

## Role of Indian Women in Rites and Rituals: A Historical Review

Dr. Chinmayi Deodhar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Religion is a very important social factor influencing various aspects of human life. It is composed of beliefs and rituals. Ritual fundamentally serves the basic social function of creating and maintaining community. Rituals strengthen the bonds of attaching the individual to the society of which he or she is a member. The role played by a certain person in the rituals is indication of that person's significance in the society.

It would be interesting to analyze the position of women from the angle of their participation in the ritualistic activities. The woman was quite necessary in Vedic sacrificial rituals and sutra rituals though their participation in such activities was very insignificant. A change can be seen in Puranic and Modern era.

The paper tries to study the role of Indian woman in rituals of different period with a view to evaluate their position in the society of the respective era.

**Key Word – Hindu Rituals, Women, Stages of religious development, Participation in ritual performance,**

### Introduction

Religion is universal and indispensable dimension of social life. It is an integral part of culture and is expressed through rites and rituals, traditions, customs,

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant. Professor (Sanskrit), Nalanda Nritya Kala Mahavidyalaya, Juhu.  
E-mail id: vineetaprabhudesai@gmail.com Mobile No: 9869288802

myths and doctrines. As the primary component of religion, ritual fundamentally serves the basic social function of maintaining a bond and solidarity in the community.

Rites and rituals generally function on two levels –

- 1) Individual level
- 2) Societal level,

Naturally they are also considered as the means by which cultural system and social system are able to interact and harmonize with each other.

Religion and religious rituals are integral parts of social and cultural system which, by nature is ever changing. Obviously religious rites and rituals also undergo many changes in due course of time.

If we study the history of rituals in India, we can observe religious development in four phases

1. Early Vedic period in which Vedic sacrifice was the principal mode of worship. Sacrificial rituals however became very complex in due course of time.
2. Later /Post Vedic or Brahmanical sacrificial religion- this was the period when *Dharmasūtra* and *Smṛti* literature were composed. The period is marked with growing individuality figured in the field of rituals.
3. Puranic period –This was the phase that led to the creation of the religion which is commonly known as Hinduism in modern days.
4. Modern period

The change can be seen in various aspects for example the nature of the rituals, manner to observe it, strictness or lenience in observance of the same, the *adhikārin* that is the person who is entitled to perform that ritual and even roles played by the *adhikārin*, the spouse of the performer and the priests involved in the observance of the rituals.

It would be interesting to observe the change in the role played by women in the observance of rites and rituals from Vedic age to the modern age.

Involvement of any individual in the performance of a ritual or a rite can be classified in following types

- 
1. As the performer or the observer, generally called *Yajamāna*
  2. Close relatives of the main performer
  5. In case of certain rites which are of the nature of *saṁskāras* one individual generally performs rituals for the sake of other person.
  6. A priest is also involved as official instructor. The role and the importance given to the involvement of the individual or a particular class in ritual performances are indications of the position and significance of an individual or that class.

This paper will try to examine role played by women in the performance of the rituals and rites prevalent in different phases of religious development.

### Early Vedic and Brahmanical Period

Rituals in this period were obviously of the nature of sacrificial rituals. Traditionally the rituals prevalent in this period are classified as Śrauta and Gṛhya (domestic) rituals. In both the rituals participation of the wife of the male performer is required.

### Śrauta rituals

As per the chronology Śrauta rituals will be discussed first. In *Rigveda*, it is mentioned that the first duty of the wife was to give her co-operation in all religious duties.<sup>2</sup> (*RV* I.72.5) Even in Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa notes wife's mandatory participation in all the religious or to be specific, in all sacrificial rituals.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the word '*patni*' as noted by Pāṇini can be applied only to a wife who shares in the sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> सञ्जानानाउपसीदन्नाभिजुपत्नीवन्तो नमस्यं नमस्यन् ।

रिरिक्वांसस्तन्वः कृण्वतस्वाः सखासख्युर्निमिषिरक्षमाणाः ॥ *RV* I.72.5

<sup>3</sup> सपत्नीपत्यासुकृतेन गच्छताम् । यज्ञस्य युक्तौ धुर्यावभूताम् ।

सञ्जानानाविजहतामरतीः । दिवि ज्योतिरजरमारभेताम् । *Tait. Br.* III.7.5.

