



## SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL MITHILA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

*The kingdom of Videha seems to be mentioned for the first time in the “Samhitas” of the Yajurveda. Mithila the capital of Videha is not referred to in the Vedic texts, but is often mentioned in the Budhist Jatakas and the Jaina and the Brahmana, purana as well as the Epic. From the Brihad Vishnu Purana we learn that Videha or Mithila was 24 Yojana length for the river Kausiki to the river Gandaki and 16 Yojana in breadth from the river Ganga to the Himalaya.*

*The social status of women in a feudal society has been nicely depicted in the writings of Vidyapati and writers of Mithila. According to Vidyapati a women needth a youth and never refrained from dependence on another. A woman has been compared to a tender creeper which dries up as soon as it is touched or pressed by and ordinary substance. Women were not active participants in the activities of the State, though we have an example of Lakhima and Viswas Devi in the history of the period concerned. Since women were believed to be of a weak mind and devoid of all knowledge, wisdom and their social position. The social status of women in general in the early medieval and medieval period was demoralizing. The Sudra and the women were placed in the same category. The society had no respect for them. They were not allowed to expose themselves physically as it was regarded as the worst dishonor. Devoid of her husband’s protection a chaste women had no other place where she could live in a peace and happiness and she could not even go to her father’s house without his consent. In the long run they became dependent upon him at every stage of life.*

**Key word:** Videha, Samhitas, Yajurveda, Brihad Vishnu Purana, Manusmriti, Upanishads, Brahmavadani, Brahmacharinis, Asrama, Sannyassa, Ghunghat, Moksha, Gotra, Sapinda, Kanyadani.

In India from the earliest times the women have enjoyed a subordinate and yet honorable status. Referring to the status of women, Manu observes, “By a girl, by a young women, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her son; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons; by leaving them she

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would make both (her own and her husband) families contemptible”.<sup>1</sup> However, it is interesting to note that the codes of Manusmriti also contain provision emphasizing the social dignity of women. Manu remarks thus, “Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husband’s brother-in-laws, who desire (their own) welfare. Where women are honored not, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The house on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely as if destroyed by magic Hence, men who seek (their own) welfare should always honor women on holidays and festivals with (gift of) ornaments, clothes, and (dainty) food. In that family where the husband is pleased with his wife and the wife with her husband, happiness will surely be lasting.”<sup>2</sup>

The upanisadic age saw the rise of many great women philosophers like Gargi, Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. They participated in the great philosophical deliberations held at the court of Janaka Videha and other contemporary kings. But this was probably not a general feature of the Society.

A Gargi or a Maitreyi does not mean that all women were educated. There is ‘Katyani’ the Second wife of Yajnavalkya. She represents the ordinary women who were poorly educated. In the time of Janaka Videha women like ‘Sulva and Gargi’ were well versed in philosophy and learning and were known as ‘Brahmavadani’. According to Harita women were of two classes-Brahmavadani and Saiyovadhu. The Brahmavadanis, were the products of the educational discipline of Brahmacharya for which women were eligible. Young maidens completed their education as Brahmacharinis and then gained husbands in whom “they are merged like rivers in Oceans.”<sup>3</sup> Unmarried learned young daughters were married to learned bridegrooms. A daughter who completed her Brahmacharya was married to one who was learned like her maidens’ qualified by their Brahmacharya, the disciplined life of studentship, for married life in the second Ashrama. But only elderly married women were permitted to hear Vedantic discourses. Sannyasa was restricted to the retired men and women only. Later on, however, Sannyasa was restored to by many men and women who wanted escape punishment or avoid rigors of a householder life.<sup>4</sup> In pre-Muslim period women enjoyed in theory as well as to a considerable extent in practice, and honorable status in society. With the advent of Muslims in India, the social change did occur in the life of women in India.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Law of Manu, Ch.V, Secs. 147-149 as quoted in the Sacred Books of the East (ed. F. Maxmullar Vol. XXV, Oxford, 1886, pp-19.

