

NA STRĪSVĀTANTRYAṂ ARHATI– THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD STATEMENT

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Abstract

Starting Vedic period, until now, many instances can be quoted, where, women have been enjoying complete independence in all walks of life. In the statement quoted above, what does the term 'svātantrya' mean? According to the commentators on *Manusmṛti*, it means *svarakṣā*. Manu's verse is actually *astrikavaca* and a *kavaca* should not be misunderstood as a shackle. This paper concentrates in this point and tries to give a correct picture of a wrongly understood idea.

INTRODUCTION

This is a very popular statement, which has created a flutter in all women's minds. However if one probes into our *Sanātana*dharma, it would be clear that the above statement is a misnomer.

During Vedic period, *ṛṣipatnīs* enjoyed equal status as men and they have authored many *sūktas* in *Ṛg Veda* (RV). For example, Lopāmudrā, one of the female preachers, has authored 179 *sūktas* with sage Agastya in the first *maṇḍala* of this Veda. Viśvavāra Ātreyaī, was the *ṛtvikā* of the 28th *sūkta* of the fifth *maṇḍala* of RV.

*Ṛg Veda*¹ calls woman as a queen of the family:

सम्राज्ञी श्वसुरे भव सम्राज्ञी श्वश्र्वां भव ।

ननान्दरि सभ्राज्ञी भव सभ्राज्ञी अधि देवृषु ॥

During this period women equally took part in sacrifices. The husbands attended sacrifices generally accompanied by their wives.

In the *Yajurveda* (YV) it has been desired that women should obtain the best education. A child born of a learned mother is always happy in life, ascertains *Yajurveda*²:

आवित्ता अदिति रुरु शर्मा ।

The *Atharva Veda*³(AV) pays high compliments to the women who were deeply engaged in learning:

शुद्धाः पूता योषितो यज्ञिया इमा आपश्चरुमवसर्पन्तु शुभ्राः ।

Women used to perform the sacrifice occupying their seat by the side of their husbands. In the *mantra*, 'अयज्ञो वा एषः योऽपत्नीकः ।' found in *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa*, one notices that the Yajamāna without his wife was not eligible to perform the sacrifice.

Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa gives a high place to women saying that women as mothers are the best and the foremost preceptors of children:

मातृमान् पितृमान् आचार्यवान् पुरुषो वेद ।

While commenting on *Manusmṛti*⁴ the commentator, Kullūka, quotes *Vājasaneyā Brāhmaṇa*, which says that a man continues to be half as long as he is a bachelor, but after marrying a wife he becomes complete and as such there lies no distinction between man and woman:

अर्धो ह वा एष आत्मनस्तस्माद्यज्ञायां न विन्दते नैतावत् प्रजायते असर्वो हि तावद्भवति अथ यदैव जाया विन्दतेऽथ प्रजायते तर्हि सर्वो भवति ।

During Upanishadic period, women like Lopāmudrā, Gārgī and Maitrāyaṇī took active part in the philosophical forums. According to *Hārīta Dharmasūtra*, there are two classes of women namely, 1. *Brahmavādinīs* who are eligible for the *Upanayana*, the study of Vedas and the practice of begging; and 2. *Sadyovadhūs* who are just initiated to the *Upanayana* before marriage.

In *Vasiṣṭhasūtra*⁵, women are eulogised as hundred times superior to a man in instructing and elevating a child.

Then emerged the epic period in which also women were given a respectable status.

For example, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we find ladies of royal families who were highly educated in all types of activities starting from Vedic rituals to war crisis management. Kausalyā was well versed in Vedic rituals. The day, on which Rāma's coronation was to take place, she was seen in the morning worshipping the Lord Viṣṇu and offering oblations into the *yajña* fire, for the welfare of her son according to *VR*⁶:

कौसल्या तदा देवी रात्रिं स्थित्वा समाहिता ।
 प्रभाते त्वकरोत् पूजां विष्णोः पुत्रहितैषिणी ॥
 सा क्षौमवसना हृष्टा नित्यं व्रतपरायणा ।
 अग्निं जुहोतिस्म तदा मन्त्रवत् कृतमङ्गला ॥

In the same epic in another episode, Kaikeyi helped Daśaratha in the Śambarāsura war and for that courageous action she got two boons from him.

In the *Mahābhārata*⁷, a famous incident can be quoted, where Kunti was taught a *mantra* from *Atharva Veda* by a sage which she used to get sons in the future episode:

ततस्तामनवद्याङ्गीं ग्राहयामास स द्विजः ।
 मन्त्रग्रामं तदा राजन्नथर्वशिरसि श्रुतम् ।

During that period, women were free to choose their husbands through *svayamvara*. In the above epic, the marriage of Kunti was conducted on the proper lines of a real Svaya mvara. Thus it is very obvious that the women's status till the epic period was on par with that of men.