<sup>4</sup> पत्युर्नो यज्ञसंयोगे *Aṣṭādhyāyī* IV.1.33

-----  
Acts performed generally by Women in sacrifices-

- Un-husking grains in *sthālipāka* (which is to be offered to the deities)
- Washing the slaughtered animal
- Looking at the ājya in all Śrauta sacrifices
- In Aśvamedha sacrifice it is duty of the wife of the performer to anoint the horse (in the same passages wives are praised as a form of prosperity.)<sup>5</sup> Then after the horse was smothered the queen was supposed to lie down with the horse.
- In Darśa- pūrṇamāsa the wife is involved in a peculiar ritual called Varuṇapraghāsa. In this ritual the wife is asked ‘how many lovers does she have?’ After her answer priest called Pratiprasthātā recites the *mantra* requesting Varuṇa to destroy them. Therefore the wife remains chaste and pure for later rituals.
- In Agniṣṭoma sacrifice, the most important type of Somayāga active participation of the wife is expected.
- In Vājapeya sacrifice she accompanies her husband in symbolic *svargārohaṇa*, and in other rituals.

These are some important examples of women participation in Vedic sacrificial rituals.

We can deduce that

- The presence of the wife is required in the ritual performances. Rather it is mentioned that half of the sacrifice is destroyed in the case of a sacrificer whose wife is unavailable on the day of sacrifice. <sup>6</sup>
- It should also be noted that very often a priest called Pratipraghāsa used to act in place of wife of the sacrificer or any woman, so substitution was quite possible and accepted.
- There are certain duties specifically stated for her, however these duties are not that of prime importance or rather ritualistic replica of her daily household work.

<sup>5</sup> पत्नयोऽभ्यञ्जन्ति ।श्रियावाएतद्रूपंयत्पत्नयः । Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa III.8.4

<sup>6</sup> अर्धोवाएतस्ययज्ञस्यग्नीयेयस्यव्रत्येऽहन्यव्यनालम्भुकाभवति ।Tai. Br. III.7.i

If the accounts of Vedic sacrifices and scriptures pertaining to them are studied then it is clearly understood that the role played by the wife of the sacrificer is essentially secondary. The question arises then whether women were entitled to perform sacrificial rituals on their own.

Interesting discussion regarding this matter is recorded in *Śābarabhāṣya* on *JS VI.1.10*. the *prima facie* here explains that as women do not have any property of their own, they do not have any right to perform sacrifice. However, *Siddhāntins* refute this saying she has legitimate mastery over the purse of her husband, the wealth is jointly owned by the couple and therefore women do have the privilege to perform sacrifice.

But it is also mentioned that the wife has to act according to the wish of her husband thus even though they have right to perform rituals that right itself entirely depends upon the wish of their husband. The discussion over the women's right to perform sacrifice may be the indication of the actual existence of the same in Early Vedic period.

### **Domestic rites**

These rites are recorded in *Gṛhyasūtras*. There are similarities in the concept and nature of the *Śrauta* and *Gṛhya* rituals. However compared to Vedic sacrifices these rituals were more individualistic and less complex.

The most important of the *Gṛhya* rituals are known as *Saṁkāras*. There are almost forty such rites mentioned for Hindus. Most significant of them can be enlisted as below

- 1) Garbhādhāna
- 2) Puṁsavana
- 3) Simantonnayana
- 4) Jātakarma
- 5) Nāmakaraṇa
- 6) Annaprāśana
- 7) Caulakarma
- 8) Upanayana
- 9) Samāvaratana

10) Vivāha

11) Antyeṣṭī

These are rites to be performed right from the conception of the foetus. It is clear that first three rites are actually connected with the 'Woman' carrying the foetus, however the rites are to be performed by her husband and her role in it is minimal. It should also be mentioned that many rites performed with the *mantras* in case of men or male child and same rites are supposed to be performed without mantras for maiden women or female child.

