CHAPTER FOUR

CONCEPT OF WOMEN IN PRIMITIVE/ EARLY HISTORIC/ MEDIAEVAL SOCIETY - Position of women in contemporary literature.

Every primitive society has had its own religion based on fertility worship. In the primitive society the life evolved around a woman, a mother who bears, feed, (Fig 80) takes all calamities on her head and covers the born one under her protective umbrella. Besides every primitive society has had its own religion based on the fertility mother she is also a consort. Thus she represents the absolute motherhood, also the absolute womanhood. She causes life and sustains it, and is also the cause of life, its inspiration and aspiration and reason to live. So the emergence of the worship of female cult or mother goddess which made out of clay was spontaneous in primitive society as N.N.Bhattacharyya said “The woman was not only the symbol of generation, but actual producer of life”.1

Art in India, particularly of the early period had never been a product of any conscious movement with majority of population living in villages, subsisting on agriculture and rural economy, Intuitive urge of people revealed itself in a penchant for fertility and fecundation rites. Fertility was concerned with life in plants, animal and in human. Agriculture prospered if the soil was fertile. Agriculture ensures high productivity both in terms of food and progeny. Thus for the early farming communities women became symbols of nature’s procreative powers and fundamental images of fertility symbols. Hence emphatic display of female attributes became traditionally popular art forms.
since antiquity. This impulse—seeking to combine the Divine with mother—seems to have been man's earliest experiences. At some point of time and perhaps for an effective performance of worship rites, which a believing and fearing mind necessitated. This perception of mind was transformed into a material medium.

In Indian subcontinent the early Harappan people further magnified it when for realizing his idea of supreme Divinity. He elevated the mother to the Mother Earth that blessed him with grain, water, air, and fire and afforded for a dwelling. The terracotta figurines of mother-goddess recovered in excavations at various Indus sites are not only the ever-known earliest manifestation of the Divine power in any medium but are also suggestive of well-evolved mother-goddess worship cult. These figurines, being made of clay and thus defining their kinship with the earth, of which they are cast, represented the Mother Goddess as Mother Earth. As significant and suggestive is her iconography— the breasts filled with milk, uncovered genital organs, beautifully dressed hair and a good number of bangles on her wrists. “The Majority of these female figurines appear as a standing and almost nude female”. Sir John Marshall also interpreted ring-stones of Harappan sites as representation of yoni, the female organ of generation, symbolizing motherhood and fertility.

Woman and tree motif is a truly indigenous element of decorative art. Many seals of Harappan sites show the presence of two different forms of tree-worship among the people of the locality. One in which the tree itself is worshipped in its natural form, the other in which the tree spirit is personified and endowed with human shape and human

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attributes. The concept of Mother Goddess also evolved in its full form in later period, till almost the beginning of the Christian era.

In *Rig-Veda* the idea of Divine Female takes was the same as prevailed amongst the primitive Indus Community, which perceived the Divine Female as Mother Goddess. "In the reverence that is her due the mother exceeds all others, even the teacher and the father, as Vasistha points out", this is because, "she bears him in her womb and rears him". Yajnavalkyasays that the mother is superior to the teacher and even to the priest participating to at the sacrifice. Even an expectant mother is respected by everyone she pays no toll at ferry, like the students of the ascetics. The Vedas also preserve some interesting elements about Saktism, although the main stream of of Vedic religion was not purely Saktik in character. Of female deities, the most significant Mother, Usha-the dawn, Ratri- the night, Saraswati- the Supreme Mother and the river per-excellence or Vak- the speech, besides Prithivi- the earth which together with Dyaus (sky) represented the elements of universal parenthood like the Sakti and Siva of later times.

Among the later Vedic female deities a notable addition is Sri-Lakshmi mentioned for the first time in *Sri-Sukta* a supplementary hymn of the *Rig-veda*. As the goddess of prosperity, wealth, fortune and vegetation, she is styled in this *Sukta* variously as golden as golden doe decked with gold and silver strings, as a column of pleasant golden-light bearing lotus garlands and as a royal divinity seated in a golden enclosure with horses on the front and chariots in the middle deriving joy on account of the presence of trumpeting elephants. Subsequently, Lakshmi with flanking elephants became most
common with the Buddhists, Jains and Brahmanists, and was incorporated in the Tantric-Saktism pantheon amongst ten Mahavidyas.