During *smṛti* period also women were treated equally with men. For example, *Yāj. Smṛ*⁸ says that if the husband/ father himself divides his property during his life time among his sons, then the wife is entitled to a share equal to that of a son.

*Yāj. Smṛ*⁹ says that if a man is allowed to marry for the second time because the first wife is either with disease or a drunkard etc. it is still imperative that he should take care of her and maintain her:

अधिविन्ना तु भर्तव्या महदेनोऽन्यथा भवेत् ॥

Remarriage for women was an accepted mode of life.

Manu¹⁰ talks about six types of *strīdhana* viz. *adhyāgni*, *adhyaṅvāhnikā*, *prītidatta*, *bhrāṭṛdatta*, *māṭṛdatta* and *pitṛdatta*.

Kātyāyana¹¹ says that no one else has the right on *strīdhana* except the woman who owns it:

न भर्ता नैव च सुता न पिता भ्रातरो न च ।

आदाने वा विसर्गे वा स्त्रीध्ने प्रभविष्णवः ॥

Then what made Manu¹² to write the following verse, containing the expression `nastrīsvātantryamarhati`:

पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने ।

रक्षन्ति स्थविरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति ॥

Here, what does the term `svātantrya` mean? `Svatantra` is understood by all as `freedom`. Then the statement would mean that `women do not deserve freedom`. But the commentators on *Manusmṛti*, explain it as `a woman should not be let to fend for herself`.

The verse declares that a woman is to be taken care of by her father, until her marriage, that duty is shifted to her husband once she is married to him, and finally, in the absence of her father and husband, the son gets that duty. Then the text adds `nāstrīsvātantryamarhati`.

Commenting on this, Medhātithi declares that this `phrase` does not mean that a woman has no freedom to do anything, but that she has to be protected since she is physically weak:

न अनेन सर्वक्रियाविषयस्वातन्त्र्यं विधीयते किं तर्हि ? न अन्यमनस्का
स्वात्मरक्षणाय प्रभवति शक्तिविकलत्वात्स्वतः। अन्यदेव अस्वातन्त्र्यम् अन्या च रक्षा।
...इह तु रक्षोच्यते।

Earlier he explains here only protection is insisted by the term *asvātantrya*. He further clarifies that *rakṣā* means *anarthapatighāta* (protection from unwarranted problems).

Rāghavānanda is quite cryptic when he says that here *svātantrya* should be taken as `being unprotected` (रक्षितुरहितत्वम्).

From these it should be clearly understood, that Manu has not ordained a woman to be fettered or chained or confined to a space, that he insists on the men folk of the house to extend their protecting arm towards her. Not only in this place, but throughout the Smṛti, Manu is always dictating rules and regulations to men to follow. He seems to drive into their ears their duty to the society and family.

When would a law be enforced? Only when there is chaos or when many uncontrollable activities affect the harmonious life style. Thus, during Manu's period, the status of women would have deteriorated, activities endangering the physical and psychological security of women would have happened and that too would have been done mostly by men. The best way to prevent men from indulging in such activities is to appoint them as

guardians to the victims, so that there would not be any untoward happenings thereafter.

Keeping all these in mind, the great administrator Manu would have appointed men as guardians for protecting women. Through this step, molestation of women by men was prevented largely. This was in vogue, during the epic period also, though women's status was much more superior that time.

For example, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* when Rāma decided to go to the forest, he asked Sītā to go to Mithilā and stay there till his return from the forest. In the *Mahābhārata* also, Draupadī was asked to stay with her brother, when Pāṇḍavas were forced to undertake *vanavāsa* for thirteen years. In another instance, Subadrā, wife of Arjuna was asked to stay with Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, her brothers when Arjuna went to forest to do *tapas*. Thus, it is very clear that, in those days women were under the constant care of their well-wishers.

Here, *svātantrya* does not mean freedom to do anything at one's free will. In fact, a woman, being protected from all directions, can very well work according to her free will. The guardians have to fulfill all her *dharmic* desires. Many instances can be quoted from our ancient literature, where women like Jābālī bringing up their offspring without any support from others including their three types of guardians mentioned above. How would these have been possible, if they did not have freedom? According to studies, after approximately 500 B.C, the status of women began to decline. With the Islamic invasion of Babur, their freedom still worsened.