Dr. S. Dange, expresses views on this matter. 'In Sūtra period there was no restriction on women to learn the Vedas and perform daily rituals with proper mantras. But denial of mantras for women might be in the belief that women are not stable, and their minds are difficult to control. Women are termed '*nirindriyā* and *a-dāyādī*. (Dange, 1985)(pg.41)

It would be appropriate to quote here some scholars regarding the issue of participation of women in the sacrificial rituals. F.M. Smith opines that "Throughout Indian social and religious history, women seem to have played a comparatively minor role in the formulation and development of social, religious and philosophical thinking. Whatever instincts they may have had historically towards these activities have been suppressed." (Smith, 1992) (pg.21)

T.N. Dharmadhikari states that 'looking to the earlier literature of *Dharmasāstra*, it appears that the women did enjoy the right of performing religious rites, but they had a subordinate position. (Dharmadhikari, 1991) (pg.181)

According to Vijay Nath, 'women in the Ṛgvedic age enjoyed social equality and freedom, however in the subsequent period of the later Vedas and Dharmasūtras, there was a gradual withdrawal of women from public life' (Nath, 2009) (pg73).

### **Purāṇic Period**

This period is marked by important changes in the field of rituals. As mentioned earlier religion is always in the process of change so as to cater the changing needs of the society facing new challenges in due course time politically, socially,

religiously and economically. The period of composition of major Purāṇas was quite uncertain in every respect. Apart from that Aryan Brahmanical ideologists were forced to acculturate people from the various strata and regions. To make the religion approachable, attractive and simple, sacrificial rituals were substituted by other rituals like vows, pilgrimage, donations etc. These rituals were quite simple and required less material.

Vows and Tīrthas are two of Brahmanical rituals which do not have any restriction regarding caste and gender. From medieval period onwards *vratas* and such simple rituals became very popular. Immense literature was composed on this topic enumerating such vows and explaining their procedures. This also includes discussion about the person entitled to perform these vows.

*Vrataraja* mentions that a person who is performing his duties as per his *varṇa* and *āśrama*, having pure mind, faithful and fears sins, and devoid of foolishness and arrogance is eligible to perform vow.<sup>7</sup> While describing the procedure or virtues of the *vrātādhikār* in generally masculine gender is used however it is mentioned in *Vrataraja* that if these virtues are present in a certain lady, she is very well eligible to perform that particular vow. It is also mentioned in this context that women should not undertake any vow on their own; she should take permission of her father or husband whichever option is applicable to her and then only commence the *vrata*, a lady observing such rituals without taking permission of her respective male parent, goes to the hell and the vow becomes fruitless. (Madanaratna) Generally, chastity towards her husband is considered highest vow of any lady and it is advised that she should follow her husband believing him to be Nārāyaṇa himself. All the actions of a woman failing to do so are in vain.<sup>8</sup>

There are some rites to be performed exclusively by women and not jointly however later smṛtis harped a different note in this matter. Vārāha Smṛti

<sup>7</sup> *Sāmānyaparibhāṣā, Vratādhikārin, in Vratarāja of Vishvanath Sharma, Ed. By Madhavacharya, Venkateshvara Press, Mumbai*

<sup>8</sup> पतिरेवगतिःस्त्रीणांपतिःप्राणाश्चसम्पदः । धर्मार्थकाममोक्षाणांहेतुःसेतुर्भवाण्वि ॥  
पतिनिरायणःस्त्रीणां व्रतंधर्मःसनातनः । सर्वकर्मवृथातासांस्वामिनांविमुखाश्चयाः ॥  
*Brahmavaivarta Purana I.9.64,65*

says, 'the women are very frail and feeble. They are not capable of enduring the attacks of hunger and fasting hence they should not indulge into the observance of vows. Viṣṇusmṛti says, a woman who observes fast or performs any religious rite, when her husband is alive, robs off her husband's life and goes to the hell.

These expressions of restrictions over the women's right to perform these rites is very surprising as a considerably large number of vows are prescribed to women for distinctive female purposes like obtaining good husband, longevity of husband's wife etc. In fact, Puranic texts profusely advocate observances of vows by women. However, *Purāṇic* texts when elaborate such *vratas* usually, it is mentioned in the myth associated to it that the lady observing it was advised to do so by her husband.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly Kunal Chakravarti (Chakravarti, 2001) has expressed very important thoughts and comments over this topic. He observes that Purāṇas, not only sanctions women participation in the ritual of vows but made it a compulsory rite for them. He denotes that this declaration of Purāṇas, in a way is acknowledgment of the fact that the indigenous *vratas* were originally exclusively women's rite.

