

Subaltern Predicament of Women In Hindu Scriptures In Ancient Era

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The society always treated women as an object of sex and sexual exploitation. It was an established fact that woman was looked down in all aspects of life. Discrimination is shown towards her in all spheres, in the disguise of tradition and culture.

The Indian literature gives controversial statements regarding the status of woman in the society. At some point it says that the mother should be respected highly more than the father and guru (teacher). And elsewhere it advises not to trust woman.

One of the ancient scriptures say that if father is bad, the son can abandon him. If Guru is bad the disciple can leave him but one should not leave one's mother. The son should obey the mother. But later Manu dharma Shastra says woman should not be given freedom. She should be kept under the control of man at every stage of life.

In the earlier days of civilization, women enjoyed a superior status. The matriarchal system of society placed the control in the hands of woman. They were the owners of wealth and enjoyed power and freedom. This is in prevedic and vedic period. In the prehistoric society people lived in groups. Group marriages were common system of society. Women because of their productive functions enjoyed superior status. Children were identified with the names of their mothers. The family was known after the mothers. This is the symptom of matriarchal society. Mahabharata depicts this type of system.

Dalit women were portrayed in both these epics. Nowadays 'Dalit' word is used commonly for oppressed and depressed classes. It has much historical context which took present shape. Let us examine some oppressed women characters from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Among them some are not specifically from lower castes; but they are from oppressed classes. I am illustrating five characters mainly from the literature. 1.Matanga Kanyas, 2.Tataka, 3.Surpanakha, 4.Aayomukhi, 5.Mandodari. There is much to say about the genealogy of these people. They come under 'Shudra' category.

Our holy scriptures say 'Asura' means Rakshasa. They are opposed to 'Sura' race. Mahabharata and Ramayana speak highly of 'Deva' race and degrade 'Asura' race.

One can notice Arya and Anarya differences in both the epics. On the whole the Puranas say that Asura, Rakshasa, Desyu races are opposed to Aryan culture.

They are aboriginal and wicked people. In that sense one can come to a conclusion that these above mentioned races were oppressed races; i.e. Dalits of that time. Ramayana tells as clearly how Rama killed Rakshasas to protect sages (priests) and Yajnas. And the most important point I wish to state is that, how the Rakshasa women were insulted by Rama who belonged to higher caste.

Mahabharata speaks of pastoral communities as well as hunting tribes. The story of 'Satya Harishchandra' is very famous in Mahabharata. Matanga Kanyas (Girls from an untouchable family) play important role in this story. The story of Harishchandra became famous in almost all regional languages in India. It was propagated as Sravya Kavya and Drisya Kavya i.e. Drama. It became popular as cinema too.

King Harishchandra was a famous king of Tretayuga. He is one among the six famous kings. He is praised for his Satyavach (i.e. Truthfulness). Let us examine some facts of the story. Once King Harishchandra went to the forest for hunting. He was much tired. Two matanga girls approached him and entertained the King with their dance and music. The King was much pleased to give them something in praise of their talent. On his request, they asked for an 'umbrella'. 'Umbrella' in those days is a symbol of royal honor. Only higher caste people were eligible for that honor. The lower castes, how much talented they may be, cannot ask for such an honor. It was a sin on their part to wish for such an honor. The poet describes the two girls as very pretty and talented. Poets whenever they describe a woman they describe her from top to beauty, color, complexion, etc. They describe their lips, nose, ears, etc. with much lust. They give less importance for their ladies feelings. 'Matanga' Kanyas are no exception to this. All the time nobody suspects their caste. Even the King Harishchandra could not make out their caste. But after listening to their wish for an 'Umbrella', i.e. for the honor which is strictly restricted to upper caste people; the King got angry and rejected their wish. The King gave them another chance to ask for a wish. The girls express their wish to marry the King. The King was stunned. He rejected their wish this time also saying that the girls are untouchables as such, he cannot marry them. In the beginning of the story the girls were described as very beautiful and well mannered. But later much discrimination is shown towards them. As untouchables they were insulted and sent off. They were abused in the name of the caste. Later Sage Viswamitra comes to the King and declares them as his pet daughters; and asks the King to marry them. He assured the King that it will not be counted as sin. But the King rejects the proposal saying that the girls were untouchables.

Pandits and scholars say that people get respect only through behaviour and merit but not through birth. But in practice they do not show that. Caste through birth dominates everything. This is a clear evidence for their outlook.

King Harischandra rejected the plea of the sage and is ready to do anything to avoid the marriage. He expresses his aversion towards lower castes repeatedly. He says that he cannot disgrace his pious caste by marrying the Matanga girls. This is the story given in Mahabharata vana parva, Chapter 77.

