

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before undertaking the exploration of the roots of feminism in the Ancient Indian Times, it is important to clarify my interpretation of feminism in order to avoid any communication gap. Feminism is the advocacy of women's political, economic, and social rights on the basis of equality of sexes. Central to feminism is humanism which implies bringing wholeness to the existence of a woman.

The logical question here is why there arose the need of feminism at all. I have a sense that the answer lies in the prehistoric times when the human existence began. While man hunted animals in the forests to make available the meat which was the staple human food, women due to the demands of sexuality and maternity remained in and around the shelter to care of children and gathering edible plants (leaves and fruits). Since, animal meat was more crucial for the human survival, men began to be treated superior to women. In this context, the theory of Historical Materialism of Karl Marx seems to be quite relevant, supporting this contention. This theory professes that how man produces the goods of his needs and who owns the means of production (the material factors) determine the social relations. Hence, the Bourgeois-proletariat relationship got replicated in the domain of man-woman relationship also. Even after the civilization began and family system emerged, man came to be viewed as the bread winner of the family while woman because of the demands of the sexuality and maternity remained confined to the household. This explains the concept of *gender performativity* (stereotyping), devised by Judith Butler, the American philosopher, which implies what a woman would do is predetermined by the fact of her sex. Engel's theory of origin of patriarchy relates women's subjugation to the emergence

of the concept of private property, whereby men began restricting social and sexual freedom of women (wives) to ensure that his property passes on to his own son. Therefore in all likelihood, patriarchy predates the Ancient History, a fact which sets up the frame for exploring feministic discourse in the sources of the study in the ancient Indian times.

It's not that the efforts have not been made to explore feminism in ancient India, but such discourse has been limited to citing the sporadic instances of a few bold women in the Rig Vedic times, referring to the cult of Shakti in the Dharmashstras to highlight feminine power, and highlighting the views of a few scholars like Varahmihira who support the equality of women. But, Ancient Indian literature and mythology being the repository of huge intellect and wisdom must have more pronounced overtones of feminism, and, if tapped optimally, could furnish a rich discourse. I reviewed some ancient literature on women's status, but couldn't find out a conscious effort to form the feministic discourse with an idea of establishing its relevance to the modern feministic issue. Therefore, the objective of this study to frame a materially richer and well crystallized discourse out of the ancient Indian sources of study.

In the interest of a better intelligibility, the study has undertaken the various segments of literature viz Vedic literature (Vedas and Upanishads), Epics, Shastras and Smritis, which represent different time periods, thereby covering almost the entire ancient historical period. In this study which is qualitative in nature, primary sources (translated version), and secondary sources (predominant in view of the limitation of

time), have been referred, and the interviews with a few feminist scholars have been conducted.

## **SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

### **CHAPTER-1- Women in Vedas, Upanishads & Epics**

This chapter brings out the status of women as reflected from Vedas, Upanishads, and Epics.

**Vedas-** In the context of this study, Rig Veda is the most relevant of all the four Vedas. The study supported the view that in the Rig Vedic times women enjoyed a considerable equality in society vis-à-vis men in many respects, having equal opportunities for learning and development, freedom to choose partner in marriage, choice to remain unmarried, a commanding status in home, enjoying better property rights etc. But the study also revealed that this equality played out within a patriarchal set-up predicated upon the male superiority. To illustrate the point, though women participated in the political bodies like Sabha and Samitis, they couldn't take decisions independently. The main take away from the early Vedic times is that in spite of patriarchy, there didn't seem to be existing gender insensitivity. To this extent Rig Veda furnishes a stronger inspiration for modern feminism

**UPANISHADS-** The Upanishads constitute a very crucial source for the study of the status of women in ancient Indian times, even though they are the repository of ancient philosophical discussions. The neuter-gender concept of 'Brahman' (the supreme soul) and the instance of the scholarly women like Maitreya debating on

philosophy with her erudite husband Yajnavalkya are great suggestions for gender-equality. Upanishads may inspire the modern feminism, for the simple reason that they teach a great lesson that a society based upon knowledge rather than rituals fosters rationality which naturally renders man alive to social inequality of all. Upanishads therefore emerged as a great counter to the deteriorating status of women during the later Vedic times.

