

RISHIKAYEN- WOMEN SEERS IN RIGVED

P D Mishra

In Rigved Mandal eight the seer Kanva makes following startling statement-

es firq oL;ka vfl& es ekrk p lek A ¼_x~osn 8&1&6½

(Lord, You are greater than my father but just equal to my mother!)

It indeed sets the tone of the Vedic lore in its treatment of women. The vedic verses are not stated to be human compositions as such as they are believed to be the revelations of the seers (Rishis) who are both men and the women. A woman seer is called Rishika. I am mentioning some of them here who are appearing in Rigved, the first and the foremost among the four Vedas.

Ghosa

Ghoshā was the daughter of seer *Kakshivān*. She was suffering from leprosy since her childhood. She was not getting married because of this illness. Later on she having been treated by *Ashwini Kumār* became all right and got married. *Ashwini Kumārs* taught her *Madhu Vidyā*, the science of secret learning. She thus became a great scholar that is evident by her invocations in hymns 39 to 41 of Mandal Ten.

‘Great *Ashwini Kumārs*! Your grace has made me fortunate. May your grace shower good rains for my husband to grow good grains from his field! Your kind looks also save my future husband from the violence. Let me find a young and handsome husband to live with him for long.

‘The way father offers education to his son, you teach us good lessons. I am ignorant. May your grace save us from the impending misfortune! May you bless me with sons, grand sons and great grand sons to lead a life of success! May I live happily in the abode of my husband!’¹

Surya

Surya is the composer of 47 stanzas of the hymn 85 of the tenth Book. It is highly poetic and picturesque to see *Surya* departing from her father’s abode after her marriage with *Ashwini Kumārs*. She was at that time flying in the chariot of her mind whose two wheels were made of the Sun and the Moon. The cloth of high heaven was covering her from above and the winds were leading her long path to her husband’s house.

Surya first propounds in the initial five stanzas the significance of *Soma*. It starts with a profound philosophical note of the Vedic order in which the most fundamental principles of cosmic character are illustrated. According to her-

‘Truth is the basis on which earth exists and heavens get sustenance from *Surya*, the Sun. *Adityas* stand secure by the cosmic law and *Soma* holds his place in heaven. Because of *Soma*, the *Adityas* strong and the earth are mighty. Thus *Soma* occupies an important place in the midst of all these constellations.’²

1 b;a okeg~os J`.iqra es vf'ouk iq=k;so firjk eg~;e~ f'kf{kre~

Surya talks about that ideal state of family relationship, which should serve as the best model for any society in any situation. The love and affection for a bride is generally not long lasting as human relationship in a joint family becomes so complex that the house starts dividing as soon as the young persons start getting married off. This is most important because there is a sense of superiority prevailing in the family of the bridegroom where the bride finds totally a foreign atmosphere. Whereas her senses of security needs to be strengthened, she should receive the most humble attention and feel as if she is in the absolute commanding position in the house of husband. It is with this assurance that *Surya* blesses the bride in following words-

‘Over your husband’s father and your husband’s mother you bear full sway

Over the sister of your husband and over his brothers as well, your rule be supreme.’³

Vagambhrani

The female seer *Vagambhrani* was the daughter of seer *Ambhrana*. She was a great scholar of high repute and realisation. She had reached that state of realisation that she is now identified as the Goddess of Knowledge Herself. 8 stanzas of hymn 125 of the Book Eight (Mandal) known as she has composed ‘Vac Sukkoth’. *Vak* is the speech personified. The word, the first creation and representative of Spirit, she is the means of communication between men and gods. Her identity with the Almighty Cosmic Force is so complete that she is able to claim it in following words-

‘Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them-

Each one who sees, breaths, hears, the word outspoken

They know it not, but yet they dwell beside me. Hear, one and all, the truth as I declare It.’⁴

Ushas

Usha has been invoked in as many as twenty *Suktas*. She is the goddess of dawn. Her personification is not distinct, but this natural phenomenon is quite vivid before the Vedic seer. The poetic beauty of the description of *Usha* is unexcelled in any ancient literature of the world. She comes like a damsel covering her body with white cloths. After appearing in the east, she uncovers her beautiful form gradually. It is as if she takes bath in the tub of light and removes darkness from the earth. She wakes up quite early and

vukfijKk vltkR;kefr% iqjk rL;k vfHk'kLrsjo Li`re~ ¼403½

² IR;suksÙkfHkrk Hkwfe% lw;sZ.ksÙkfHkrk |kS%
_rsukfnR;kfLr"BfUr fnfo lkseks vf/k fJr%

³ lezzkKh "o'kqjs Hko lezkxzh 'o'oka Hko
uukUnfj lezkKh Hko lezkKh vf/k nso`"kq ¼85&46½

⁴ e;k Isk vUuefÙk ;ks foi';fr ;% izkf.kfr ; bZa 'k`.kksR;qDre~
veUroks eka r mi f{k;fUr Jf/k Jqr Jf)oa rs onkfe ¼125&11½

inspires birds; animals and human beings get up soon. She unlocks the gates of heaven and removes all darkness of dream and reality.

Red horses draw the chariot of Usha. She opens up the gate for *Surya* to move out. Sun follows her the way a lover follows his beloved (1.115.2). She is the wife of Sun and the sister of *Bhaga*. She is also the sister of night. She kindles up fire. *Agni* also moves up to meet her. *Ashwini Kumars* are the friend of *Usha*. She awakens them and they move along with her.

