



Female *Ṛṣis*, Marital Rights and the Ethics of Conjugal Partnership in the *Ṛgveda*

Shivam Chaudhary

Research scholar, Department of Sanskrit,

University of Delhi

Phone: 8800539519

Email id: shivamchaudhary1002@gmail.com

Dr. Monica Kuwar Rathore

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit,

University of Delhi, Delhi-110007

Phone: 8826754431

Email: monicarathorejnu04@gmail.com

Abstract

Marriage stands as a pivotal sacrament within Indian societal framework, has taken great strides and undergone drastic changes and modifications, but intrinsically aligns with the ancient philosophical underpinnings linked to this institution from the genesis of civilization. The *Ṛgveda*, while delving into profound philosophical inquiries, simultaneously serves as a reflection of the societal landscape of its era. According to the *Ṛgveda*, the institution of marriage can be comprehended as a partnership, devoid of any inclination towards dominance or subjugation of one individual within the relationship. Women in the *Ṛgveda* at times fought for their rights within their marriage. Women such as *Lopāmudrā* (1.179), *Aditi* (4.18), *Indrāṇī* (10.86), and *Romaśā* (1.126) fought for their entitlement to have autonomy regarding their conjugal rights in marriage, while *Aapālā* (8.91) received abuse probably due to her physical disability. Throughout history, women have maintained their independence in marriage. Creating a New Society requires us to

re-commit to ensuring that women are granted their rights as equals. Establishing open lines of communication among partners is critical for their individual security, worth, and satisfaction in their relationship. By giving women the ability to exercise their rights, it helps to create stronger relationships and better the overall health and development of society.

Keywords

Matrimony, Women's Rights, Molestation, Conjugal Relations, Vedic Society, *Rgveda*

Introduction

Indian culture boasts multiple pillars that support its structure, with one crucial foundation being the institution of sacraments. Among the sixteen sacred sacraments, marriage (*vivāha*) stands out as one of the primary ones (Sastri, 1909). The very first discussion about marriage can be easily found in the *Rgveda* (Macdonell, 2012; Rishi, 2017; Sharma, 2006; Upadhyaya, 1948), which not only addresses the issues that are philosophically profound, but also gives evidence of the condition of society at the time. In contemporary society, there has been tremendous development and alteration to the definition and conception of marriage. Currently, a significant portion of matrimonial relations grapples profoundly with disdain and brutality. The traditional fabric of matrimonial unions has undergone a profound shift, which reflects a sharp deviation from the original conception and idea. Globalization, evolving gender roles, changing economic dynamics, and technological advancements are some of the factors that have collectively contributed in redefining the landscape of marriages (Roy, 2018). There is more awareness and advocacy about the incidence of abuse and disrespect within marriages; however, abuse and disrespect continue to be a concern. While societal attitudes towards relationships have progressed over the years, there remains a significant prevalence of domestic violence, emotional abuse, and disrespect within conjugal partnerships (UN Women, 2022). Such a picture of matrimonial relationships stands in stark contrast to its conception during the beginning of our civilization where it was characterized by parity and reverence. It is a paradigm which deserves scrutiny and enlightenment.

Our examination will scrutinize the intricate nuances of certain hymns within the *R̥gveda* about marriage and marital rights- a domain to which the female scholarly class has made a significant contribution. These hymns effectively articulate the nature, concerns, and challenges of matrimonial relations, which were proclaimed by women and expressed to their partners. Such discussions underscore women's high status and unobstructed empowerment to vocalize their concerns within their relationships.

Conception of Marriage in *R̥gveda*

According to the *R̥gveda*, the institution of marriage can be comprehended as a partnership, devoid of any inclination towards dominance or subjugation of one individual within the relationship. Such an understanding can be gleaned from a renowned hymn called *Vivāha Sūkta* (10.85) (Sharma, 2006; Griffith, 1896), which focuses on the matrimonial rituals involved in the union of *Sūryā* (daughter of *Sūrya*) and *Soma*. The prayer to unite the hearts of both partners has been done in the following words-

समञ्जन्तु विश्वे देवाः समापो हृदयानि नौ।

सं मातरिश्वा सं धाता समु देष्ट्री दधातु नौ॥

samañjantu viśve devāḥ samāpo hrdayāni nau /

saṃ mātariśvā saṃ dhātā samu deṣṭrī dadhātu nau ॥¹

which means, “May the universal gods unite both our hearts; may the waters unite them; may *Mātariśvan*, *Dhātā* the bountiful (*Sarasvatī*) unite both our hearts.” Moreover, Agni is said to make husband and wife of one mind².