**EPICS-** Like most of the ancient literary sources, the Epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, also reveal the contradictory views about the status of women. But the Epics form a different category because unlike the other texts they are purely in the form of stories. Hence dialogues play an important role reflecting the treatment of women. The dialogues on women project their totally inferior position, suggesting total submissiveness, which doesn't seem to be matching with the strong roles they came on to perform in the stories. Strong, feminist characters like Suparnakha, Kunti, Draupadi, Tara etc. therefore have long been the hallmark of Indian mythology, and thus continue to inspire the feministic discourse in the current times. Secondly, these epics are given to not only ambivalence but multivalence, leaving a lot scope for a contextually positive interpretation. That is why the revisionist mythology-efforts to view the stories from the eyes of women like Draupadi and Sita- is playing a crucial role in inspiring feminism in the current times.

## **Chapter-2 Arthashastra; Economics & Women**

*Arthashastra* holds a special place in the body of the ancient literary sources simply because it concerns primarily with governance and economics, looking upon women as an economic resource to be deployed for the purpose of the state, as against

the *dharmashastric* literature which confine women to the households within a brahmanic-patriarchal society and defines them with reference to men. Thus, the text mentions about women engaged in various kinds of economic activities as well as state services. Since the objective of the Arthashastra is to strengthen the state power, it supports the categories women like courtesans who brought revenues to the state, and spies who through their intelligence overpowered enemies. But these women were mostly of lower class/caste, not enjoying a high social status. Arthashastra is no different from the Dharmashastra in according a secondary status to women in the patriarchal framework. The upper Varnas women in family life were not encouraged to step out of the household domain. Hence, there was a conflict between the economic independent social status. It was because youth and sexuality rather than education was the source of their independence. Hence, the big take-away from Arthashastra from the feministic point of view is that if education and professional skill get women economic opportunities they will naturally enjoy freedom and status at once. The feministic governance today rightly emphasizes upon educating women to bring them into workforce.

### **Chapter-3- The portrayal of Women in the Manusmriti and Other Shastras & Smritis**

**MANUSMRITI-** Amongst the Dharmashastras, the Manusmriti has been referred especially because it is supposed to be the earliest and most authoritative work on Brahminical Dharma in Hinduism. This text assumed more importance than the others also because the British rule implemented it even during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Manusmriti remains a hotly debated text as is quite confusing with regard to the status of women. It consists of both positive as well as negative comments about women.

*Another reason which challenges its reliability is its authenticity; it is believed to have undergone multiple revisions over time.* However, there is an agreement that Manu has kept them under complete male domination. And hence in no way we can take Manusmriti as the inspiration for the feministic discourse of the modern times; the negative ones are too unambiguous and harsh in their denigration of women, and militate against the feministic sentiments.

**OTHER SHASTRAS AND SMRITIS-** The other Shastras and Smritis don't paint women in very positive colours. Patriarchy seems to be getting hardened in the later ancient times when these texts were supposedly composed. The daily duties of women documented in Stridharmapaddhati, written by Tryambaka, are quite menial, reflecting their complete subordination. But the scholars believe that these texts don't represent the entire geographical spread of the country. The different ground realities might be different; many regions of eastern India under the influence of Buddhism which professed gender equality.

However, the most remarkable feature of the Smriti literature from the point of view of gender equality is the concretization of the cult of 'AdiShakti', Durga and Kali to uphold feminine cosmic energy behind the creation of the Universe, impressing that both man and woman are equally needed for human existence. Hindu Shakti tradition-related texts, and empirical studies have brought out that women in rural India who have had no exposure to Western thought or education assert their Hindu goddess-inspired feminism. The philosophizing fervour again, like Upanishads, fosters humanism which is pivotal to feminism.

