions to Yājñavalkya. First, Gārgī asked Yājñavalkya about the origin of the universe. She asked, if

everything in this world is emerged in Water then with what does water connected with? Yājñavalkya replied that, Water is connected with Air. Gārgī asked with what then the air is connected to! Yājñavalkya replied that air is connected to Sky or Space. Gārgī wanted to know with what does Space connected to! Yājñavalkya replied space is connected to Gandharvas. Gārgī asked with what the Gandharva connected to! Yājñavalkya answered Sun. Then Gārgī again asked him what connects the Sun? Yājñavalkya answered, the Moon. Then Gārgī again asked him what connects Moon woven with it? Yājñavalkya replied that the answer is the Stars. Gārgī then questions what are the Stars woven to? Yājñavalkya replied that the Stars are woven to Gods. Gārgī then wants to know where God woven is. Yājñavalkya replied that the God is merged in Indra. Which is connected to Indra woven? Yājñavalkya replied that the Indra woven connected to Prajāpati. Gārgī again questions, which is connected to Prajāpati? Yājñavalkya replies that Prajāpati is connected with Brahma. Gārgī then again questions Yājñavalkya about where is this Brahma woven to? Yājñavalkya replies: Gārgī, do not question too much, lest your head fall off. In truth, you are questioning too much about a divinity about which further questions cannot be asked. Gārgī, do not over-question. Thereupon GārgīVācānavī held her peace¹. In the eight Brāhmana of the third chapter of Bṛihadāranyaka-Upaniṣad again Gārgī gets an opportunity to test Yājñavalkya wisdom. She takes permission of the learned people gathered there to ask more questions to the sage. Since everybody was well aware of Gārgī's wisdom her request was accepted gladly by all of them and Gārgī places her first question – "That, O Yājñavalkya, which is above the sky, that which is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, sky and earth, that which people call the past and the present and the future – across what is that woven, warp and woof?" (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 268).

Yājñavalkya replies that – "Across what then, pray, is space woven, warp and woof." (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 269). Then Gārgī asked her second and final question – "That, O Yājñavalkya, which is above the sky, that which is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, sky and earth, that which people call the past and the present and the future – across what is that woven, warp and woof?" (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 269)

Yājñavalkya replies that – "Across what then, pray, is space woven, warp and woof." (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 269). "Verily, O Gārgī, that Imperishable is the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, and the understood Understander. Other than it there is naught that sees. Other than it there is naught that understands. Across this Imperishable, O Gārgī is space woven, warp and woof" (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 270). Thus Yājñavalkya replied all the question of Gārgī very convincingly. In this way we come to know about the intelligence of Gārgī as a women scholar from the Upaniṣad literature.

Kātyāyanī : In spite of being a house wife Kātyāyanī is also known for her spiritual knowledge. She is the second wife of Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya. They enjoyed domestic life together. Kātyāyanī was not a scholarly women but she had enough knowledge about spirituality as a house wife. While Maitreyī was devoted to spiritual studies Kātyāyanī liked a happy domestic life. We find her reference in the Upaniṣad fifth Brāhmana in Bṛihadāranyaka- Upaniṣad.

Maitreyī : Maitreyī was the one of the two wives Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya. She was a philosopher. She appears in the Bṛihadāranyaka- Upaniṣad where she is engaged in a dialogue with her husband Yājñavalkya about the concept of soul. After successfully completing the three stages of life Yājñavalkya desires to enter into Sannyāsa and expresses his desire to divide to all his wealth equally between his two wives Kātyāyanī and Maitreyī. Maitreyī then asks Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya – "If now, sir, this whole earth filled with wealth were mine, would I now thereby be immortal" (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 298).

Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya replied – “No, no! As the life of the rich, even so would your life be. Of immortality, however, there is no hope through wealth” (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 298).

Maitreyī then asked – “What should I do with that through which I may not be immortal? What you know, sir – that, indeed, explain to me” (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 298).

Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya replied that –

O Maitreyī! You always are darling of my heart and your instant statement too is enhancing my joy. Behold, then, lady, I will explain it to you. But, while I am expounding, do you seek to ponder thereon. Lo, verily, it is the soul (Ātman) that should be seen, that should be hearkened to, that should be thought on, that should be pondered on, O Maitreyī. Lo, Verify in the Soul's being seen, hearkened to, thought on, understood, this world all is known (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 298-299).

Then Maitreyī said: “Hercin, indeed, you have caused me sir, to arrive at the extreme of bewilderment. Verily, I understand it not. Then said he – Lo, verily I speak not bewilderment. Imperishable, lo, verily, is this soul and of indestructible quality” (Joshi, Biamli and Trivedi 301)

Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya replied that the ultimate peace is achieved only by means of knowing the self or one's own soul. Maitreyī replied that his words made her in a confusing state of mind and she is not being able to understand anything. Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya replied that nothing is confusing for he is only talking about the indestructibility of the soul. Though this conversation with Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya we come to know about the intelligence of Maitreyī as a spiritual thinker and a philosopher of Advaitavedānta.

Umā : Unlike Jābalā, Maitreyī, Kātyāyanī or Gārgī Vācakanvī, Umā is a goddess. We find her in Kenopaniṣad. She is the daughter of Snowy Mountain (Haimavat) and the wife of lord Śiva. All the Gods respect her because she possesses tremendous celestial's powers. She is the mother of universe and her other name is Brahmavidyā. When the two messenger of God Indra reported him about the tremendous power of Yakṣa. Indra himself rushed to the place to meet him but found Umā. He respectfully addressed her as 'mother' and asked her about Yakṣa. Umā said that Yakṣa has sent her there. Indra becomes happy to know that and asks her about the identity of Yakṣa and the reason of his disappearance. Umā consoles her by saying that Yakṣa can be felt with spiritual senses because physical senses are too limited to perceive Yakṣa. Indra replies that he knows Yakṣa has tremendous power which is way more than any Gods in the heaven. But he would be not satisfied unless Umā tells him about Yakṣa. Umā smiles and replies that Yakṣa is the Brahma, the ultimate master of the universe and everybody is strengthened by his power. Immediately after hearing this we find Indra in tears. Umā reminds him about the ego of the Gods' after defeating the demons (Asuras) and how they totally forgot about Brahma, the force behind their victory and that no parent would want their children to be egoistic and disrespect to parents which is considered as a sin. In this way Umā gives Indra the wisdom of Brahma and disappears from the place.⁴

Apart from these prominent women characters there are a few names of noble women found in Upaniṣad. Āṭikī is one of them. She is the wife of Uṣasti Cākṛāyana. Āṭikī had kept the leftover food given by Uṣasti and gave it to him in the next morning when he was very hungry.⁵ Another name we find in the Upaniṣad is the daughter of Jānaśruti. Jānaśruti gave away all her wealth including his daughter to Raikva in order to learn about the God him worshipped.⁶

Conclusion : The above study shows that women had an important place in the Upaniṣad society. While there were scholarly women celebrated by the male dominated society for their

intellectual ability, there were women like Kātyāyanī who helped her husband in leading a happy conjugal life. There were single mothers like Jābalā who stood for the identity of her son. Child marriage, polygamy, intercaste marriage was present in the society. The principal function of women was to beget children can help the husband. But they were allowed to get education. Upaniṣad glorifies the image of women in Umā. She is the mother of the universe who teaches the Advaita to her sons.

In spite of all the hardships in a male dominated society women came forward in the sphere of education to uplift their position. Such consciousness among women in the ancient Indian society is really astonishing.

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