There can be many ways to explain this controversy. It can be explained as in the process of acculturation these non-Brahmanical rituals like female oriented vows were adopted by Brahmanical religion. However, the sanction given to these rituals came with the link to Vedic rituals. Therefore, vows were projected as substitution to sacrifices. And certain features of Vedic sacrifices like denial of the privilege to women were partially transferred to these new rituals also in spite of their female dominated nature. However, it must be noted that in this era women participation in religious rituals was encouraged more and more.

### **Modern period-**

In modern era one can see a gradual increase in the participation of women in the performance of rituals and celebration of the festivals. The section of daily worship ritual is generally shared by male and female equally. There is now a

<sup>9</sup> संवत्सरं व्रतमिदं यद्यज्ञो धारयिष्यसि ॥ *Bhāgavata Purana. VI. 18.45*



-----  
 trend to perform *upanayana* rite even for the girl child with proper *mantras*. Many women wish to perform almost all the rituals generally performed by men. Now a days even funeral rites which used to be the strictly in the dominion of men are performed by women.

In progressive cities like Mumbai and Pune one can see many women *Purohitas* officiating different rituals. The concept of lady priest however is not still much acceptable in the rural areas, but in urban India it is well appreciated.

Festivals are celebrated at family level as well as publicly. Celebration in the family was no doubt always governed by the lady of the house, however in last twenty years or so participation of women is growing at large scale in public celebration also.

Certain activities like preparing human pyramids for *Gopalkālā*, or playing big drums- *dhola* for Ganpati festivals etc. was dominated by men previously but we can definitely say that women are performing excellent and in fact taking over in these fields also.

### **Observation and Conclusion**

It may be observed that the role of Indian women in rites and rituals has changed in accordance with the time and with the need of that time. The patriarchal system in India has always dominated female section of the society, but in some or the other way religion has always admitted the importance of the role played by the 'Woman' in the life of a 'Man'. Therefore, woman's representation in the religious rites and rituals indicate two opposite things. Denial of independent right to women is of course reflection of the male dominance whereas the women's essential and compulsory participation may be an indication of undisputed significance.

In modern period especially in post-independence era, women empowerment, exposure to new world, education and idea of individuality, and in addition to that even the financial independency has made modern woman more aware of her role in family and society.

This has reflected even in her attitude towards the religious observances. Today's woman may not observe typical female oriented vows like *haritalikā*, *vaṭasāvitrī*, *mangalagauri* etc. forcibly if she does not wish to observe. However,

at the same time a tendency can be seen to perform rituals or to participate in the celebration of the festivals where generally women participation is not allowed and welcomed previously. The enthusiasm shown by women to act as an officiating priest when opportunity was given is also very interesting. There were many movements in recent past for the inclusion of women in ritual observances or admission in the inner chamber of the temples. One can sense the spirit of rebellion in this. But it should also be admitted that every change is looked upon as rebel till it settles well in the society and this changing role of women in religious observances naturally is not an exception to that.

### References

- Chakravarti. (2001). Religious Process: The Purans and the Making of a Regional Tradition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dange, S. (1985). Hindu Domestic Rituals: A critical Glance. Delhi: Ajantha Publications.
- Dharmadhikari, T. N. (1991). Women's Right to perform religious rites. In J. V.N. (Ed.), Living Customs and Their Ancient Indian Sources (p. 181). Pune: Centre for Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Pune.
- Nath, V. (2009). The Puranic World: Environment, Gender, Ritual and Myth,. Delhi: Manohar Publications,.
- Smith, F. (1992). Indra's Curse, Varuna's Noose and Supression of Vedic Women in Vedic Sruta Rituals. In J. Leslie (Ed.), Roles and Rituals for Hindu women. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.

### Bibliography

- 1) Leslie Julia (Editor) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, MLBD, New Delhi, 1992
- 2) *Bhāgavatamahāpurāṇa*, Gitapress Gorakhpur, 2000
- 3) *Brahmavaivartamahāpurāṇa*, Ed. By Vasudevshastri Marathe, Anandashrama Sanskrit series, Pune 1935
- 4) *Ṛgveda- Samhitā*(with Sāyaṇa's commentary) Ed. by Vaidika Samshodhan Mandal, Pune, 1933-51
- 5) *Taittirīya- Samhitā*, Ed. by Satwalekar, S.D., Anandashrama Pune, 1948.

~~~~~