Rigvedic society is the staunch supporter of constant companionship of partners of conjugal relationships, not just in this world but also when one starts her\his journey to the other realm. The couple used to be blessed with following words-

¹ *R̥gveda* (10.85.47)

² Ibid (5.3.2)

इहैव स्तं मा वि यौष्टं विश्वमायुर्व्यश्नुतम्।

क्रीळन्तौ पुत्रैर्नप्तृभिर्मोदमानौ स्वे गृहे॥

ihaiva staṁ mā vi yauṣṭaṁ viśvamāyurvyaśnutam /

krīlantau putrainapṭṛbhirmoḍamānau sve grhe ॥³

which means, “Abide here together; may you never be separated; live together all your lives, sporting with sons and grandsons, happy in your own home.”

Considered as an *āśrama*, marriage, in accordance with Vedic customs, held the singular objective of procreation and adherence to dharma- the obligations and moral duties incumbent upon individuals. It is the essence of "dharma" that distinguishes Vedic society as unique and exemplary, standing in stark contrast to the contemporary world, fraught with turmoil and catastrophe. *Soma*, holding the hand of *Sūryā* during the wedding ritual, says-

गृभ्णामि ते सौभगत्वाय हस्तं मया पत्या जरदष्टिर्यथासः।

भगो अर्यमा सविता पुरंधिर्महयं त्वादुर्गार्हपत्याय देवाः॥

grbhṇāmi te saubhagatvāya hastam mayā patyā jaradaṣṭiriyathāsaḥ /

bhago aryamā savitā puraṇdhirmahyaṁ tvādurgārhapatyāya devāḥ ॥⁴

which means, “I take your hand for good fortune, that you may attain old age with me as your husband; the gods *Bhaga*, *Aryamā*, *Savitā*, *Puraṇdhi* have given you to me, that I may discharge the duties of a household.” Vedic society intricately addressed the responsibilities and duties of every individual, resulting in the scarcity of instances delineating mutual disrespect and discord within relationships.

³ Ibid (10.85.42)

⁴ Ibid (10.85.36)

Status of Women in Society and Conjugal Relations

Maltreatment of women within conjugal relationships persists as a troubling and pervasive issue (UN Women, 2022). Despite many effective steps in spreading awareness about women's rights and gender equality, every day we find new examples of relationship problems that continue to plague conjugal partnerships. Women experience many types of mistreatments, including psychological coercion, economic control, and verbal abuse, which all sabotage her rights and dignity in a relationship. It reminds us of the persisting inequalities and injustices within contemporary society thus requiring coordinated actions to take down systems of oppression, create awareness, and build strong support systems for empowering women to feel safe in their relationships.

In contrast, there exists a historical backdrop wherein women held comparable or occasionally even superior status in comparison to their male counterparts. Revered as embodiments of Brahma, women occupied an esteemed position within Rigvedic society. We predominantly encounter two archetypes of women: those fervently seeking profound wisdom and those reigning as sovereigns within the domestic realm. Before delving into the esteemed position women held within their conjugal relationships, we need to look at the milieu from which they emerged. These women originated from a society that accorded considerable significance to their daughters and wives. *Indrāṇī*, while acclaiming her own powers and rights in her domestic space, affirms-

मम पुत्राः शत्रुहणोऽथो मे दुहिता विराट्।

उताहमस्मि संजया पत्यौ मे श्लोक उत्तमः॥

mama putrāḥ śatruhaṇo 'tho me duhitā virāṭ|

*utāham asmi saṁjayā patyau me śloka uttamah||*⁵

which means, “My sons are the destroyers of my enemies, my daughter is an empress; I am victorious, and my fame is most precious to my husband.” Daughters autonomously selected their destinies, opting either for an ascetic life or the responsibilities of a

⁵Ibid (10.159.3)

householder. *Ghoshā*, who matured in her father's household without entering wedlock, initially sought enlightenment from the *Aśvinīkumāras*, mirroring how sons traditionally acquire wisdom from their fathers before embarking on marriage.

इयं वामहवे शृणुतं मे अश्विना पुत्रायेव पितरा महयं शिक्षतम्।

*iyam vām ahve śṛṇutam me aśvinā putrāyeva pitarā mahyaṁ śikṣatam*⁶

Women of the *R̥gveda* were aware of their individual identity and wisdom. They too craved for seeking the supreme knowledge because it is education that helps one contribute efficiently in the development of society. Educated men and women are the leaders of society. *Vāk Sūkta*⁷ represents an elevated status of women in the Vedic society, which acknowledges the significance and reverence for the feminine divine. *Vāk*, the personification of speech, is revered as the divine figure who highlights the inherent respect and honor attributed to women for their ability to express, communicate, and create. This hymn not only celebrates the power of speech but also serves as a representation of how much society valued its women. In addition, it is a symbol of how women contribute to the universe, from their role as carriers of wisdom to being sources of divine energy.