There were many slokas praising 'Matanga Kanya'. Even Shankarcharya prayed her. The Matangas are suppressed by the society in the name of Varnasrama dharma. Dr.Ambedkar in his book on "Riddles in Hinduism" discusses many points on these tribes and races which were insulted by "Manu". Dr.Ambedkar says that varna – dharma which formed so fundamental part of the Hindu Dharma is very much peculiar and nobody could give a consistent explanation of its origin. We see Dalit women as mature individuals and good representatives of primitive society. They have potentiality and powerful past. It is no surprise to note that the realities were wrongly recorded and were focused in negative way.

Puranas and other scriptures sometimes give contradictory statements regarding such stories. Manu restricted women, particularly Dalit women and made unfair codes and comments against them. These codes are visible in Ramayana.

The greed of upper castes i.e. of Kshatriyas (rulers) and Sages led the Journey of Rama in Dandakaranya. Ramayana is a story of upper and lower class conflicts; Aryan and non Aryan conflicts for power.

Killing of Tataka is the consequence of domination of Sages over the land of Tataka in Dandakaranya. This was done for, "Gobrahmana Hithardhaya..." (for the welfare of cows and Brahmins) and "Caturvarna hitardhaya" (for the welfare of the (four) caste system says) Ramayana. This caste system decides the status of the people by virtue of the birth.

Tataka is a dignified and powerful ruler of "Malada" and "Karusha" lands. According to the Dictionary of Hinduism "She is a female vegetated godling (Yakshini) who was changed into a male violent spirit (Rakshasi) for having disturbed the Rishi Agastya".

The story of Tataka is mentioned in two places in Ramayana. She is a Yakshini: Yakshas are of "Tamasa" guna. "Manudharma Sastra" identifies some races as higher and some as lower depending on their births. He also says that the births are in accordance to the 'guna'. Manu says, "Births as dancers, arrogant men, Rakshasas and pishachas are the effects of the refined kind of Tamasa guna (Manu 12 – 44).

Births as shudras etc. are the middle kind of Tamasa guna. Births as gandharva, guhyaka, Yaksha, attendants of Gods and Apsaras are the superior kind of Rajasa guna” (Manu 12 – 46)

So Manu is equating shudra, rakshasa and pishachas births more or less with ‘Tamas guna’. Tataka being a Yakshini by birth is of Rajasa guna which is superior to Shudra. But she became a Rakshasi by the curse of Agestya and became the victim of domination of higher castes. They killed her husband and gave curse to her son to become a rakshasa and made her also a rakshasi. In that way she was oppressed and was degraded. She can be equated to a Dalit woman.

Tataka by birth was a beautiful and strong lady, a peace loving ruler. She opposed “yajnas”, which involved killings i.e. Himsa (violence). The Sages were not allowed to do sacrifices (Yajnas) in her territory. So the Sages were not happy about her Ahimsa. They went to King Dasharatha and brought his sons Rama and Lakshmana along with them for help and attacked Tataka, they got her killed, and occupied her territory.

The realities of the story were not focused properly in Ramayana. Tataka was neither cruel nor of aggressive nature. Vishwamitra brought Rama to her land “Tatakayamvanam” purposefully, and caught her unaware; and got her killed. Tataka was not given a chance to fight or protect herself. Tataka, when she heard the sound of Rama’s bow became frightened and fell unconscious (“Krodha Moorchita”) says Valmiki.

They attacked her mercilessly, defamed her by cutting her nose and ears and killed her in a most cruel way. Now – a – days we often come across incidents of sexual exploitation. When a girl rejects to fulfil the desire of higher caste man or landlord they punish her by way of making her ugly. They cut her nose and ears. In some cases strip her naked. It is interesting to note that such type of punishments were in vogue in Ramayana and Mahabharata.

According to Mahabharata Draupadi was insulted in a full court. They tried to strip her naked. The reason may be different. But that is the attempt made on a woman.

In Ramayana the lower caste women like Shurpanakha, Aayomukhi and Mandodari (belonging to Rakshasa community) were punished and insulted.

This is the transition period of the society changing from Matriarchal system to Patriarchal. This Puranic age is the time when the caste system came into existence.

Though 'Sita' was kidnapped and kept in 'Lanka' in Ravana's 'Ashoka garden' for such a long time, there was no illtreatment towards her. She was looked after with great respect.

But Mandodari was ill treated by Rama's soldiers. Surpanakha and Aayomukhi were ill treated by Rama and Lakshmana. It clearly shows the outlook of society towards lower caste Dalit women.

These are the few characters chosen to show the trend of Hindu caste based society towards Dalits. Even in modern literatures Dalit characters are not given proper treatment.

It is time the writers to imbibe the spirit of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr.B.R.Ambedkar who fought for human values and Women Liberation through their writings, specially of oppressed classes.

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