References in the *Divyavadana* and other works of Sanskrit Buddhist literature show that several classes of female nurses were employed to attend on royal princes and scions of the nobility. They are *ankadhatri*, *(Fig 44)* *maladhatri*, *(Fig 43)* *stanadhatri*, *(Fig 43)* *kridapanikadhatri*, etc. The *ankadhatri* is so called as she carried the child in her arms. The one who bathed the child and washed the linen was called *maladhatri*. The *stanadhatri* or *kshiradhatri* was one who was so called from feeding the child with milk from her breast. The *kridapanikadhatri* was one who entertained the young and grown up children with different kinds of play-things and toys.

The position of the wife in the Vedic age was very high. "When a young man carries his wife home in a chariot (vi-vah), the nuptial fire is carried with him, and is set up in his house as his domestic fire; it is symbol of his married life. It has to be kept up till he retires from the world; from it the wife lights the kitchen fire, in it he offers oblations *(agnihotra)* everyday, morning and evening, jointly with his wife." The *Taittiriya Brahmana* declares that there is no sacrificial rite for a man who is without a wife; Panini tells us that wife is called *patni* because of her participation at the sacrifice.

During the Vedic Age domestic life was not in any way conceived to be inconsistent with spiritual life, the best proof of this is the fact that the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest known literature in the whole world, contains hymns by as many twenty-seven women, called *brahmavadinis* or women seers. Saunakai in his *Brihaddevata* (c. 5th cent B.C) a work on
Rg-Veda has mentioned the names of these twenty-seven women seers, the well known.

Vedic commentator Sayanahas mentioned of two more such seers in addition to the twenty-seven. The brahmavadinis were not ascetics roaming in the forest. On the contrary they did not give up family life, many were married or desired to be married. Hence some of their hymns were but simple frank expressions of their inner, womanly desires for a worthy loving husband, a happy and prosperous home-life free from co-wives and so on.

In the Upanishads, which constitute the last part of the Vedas, we have the brightest example of brahmavadini Gargi of immortal fame, daughter of the Sage Vacaknu whose highly learned, philosophical discussions with the great sage Yajnavalkya have recorded twice in the old and celebrated Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. "The glorious example of sadyovadhu too, is found in the same Upanishad. When the Sage Yajnavalkya on the eve of his retirement from the world desired to divide his property between his two wives Maitreyi and Katyayani, Maitreyi refused to have it. Instead she was given the choicest gift of knowledge by her husband in a most illuminating discourse on the unity of the Self. Here we find the sublime example of a sadyovadhu and a brahmavadini rolled into.

The age of Panini (5th century B.C) continued the Vedic tradition of culture and education. Those brahmavadinis who themselves taught were reverentially called
upadhaya or upadhyayi and acharya, while the sadyovadhus who were wives of teachers were called upadhyayani and acharyani.

In the Immortal epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata we find two types of Indian women, ascetic and domestic. A magnificent example of brahmavadini in the Ramayana is Anusuya, wife of Sage Atri, who practiced severe penances and spent her whole life in deep meditation and reached such heights of spiritual perfection as are rarely reached by even great seers. Another celebrated woman ascetic of the Ramayana is Sramani Sarbari, a low caste woman. She was the disciple of great sage Matanga and described as wearing bark and matted locks, and having reached the highest standard of asceticism, and as being honoured by great ascetics. On the other hand, the highest manifestation of domestic perfection in the Ramayana is found in the inimitable personality of Sita, the idol of Indian womanhood throughout the ages whose character is the combination of softness and hardness, as wife, as mother, as one endowed with infinite purity of heart, strength of character, courage and confidence.

On the other hand the central story the Mahabharata apart from main episodes, we have portraits of heroic ladies, strong and impetuous mothers of heroes. The brave Savitri, who could wrench her husband from the grip of death, and who in her youth, although, exquisitely beautiful in every limb, had such an aureole of dignity about her that she looked a veritable goddess, and no young man would venture to seek her hand in marriage. Nor we can forget Vidula the heroic mother of Prince Sanjaya of the Sauviras, on the bank of Sindhu. The son suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of his neighbours, the Sindhus, and lay dejected and low. But the mother with the words of fire
sought to inspire her son and rouse him in action, to fight for his lost royal glory. These are told in more than hundred verses in the Udyogaparvan of the great epic and with recitation of them the mother of the Pandavas probably revived the drooping spirit of her son.10

There are other instances in the *Mahabharata* of women who led dedicated lives at home. Here we have Gandhari, Kunti, Darupadi, Damayanti, Sakuntala and Satyabhama. The single case of Gandhari proves what heights of excellence wifehood and motherhood could reach.11