Women who opted for marriage were also initially granted a significant level of education (Jatin, 2000). This is discernible from the readily accessible hymns authored by women of the household. *Ghoshā*, *Lopāmudrā*, *Indrāni*, *Romashā*, among others, stand as notable examples illustrating this aspect. Given the considerable education these women received, it is inconceivable to imagine them consenting to anything less than their rightful entitlement. Acutely cognizant of their obligations and roles, they possessed the empowerment to vocally oppose any form of maltreatment, should they ever encounter it. The case of *Aapālā* can be cited as a prominent example of the same. Furthermore, the perpetuation of women's esteemed status was solidified by instances such as *Indra* seizing all riches and opulence from men who dared to engage in conflict against women.

⁶ Ibid (10.39.6)

⁷ Ibid (10.125)

स्त्रीभिर्यो अत्र वृषणं पृतन्यादयुद्धो अस्य वि भजानि वेदः॥

*strībhir yo atra vṛṣaṇam pṛtanyād ayuddho asya vi bhajāni vedah||*⁸

While initiating their journey as a household, women in the *R̥gveda* possessed the autonomy to select their companions⁹. The agency of women is found not only in this initial stage of their relationships but also in their further endeavors. Considered as the ornament of the household and sometimes the home itself¹⁰, wives were asked for a blessing from the *devatās* like *Agni*¹¹. The high status of wives can be inferred from the fact that they were compared with *Agni*, one of the most popular *devatā* of the *R̥gveda*. *Parāśara śākta*, while praising *agni*, says-

दुरोकशोचिः क्रतुर्न नित्यो जायेव योनावरं विश्वस्मै॥

*durokaśociḥ kratuṛ na nityo jāyeva yonāvaṛaṁ viśvasmai ||*¹²

which means, “Agni of unattainable brightness, is like a vigilant sacrificer; he is an ornament of sacrificial chamber, like a woman in a household”. This specific analogy has the power to dismantle all the criticisms leveled against ancient Indian society for being close-minded and traditional. This rather sounds idealistic in our present-day society, where reports of mistreatment and harassment of women in marital relationships are all too common in the news and media.

As per UN Women, in 2021, around 45,000 women and girls worldwide were killed by their intimate partners or other family members (UN Women, 2022). This means that, on average, more than five women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family. Globally, an estimated 736 million women, almost one in three, have been subjected to physical and/or intimate violence at least once in their lives (UN Women, 2022).

⁸ Ibid (10.27.10)

⁹ Ibid (10.27.12)

¹⁰ Ibid (3.53.4)

¹¹ Ibid (1.14.7)

¹² Ibid (1.66.5)

The need of the hour is to look back to our history, where wedlock ensured equal status to both partners. In the words of Dr. Shashi Prabha Kumar, “Here there is no better half or the worse half, but just the two halves” (Kumar, 1998). Vedic hymns often portray the husband and wife as complementary halves, each having their own unique roles and contributions within the family and society. In Vedic writings, the term '*Dampati*' was frequently employed. This expression means "two joint proprietors of the household". It highlights the significance of harmony, mutual support, and cooperation between spouses, thereby emphasizing the importance of their equal partnership in performing religious rituals, managing household affairs, and fostering familial well-being. *Atri* while praising *Agni*, states-

बृहद्वयो बृहते तुभ्यमग्ने धियाजुरो मिथुनासः सचन्त।

देवोदेवः सुहवो भूतु मह्यं मा नो माता पृथिवी दुर्मतौ धात्॥

bṛhad vayo bṛhate tubhyam agne dhiyājuro mithunāsaḥ sacanta|

*devo-devaḥ suhavo bhūtu mahyam mā no mātā pṛthivī durmatau dhāt||*¹³

which means, “Married pairs, worn by devout rites; jointly offer abundant sacrificial food, Agni, to you who are mighty; may each divinity be successfully invoked by me; let them not take us into unfavorable thought.” however, through its verses, it highlights that there was an implied philosophy of mutual respect and cooperation between husband and wife and that those who occupied those two roles were viewed as equal within the family and society. Women were referred to as "*Gṛhpatnī*"¹⁴ and "*Samrājñī*" (the ruler of the household)¹⁵, which illustrates that one of their primary functions was overseeing the resource management of their household. This demonstrates that women also held decision-making authority in matrimonial ties. Furthermore, implications suggest the ownership of personal property by women in certain references (Jatin, 2000). *Śyāvāśva ātreya* states-

¹³Ibid (5.43.15)

¹⁴ Ibid (10.85.26)

¹⁵ Ibid (10.85.46)