Though Jainism tried to bring back their glory, many women faced confinement and restrictions. In the medieval period, women's position still deteriorated. Child marriage was enforced; ban on women remarriage became part of social life in some communities; *purdah* culture cropped in and the venerated *devadāśīs* were exploited; *satī* too was in vogue. Polygamy was practised among Hindu *kṣatriya* rulers for some political reasons.

In spite of all these conditions women often became famous in the field of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia Sultana of 13th century became the only queen to have ruled Delhi. Shivaji's mother Jijabai, was a great administrator and a courageous warrior. In *bhakti* cult Mirābai was outstanding. Guru Nanak, the first *sikhguru*, practised equality between men and women. He advocated that women be allowed to lead religious assemblies and to lead *kīrtans* etc.

Rāṇī Maṅgammā of Nāyaka kingdom of Madurai of 17th century is still remembered for her administrative skill. Rāṇī Ahilya Bai Holkar of Malwa kingdom (18th century), has built many temples and *Dharmaśālas*; she had fought in several wars; she had specifically worked for the welfare of widows. RāṇīLakṣmi Bai of Jansi is remembered for her incredible valour shown in the first war of Independence (1857).

After the advent of British rule, woman's legal rights as well as her position in society again reached a dark phase lowering her status to very low level depriving her of individual rights she was enjoying previously, since the British applied the Roman law. After two centuries of ruling, they realized the value of ancient Hindu law and tried to amend their own laws accordingly. In 1847 Peary Charan Carkar, Calcutta, established the first free school for girls in Barsat.

Rajaram Mohan Rai's efforts led to the abolition of *Satī* in 1829. Widows Remarriage act 1856, improved the situation of widows. All India Women's Education Conference was held in Pune in 1927. It became a major organization in the movement for social change. In 1929, Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed.

Women from different occupations like Dr. Anne Besent, Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Sucheta Kripalini, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Durgabai Deshmukh played a prominent role in our freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu was the first woman to become the

President of Indian National Congress. Mrs. Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of Independent India.

Constitution of India guarantees equality to all Indian women (Article 14). It allows special provisions to be made by the state in favour of women and children (Article 15-3). 2001 was celebrated as the year of Women Empowerment. National Policy for the Empowerment of women care was passed in 2001.

Finally, an exclusive Helpline telephone Number has been allotted for Women welfare (1091) and any type of harassment in any part of India can be registered here 24×7-365 days. Several women oriented NGOs and Self- help groups have played major role in the advancement of women's rights in India. Many women like Medha Patkar have emerged as leaders of local movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan. The most famous female business success story is that of the Sri Mahila Griha Udyog (Lijjad Pappad makers).

Thus many laws have been enforced to safeguard women. They have exclusive right to enjoy the property inherited from their mother side. They can spend that money according to their free will. Even their husbands do not have any right in that freedom.

Nowadays, woman has to play a dual role. At one end, she has to do full justice to her job. At home, also she has the moral responsibility of bringing up her children. Now a question will arise. The men also have the same responsibility, why cannot they share it? True! But, it should be clearly understood that only women can handle some psychological issues of the children which cannot be handled by men. Thus, women, who are capable of playing this dual role more efficiently than men should also realize the fact that their physical health also have to be taken care in order to run the show for quite a long period. God has created women to pour love on others. Only women can make their children emotionally healthy. If the present trend continues, the next

generation would definitely lag behind in understanding true love and affection. The term 'Humane Touch' will become a misnomer.

CONCLUSION

Now, the responsibility of saving the mankind from the clutches of demon called material value lies within women. Are they going to use their unique power of love to save it or, they, without understanding the meaning for *svātantryam*, going to yield to temptation, fight for equal rights which are always with them, break the protective layer designed by our ancestors like Manu, and harm themselves and consequently destroy the whole mankind, The answer will decide the fate of future generations.

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4. *Ṛgveda*, with com. of Sāyaṇācārya, Vaidika Samsodhan Mandal, Pune, 1972.
5. *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra*
6. *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, M.L.J. Press, Madras, 1958.
7. *Yajur Veda*, ed. by S. D. Satvalekar, Svadhyaya Mandal, Pardi.
8. *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, ed. by K.L. Joshi, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 2005.

ENDNOTES :

- 1 ṚV, X. 85. 46
- 2 YV, X. 9
- 3 AV, XI. 1. 17
- 4 Manusmṛti, IX. 45
- 5 Vasiṣṭhasūtra, XIII. 48
- 6 VR, II. 20. 14-5
- 7 Mahābhārata, Vanaparva, 305. 20
- 8 Yāj.Smṛ, 11. 114-15
- 9 Yāj.Smṛ, 1. 74ab
- 10 Manusmṛti, IX. 194
- 11 Kātyāyana, 911
- 12 Manusmṛti, IX. 3