Both Manu and Kautilya gave emphasis on the married life. Manu's code in trying to dissuade the householder from a formal renunciation of the world, when Buddhism had made the order of ascetics more popular and more accessible than ever before. When a young man is about to enter the world on the completion of his education, the teacher dismisses him with the injunction, 'Thou must not cut off the line of children'. Manu proclaims distinctly that one who seeks salvation without discharging his debt to his father by begetting children, tumbles down the ladder of life—marches farther off from the goal instead of getting nearer. Kautilya in his writings condemns such a man as a criminal liable to punishment by the State. Notwithstanding the prohibition by Kautilya of initiating women into the ascetic order, it appears from work that there was no dearth of woman ascetics in his age. The king is advised to employ an ascetic woman (*parivrajika*) who was a poor, widowed, and bold and clever Brahmana lady desirous of earning her livelihood thereby; she would be honoured in king's family and work as a
secret spy. Ascetic women appear to have been employed, by the Superintendent of Weaving, in spinning. 12

The sacredness of the marriage tie renders widow-marriage impossible in India. Vatsyayana, who gives a matter-of-fact account of the society of his time, presents a beautiful and detailed account of the life of a remarried woman-her privileges and her limitations. The punarbhū (the remarried woman) in her new home enjoyed a degree of independence unknown to the wife wedded according to the sacramental rites. In her lover's house she assumed the role of a mistress, patronized his wives, was generous to his servants, and treated his friends with familiarity, but was not permitted to participate in his religious observances. In ordinary household also the wedded wife who participates with her husband in religious rites, lived in comparative seclusion in the inner apartments, and never came out to receive her husband's friends. This exactly indicated the position occupied by the remarried woman in the society. In Vatsyayana's time, it appears, public opinion permitted the widow to live with man of her choice, but she could never receive the same regard, nor acquire the same status as the married wife. Even the man who took a widow to wife had to suffer from certain disabilities: Manu prescribes that the husband of a re-married woman is to be excluded from sraddha (memorial rites).

The remarriage of the widow is not advocated by the Smṛti writers and the Puranas. Al-Biruni observes that a woman in India has to choose between two things after the death of her husband-either to burn herself or to remain a widow till her death. It is true that some Smṛritis and Puranas encourage the performance of the satī rite, as when
Brihaspati says that a woman is declared devoted to her husband when she is his companion in his weal and woe, and if she dies when he dies, or when the *Brihaddharma Purana* declares that a widow who follows her husband on the funeral pyre, though she commits a great sin, does good to the departed soul. The authorities however prohibited those wives who have not attained the age of puberty, are pregnant, or have children very young, from becoming a sati. Al Biruni similarly reports that women of advanced age or those who had children did not burn themselves, but they preferred to burn herself because of ill treatment by her in-laws.

The 'opulent' female having broad hips and exposing her sexual triangles, who is portrayed in a frontal on the Pre-Asoka gold plaque of Lœuriya in Champaran district points to the existence of her cult and the fetishistic beliefs associated with it. Images of women in their bountiful aspects were depicted prolifically in Indian art with deep rooted belief in their magic symbolism. This deep rooted belief again found aesthetic expression in the graceful and lively images of *Yakshis, Vrikshkas* and *Dohada* etc in early Indian art in the form of woman-and-tree motif. Traditionally *Dohada* means fulfilling the wishes of the pregnant woman and her husband. But according to Coomaraswamy the *Dohada* rites cannot be identified with pregnancy rites. The *Dohada* rite, performed for the sake of the tree, it is not a fertility rite, but one of fertilisation so that the tree may have flowers and fruits in abundance. "It is believed that the obstinate Ashoke tree flowers only when it is touched by the delicate feet of a beautiful girl or when she sprinkles wine from her mouth on it". Kalidasa in his *Malavikagnimitra* gave a full description of Ashoka-dohada in a most romantic setting.
Kalidasa poetically links Ashoka with the hero pining for love (here the king) whose desire starts sprouting and blooming at quickening touch of his lovely beloved's (here Malavika) delicate feet. He turns the Ashoka-dohada into a multimeaning symbol of the context of ancient fertility ritual. Among different types of Dohada Kalidasa selected Padaghatadohada, 15 it symbolizes the variety of sexual act. This description of Padaghatadohada shows that in the first place, not all are fit to perform Dohada. In the actual function of the Padaghatadohada no less than in the sex consummation which this symbolizes, the legs play an important part. So great attention was bestowed in the matter of adorning the legs. Thus Malavika's feet are adorned tastefully by Bakulavallika, her friend. Bakulavallika paints the feet of beautiful Malavika with red dye and puts on nupuras (anklets) to make her ready for the dohada. Malavika strikes the tree with her left foot. It is significant to note that kalidasa gives the place of honour to the left foot in this particular variety of sex act. There is a specific purpose served by the Nupuras and these are referred to by the king as resounding in the act of striking. Vatsyayana associated this resounding of nupuras with a variety of sex act.