She bestows upon her devotee's prosperity, offspring, security and long life. She brings reputation to poets and fame to brave people. Her devotees pray that she should be as kind and loving to them as the mother to her children is.

Saraswati

Rigveda mentions many times a mighty river *Sarawati* in the northern India, which stretched from the mountains to the ocean but has dried since. The extensive archaeological excavation conducted in India after 1950 at more than hundred sites confirms the existence of this river. *Sarawati* in the later *Puranas* is the goddess of learning and fine arts with her icons displaying a *vina* in her hands. According to commentator *Sayana* *Saraswati* is a river in some verses and a speech in others. Wilson and Griffith are of similar opinion though they prefer to call it a river-goddess. According to Shri R. L. Kashyap, an Aurobindonian commentator, however, '*Saraswati* is a power of inspiration descending from the supreme plane of Truth which manifests to the *rishis* as inspired learning.'

Women Characters (Seers) in Poetic Dramas

The mythological dialogues between *Sarama* and *Pani* (10.108), *Yama* and *Yami*, (10.10), *Vishwamitra* and rivers *Vyas* and *Satlaj* (3.33) and *Urvashi-Pururava* (10.95) are the best specimens of dramatic poetry of *Rigveda*.

The hymn of *Sarama- Panis* is a colloquy between *Sarama* and the messenger of *Indra* and the *Panis* who had carried off the cows of *Brahspati*. *Sarama* and *Panis* are alternatively object (*Devata*) and subject (*Rishi*). The *Panis* begin with addressing *Sarama* who has unwittingly found her way to the rocky stronghold in which the stolen cows are kept. *Panis* try to allure *Sarama* by first offering her a share in the stolen property and then proposing her to become their sister on which *Sarama* has this to react- '*Brotherhood, sisterhood, I know not either: the dread Angoras and Indra know them. They seemed to long for cine when I departed. Hence into distance, be ye gone, O Panis.*' Hymn 33 of the Book 3 is again a dialogue between *Vishwamitra* and river *Vipasa* and *Shatudri* who are also regarded to be *Rishis* or seers of the stanzas ascribed to them. According to *Sayana*, *Viswamitra*, the *Purohit* or family priest of the king *Sudasa*, having obtained wealth by means of his office, came along with it near these rivers. In

1ukga osn Hkzkr`Roa uks Lol`RofeUnzks fnqkafxj`p ?kksjk%
xksdkek es vPNn;u~ ;nk;eikr br i.k;ks ojh;% _x~ +10&108&10
2-vk rs dkjks `k`.kokek opkafI ;;kFk nwjknuIk jFksu
uh rs ualS ihI;kuso ;ks"kk e;k;so dU;k 'k'opS rsA _x~ + 3&33&10
3-iq;joks eke`Fkk ek iz ilrks ek Rok o`dkls vf'kokl m {ku~
u oS L=kS.kkfu Ij;kfu IfUr lkyko`dk.kka g`n;kU;srk A _x~ + 10&95&15

order to make these rivers provide him a safe passage; he lauds them with first three verses. The rivers though seemingly reluctant in the beginning provide him a passage in the following manner-

'Yea, we will listen to thy words, O singer. With wain and car from far away thou comest Low like a nursing mother, will I bend me, and yield me as a maiden to her lover.' (3.33.10)²

Hymn 95th of the tenth Book is again a dialogue between *Pururava* and *Urvashi* who are severally the speaker, the *Rishi* and addressee, the *Devata*. This dialogue contains the root of a legend related in *Shatpath Brahman* and appearing again in *Mahabharata* and other *Puranas* forming further the plot of the well-known drama, *Vikramorvasi* of *Kalidasa*.

The romance of poetry is at its peak when *Pururava's* dejected declaration that his bed would be 'the destruction's bosom and there let fierce rapacious wolves devour him', *Urvashi* cries-

'Nay, do not die, Pururava, nor vanish: not let the evil omened wolves devour thee

*With women there can be no lasting friendship: hearts of hyenas are the hearts of the women.'*³

Hymn 10 in the Book 10 known, as '*Yama Yami Sukta*' is another specimen of a very good poetry. The contents of this verse beautifully combine the attributes of a good poem and morality. An oft-quoted remark of the great commentator Winternitz is an apt point to remember at this stage, which warns that '*Rigveda* is everything except a book on morality.' This has both, the positive as well as a negative connotation. Negatively while it can mean to be a book defying the concept of morality as such whereas, positively it suggests that in matters of higher philosophy or deep poetry, the common concept of morality have not got any place. Therefore when in this hymn under reference *Yami* proposes her brother 'then let thy soul and mine be knit together, and as a loving husband take thy consort', *Yama* naturally turns down the offer and states 'I will not fold mine arms about thy body: they call it sin when one comes near his sister.' Following remark from Griffith '*Hymn of the Rigveda*' may certainly be not out of place here-' As the Hebrew conception closely connected the parents of mankind by making the woman formed from a portion of the body of the man, so by the Indian tradition they are placed in the relationship of twins. This thought is laid by the hymn in question in the mouth of *Yami* herself, when she is made to say- *Even in the womb the Creator made us for husband and wife.'*