सनत्साश्व्यं पशुमुत गव्यं शतावयम्।

श्यावाश्वस्तुताय या दोर्वीरायोपबर्बृहत्॥

anatsāśvyam paśum uta gavyaṃ śatāvayam|

*śyāvāśvastutāya yā dor vīrāyopabarbhṛhat||*¹⁶

which means, “She, (*Śaśiyasī*), who has thrown her arms round the hero *Taranta*, who was eulogized by *Śyāvāśva*, has given me cattle comprising horses, and cows, and hundreds of sheep.” Economic independence plays a crucial role in ensuring due respect to women in conjugal relationships, which empowers them with autonomy, decision-making authority, and a sense of equality within the relationship. If women are financially independent, they do not have to rely completely on their partners for economic support, which helps prevent any potential power imbalances. This independence fosters a greater sense of self-esteem and agency, which enables women to express themselves, make decisions based on their own interests, and contribute to family decisions in a meaningful manner. Not restricting themselves to the homely duties of decision-making, women used to participate in public meetings and discharged their responsibilities as active participants¹⁷.

Following the fulfillment of responsibilities with utmost dedication and integrity, there is an anticipation for rightful entitlements, and Vedic women emerge as strong advocates for their necessities and entitlements within their relationships. Upon closer examination of certain hymns, we find that Rigvedic women were well aware of their self-esteem and desires within their conjugal relations. *Aapālā*, Sage *Atri*’s daughter, was repudiated by her husband due to her getting afflicted with a skin disease she had no control over. Despite being innocent, she was abandoned, and she returned to her father’s hermitage to practice penance. Through her unwavering dedication, she earned a boon from *Indra*, allowing her father’s barren land, his bald head, and even her own body to bear crops (as interpreted as offspring)¹⁸. Remarkably, *Aapālā*’s focus on self-respect is evident in her

¹⁶ Ibid (5.61.5)

¹⁷ Ibid (10.86.10)

¹⁸ Ibid (8.91)

choice of boons from *Indra*, all of which centered on herself and her father, rather than her husband. This challenges the common notion that a husband is a woman's sole support. Even after gaining a radiant appearance that could have facilitated her return to her husband, *Aapālā* prioritized her dignity and opted to stay with her father. When one holds themselves in high regard, they establish personal boundaries, maintain integrity, and demand fair treatment from others. Varying from the account of *Aapālā*, we find *śaci*, who believes that she has complete right over her husband and that she would rule over him –

समजैषमिमा अहं सपत्नीरभिभूवरी।

यथाहमस्य वीरस्य विराजानि जनस्य च॥

samajaiṣamimā ahaṃ sapatnīrabhibhūvarī

yathāhamasya vīrasya virājāni janasya ca||¹⁹

Moreover, we find the account like that of *Lopāmudrā*, who discusses with her husband *Agastya* about the physical intimacy of conjugal partners²⁰. Physical intimacy is an integral part of a conjugal relationship, which serves as a profound means of emotional connection that ultimately fosters closeness, trust, and mutual understanding between partners. However, the belief system, which is engrossed with the denial of women's physical pleasure, subjugates their desires and needs which not only diminishes their status from attaining an equitable stance but also restricts the growth of mutual respect within a relationship. Looking at the accounts like that of *Lopāmudrā*, we find that women of the Vedic era had agency in their conjugal relations in these aspects as well. This enables women to actively influence the dynamics of their relationships, thereby promoting a sense of partnership and equality. Therefore, Vedic society had a socio-cultural milieu in which women were equal to men regarding their identity, autonomy, and agency.

¹⁹ Ibid (10.159.6)

²⁰ Ibid (1.179)

Conclusion

The essence of a society is intrinsically tied to the traits of its residents, and instances such as molestation and harassment unmistakably demonstrate an absence of civilized conduct. The Vedic society comprehended this imperative requirement for societal progress. Through the aforementioned examination, we have deduced that women held a considerably elevated status in the Vedic epoch. Revival of the ethos of that era necessitates an unlearning of our current knowledge and a continual examination of similar hymns to uncover further insights. Vedic marriages, therefore, were not just union ceremonies of two complementary entities having equal status. Among the multifaceted approaches by world forums like G20, one is the elimination of gender-based violence. The G20 plans to create a new Working Group on Empowerment of Women to support countries in addressing gender inequality across the spectrum. Besides, SDG 5 strives to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Such researches which prove the mainstream participation of women in society would provide us a strong support system and would ultimately help us to meet these international goals. Women have traditionally possessed sovereignty within matrimony. We, as vanguards of an enlightened society, must reinitiate our commitment to bestow women their rightful standing. Encouraging sincere communication among partners is essential for their mutual security, worthiness, and contentment in their private lives. Empowering women to wield their prerogatives not only nourishes more robust relationships but also enriches the collective welfare and progression of society in its entirety.

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