The evolution of the status or concept of women in India has been a continuous process of ups and downs throughout the history, considering the vast body of empirical research available on the topic, two approaches seem valid; one is the classical text view and the other empirical view.

Throughout the classical literature on the status of women there is almost consistent opinion among great scholars that during the age of Vedas, a woman's status was equivalent to that of a man. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata is the story of the fall of the
Kauravas because they humiliated Queen Draupadi. Valmiki's *Ramayana* is also about wiping away of Ravana when he abducted Sita. The Pletho'a of Goddess in the ancient period was created for the respect of women. Women could have multiple husbands. Widows could remarry. They could leave their husbands. In the Vedic society women participated in the religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no evidence of seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs.

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the later Vedic period women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriage also came into existence, According to the *Aitareya Brahmana* a daughter has been described as a source of misery. *Atharva Veda* also deplores the birth of daughters. Yet certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the *Rajan* in the *Rajasurya* has been regarded as an indication of matrimonial influence. However it is clear that in the age of *Brihadaranyaka*, the position of women gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis* women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriages or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband their only duty.

In the Mauryan and post-Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. But the Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them.
Megasthenes also had the same view. Though in the field of Indian plastic art perhaps due to the growth of urban conditions and acceleration of trade, industries and crafts, significant changes were noticeable in the social sphere. New social challenges in the form of ethnic and cultural amalgamation and pre-conditioning gradually had their impact on the social attitude of people at large which in turn found expression in art.

In addition to the clay to satisfy the needs of the society ranging from king to the lower ordinary people. Especially in the urban areas such as Bulandibagh and Kumrahar they fashioned extraordinary pieces and gained a special position parallel to other medium of art. The large size female figurines wearing heavy jewellery, head-dress, long skirt and distinguished by sensitive modelling are no doubt the work of skilled masters. On the other hand stone carvers, the potters of Mauryan period fashioned Buxar, which was not the capital city in Mauryan times, had yielded terracotta figurines completely distinct in nature and recall Pre-Mauryan mother goddess. Most of them are completely handmade but few show the moulded face. Lack of drapery, heavy jewellery and typical Mauryan coiffure are clear indications of its belonging to the rural area.

The goddess of fertility in the Mauryan Empire, the symbolic of the great mother is feeding, fertility and procreation/perpetuation of the species. The Mauryan Empire keeps the original model of predecessors whose representation is common in the earlier civilizations which gives importance to the female sex or the breasts giving the maternal milk.
Probably with the development of urban lifestyle for the first time the artist realized within himself the beauty of woman and felt the desire to create her image. The urban conditions had given rise to certain features of town life which did not find favour with Brahmanical outlook conditioned by simple agricultural society. The inevitable outcome was the evils of urban society. Socio-economic milieu of the country was undergoing rapid changes. Money-economy had penetrated deeply into the life of the urban society. Some women who had no other source to earn their livelihood took prostitution to satisfy the needs of the rich foreign & indigenous traders/merchants. Owing to the suppressed condition of women in the society of his time the great Asoka may have felt the need to appoint a special group of Mahamattas who would be concerned mainly with the welfare of women. But the position of women though inferior they were employed as palace-guards, spies etc. Widow's remarriage was also permissible. Women in general, says Varahamihira (c.A.D.500), are blameless; they deserve the highest honour and respect. This picture of the women is reflected in the works of Kalidasa, Bana, Bhavabhuti and other classical writers of the age.16

But their status deteriorated in the later periods, such as Gupta period. Since women and property were bracketed together in several references in the Epics, Smritis and Puranas. Women came to be regarded as a sort of property. She could be away or loaned as any item of property. This was like the attitude of typical patriarchal society based on private property. Because of the Brahmanical law did not allow any proprietary right to women. The provision for 'stri-dhana' is of a very limited character and does not extent beyond the wife's rights to jewels, ornaments and presents. This took strong roots in Gupta and post-Gupta periods. The practice of using veils by women particularly in high cast families was in vogue.
But it is difficult to ascertain the exact chronological time as to when the deterioration in woman’s status started. It appeared that probably from the age of Brahmanas and the age of Sutras and Epics (500 B.C to 500 A.D) and the age of later Srutis and in the mediaeval periods the status of women had deteriorated considerably. The views of literatures are contradictory and conflicting on this subject. The term 'woman' is used in generic sense regardless of the internal differentiation present throughout India based on socio-cultural, demographic and ecological factors.
Notes:


5. Ibid, p.408.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


15. Ibid.