<sup>2</sup> P.N. Ojha, Some Aspects of North Indian Social Life, 1st Edition; Janaki Prakashan, Patna, pp. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Yogendra Mishra, History of Videha Janaki Prakashan, Patna, 1981, pp. 20-21

<sup>4</sup> Upendra Thakur, History of Mithila, Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1988, pp-329-330

<sup>5</sup> Indira Kumar Choudhary, some Aspects of Social life of Medieval Mithila, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal research Institute, Patna 1988, pp-1,2

In Medieval Mithila Women were not treated equally with men because the whole approach was based on the domination of the menfolk. Like child and the coward, they depended on the mercy of the male.

The social status of women in a feudal society has been nicely depicted in the writings of Vidyapati and other writers of Mithila. According to Vidyapati a women needs a youth and never refraineth form dependence on another.<sup>6</sup> A women has been compared to a tender creeper which dries up as soon as it is touched or pressed by an ordinary substance.<sup>7</sup> Women were not active participants in the activities of the state, though we have an example of Lakhima and Viswas Devi in the history of the period concerned. Since women were believed to be of a weak mind and devoid of all knowledge and wisdom, their social position, was one of dependent and pity.<sup>8</sup>

As education of women was considered less important then the men's, very scanty provisions were made for its development during the period under review. Female education on a mass scale in Mithila was practically unknown. It was generally confined to the women of the royal and aristocratic families. But the education of women belonging to the poor and the lower classes was ignored; as the later were preoccupied with earning of living. Hence, they got little opportunity for receiving education. However, we notice some of the women scholars of Mithila played important part in raising the status of Mithila in the realm of education and learning. The most among them seems 'Lakhima', the chief queen of Shiv Simha. (e. 1416 A.D)<sup>9</sup> She was celebrated scholar of that period.

Viswas Devi was yet another celebrated woman during the period under review. Under her kind patronage, as it is said, Vidyapati wrote" Shaivasarvaswara parmanbhut puransomargh and Gangavakayavali. These books are replete with the eulogies of the queen. If tradition is to be relied upon during the reign of Viswasa Devi there was a gathering of 1400 Mimamsakaras in Mithila.<sup>10</sup>

The grand-daughter of vidyapati 'Chandrakala' was also believed to be an accomplished women of our period. She was a great poet and 'Lochan' in his "Rajtarangini" quotes a poem by her.

However, excepting the above examples, we do not notice other women of repute in the realm of education and learning. In fact, women's education on a mass scale was unknown because of several important factors. This state of women education, however, was not only due to the negligence on the part of the parents and administration but also because of numerous social evils such as the Purdah system and the practice of early marriage as well as seclusion of women within the four walls of the house.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> According to Prof. R.K. Choudhary Vidyapati can be placed between 1360 and 1480 A.D.

<sup>7</sup> R.K. Chaudhary-Mithila in the age of Vidhyapati-Varansi, 1976 pp-144

<sup>8</sup> Vidhpati-edited by K.Mitra and B.B. majumdar, cal-1953, No. 679 "Ham abala achhi alpa gyan".

<sup>9</sup> Upendra Thakur-op. cit-pp-332.

<sup>10</sup> R.K. Chaudhary op. Cit-pp.-226

<sup>11</sup> Indra Kumar Chaudhary, op.ct. pp.-9

One of the most noteworthy social features of the period was the system of 'Purdah' seclusion or veil). But it is interesting to note that the institution of Purdah or seclusion seems not to have been prevalent in the ancient social life.<sup>12</sup> A women in the ancient India enjoyed the freedom to move anywhere, they liked hiding their faces from the strangers. The practice of Purdah seems to have originated in Indian society after the advent of the Muslims in India.

Many factors were responsible for the growth of the Purdah system in the Hindu social life and Mithila was no exception to it. These were (I) the exclusion of women from the male society (II) the raids of the Muslims on the non-Muslims and (III) the fear of the ruler or his officer demanding a girl for a wife. Besides the tendency to imitate the ruling class was another factor which helped the introduction of Purdah among the upper class of the Hindu society.