## **Chapter-5- Arthashastra, Kamasutra and Manusmrti; A Reflection Upon Women's Work**

Kautilya's Arthashastra, Manu's Manusmriti and the Kamasutra ascribed to Vatsyayana, belong to an almost contemporary period ranging from fourth century BCE to the third century CE, and are quite popular with regard to classifying women's role in household and economic activities.

Arthshastra and Manusmriti, we have seen, exhibit an unmistakable patriarchal ethos. *Manusmriti*, does not recognise the role of women of upper classes as generating resources or participating in productive activities. **Arthshastra** is different only to the extent that it views women as the economic resource also because its prime objective is to maintain and strength the authority of the state. The objective is not to accord any freedom and dignity to women in general.

**Kamasutra of Vatsayana** is a very crucial text in understanding the role of women. Unlike Arthashastra, it not only relates to the sexuality of women, but also dwells at length upon their role in household, which speak substantially upon their treatment. In contrast to the Arthashastra and the Manusmrti, the Kamasutra does not recognise the role of the conventional householder, called nagaraka (husband), as the maintainer and preserver of the household. All major household responsibilities are supposed to be managed by wives in the presence as well as absence of the husband. Secondly, in Kamasutra she has been portrayed as having been engaged into many activities, which can be taken apparently commercially productive. Likewise, woman was the commander of the servants as well.

Another remarkable revelation in the text relates to not the economic worth but the sexuality of women. The text mentions that men should always be tender to women in sex. This prescription can act as a check upon the prevailing problem of sexual violence in today's society. Thus, Kamasutra emerges as a great feministic text of the ancient times in spite of being placed in a patriarchal set-up.

## **INSCRIPTIONS AND COINS**

Some critics of ancient Indian literature argue that being “mythological or fabled, they hardly reflect the ground realities substantially. In this context if we wish to study the ground realities, one of the most reliable sources will be epigraphy. On the basis of a few we have seen women emerge as poets, givers, rulers, enjoying a lot of freedom. Ordinary women have been shown as singing and dancing outdoors, which suggests that they enjoyed a lot of freedom. Likewise coins too being issued in the name of women (rulers) suggest that women could be rulers too, and not mere queens. To know the ground realities the domain of epigraphy and numismatics need to be further researched.

**At the end of the study of the ancient sources,** it would be pertinent to draw attention to the precautions which need to be exercised in viewing and interpreting the Brahmanical/ Hindu texts:

- (a) The ancient texts don't represent the entire geographical region, as many local customs and traditions prevailed concurrently.
- (b) The concepts in these texts are more theoretical than practical; ground realities could be considerably different from the theoretical concepts.



- (c) We have to keep a keen eye upon Hermeneutics (contextual interpretation), as these texts being given to contrary interpretations leave a lot of scope for the feministic interpretation suitable to the theme of feminism.

Summing it up, we have see how the endeavour for gender equality in the ancient times has taken place within the overarching patriarchal framework underpinned with women's subjugation, which predates the ancient history and endured till now. But is replacing patriarchy with matriarchy the solution? Ms. Kamla Bhasin says, "as a feminist I don't subscribe to the male dominance being replaced with female dominance. Matriarchy is not the solution. There are instances when men too feel oppressed by women. What I professed is gender equality, with man and woman being sensitive to each other's existential needs." Therefore what is required is an equitable order which could view man and woman as two individual entities, equally crucial to the continuance and evolution of humanity. Even the natural order-biology-supports such an equitable order as both man and woman have to come together to continue the race of humanity through procreation. Even if a woman is not working, it can't be the reason to view her inferior; ignoring her contribution by way of maternity and home making indicates intellectual myopia. So along with the feministic governance and other endeavor to bring women into the men workforce and at thus par with men in all respects, there is a need to enlighten society to work for an equitable social order where both the genders are sensitive to each other. The modern feministic discourse drives me hopeful for this happening in future.

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