The Hindu women in Mithila, specially belonging to upper and well to do section, observed Purdah strictly. They took to Purdah as the insignia of respectability. The Hindu women therefore put a 'Ghunghat' to veil their faces whenever they saw strangers. Vidyapati has referred to the custom of Ghunghat or veil. However, Lakhima Devi,<sup>13</sup> the chief queen of Shiva Simha and Vishwasa Devi,<sup>14</sup> seems to have been exceptions to the rule as they did not practice the system of veil. But the women of the middle and the lower strata of the Hindu society were free, the latter being the freer, from the bondage of this custom. The mass of the peasant women did not wear any shroud or veil of a specific kind as they did not confine themselves to their houses. The Muslim women also observed Purdah more strictly to their Hindu sisters. Laws of Islam command the Muslim women to move only with the veil on.

Thus in Mithila it appears that the system of Purdah was confined particularly to the upper classes in both the communities which might have considerably hampered the progress of women during the period under review.

Among the Hindus of Mithila 'Vivah' is generally considered as obligatory for every person because in the first place the birth of the son is said to enable one to obtain 'Moksha'. Manu considers it a social institution for the regulation of the proper relations between the sexes.<sup>15</sup>

The elaborate marriage rules have been discussed in details by the Mithila Nibandhakaras. Chandeshwara observe that girls of other castes may be married by a Brahmama, one after another in the anuloma or regular order. It may be pointed out here that the Smritis laid down two duties for the married man (I) sacrifices can be performed only with a wife of the same caste and (II) sexual pleasure can be enjoyed with any married wife. Digest of Mithila gives us the impression that it was difficult to

<sup>12</sup> Mithila Bharti, Ank-1, 1969, p-19ff.

<sup>13</sup> Kasi Prasad Jayaswal Commotion Vol.-1, Patna, 1951, pp.-52, also Indrakant Chaudhary, op. cit, pp.-137

<sup>14</sup> Makhan Jha-Folic Lore magic and legends of Mithila, Patna-1979, pp-10

<sup>15</sup> Upendra Thakur-History of Mithila-op. cit. pp.-363

settle marriages amongst higher castes. If the boy and girl belonged to the same 'Gotra' and Pravara or Sapinda' relationship extended to seven degrees on fathers side and five on mother's side, marriages were forbidden.<sup>16</sup> Chandeshwara, upholding the views of Vijnanesvaras explains Sapinda as one connected due to origins from the same body. A long list of qualities of the bride and bridegroom is given in the Grhastharatnakara. A poem of Vidyapati makes us believe that marriage of a boy at an advanced age prevalent in lower sections of the community.

Like other digest makers, Chandeshwara introduces to us the light forms of marriage and their receptive merits and demerits, He recommends the first four forms, namely, Brahma, Daiva Arsha and Prajapati for Brahmanas; Asura and Rakshasa for Kshatriyas: Gandharva and Paishacha for Vaishya and sudras.<sup>17</sup> Jyotirisvara mentioning also the eight forms, States that the Prajapatya form of marriage was the most popular one in Mithila.

In Mithila marriage of Brahmanas and Kayasthas could be negotiated only when necessary certificates testifying to validity of negotiations were issued by the 'Panjikas', Vidyapati also refers to such match makers. Some details of Mithila marriage are preserved in the poems of Vidyapati and the Varnaratnakara of Jyotirisvara. The letter tells us that after the decision over Gotra there was the gift of sacred thread. The actual marriage rites were preceded by offer of arghya, padya acamana and madhuparka to the bridegroom. The girl was then given away with dakshina or dowry in the presences of the God of fire. Then the five types of Bhusamskaras, offer of Ajya before fire and certain other ceremonies were performed, which are practiced even in modern times. The ceremony concluded with the march of seven steps by the husband and wife called 'Saptapadagamana' Vachaspati refers to two practices, which are followed even today. One of them is the dviragamana or gauna.<sup>18</sup> The other one is the custom of giving some parents to a newly married bride when she bowed to her father-in-law or mother-in-law or elder-in-law for the first time.

Regarding the position of wife, Vidyapati is of the view that "taking a second wife is the crime of a man who hath abandoned decency". ..... As a devoted husband himself Vidyapati regarded" wife as the partner in all pious acts ..... the sharer of evil deeds and merits ..... and the causes of all happiness in the world ..... what fellowship be there were there be no sharing alike of sorrows and Joys "Vidyapati's ideal of conjugal life was very high and lofty."<sup>19</sup>

The smritis writer brought down the marriageable age during the medieval Mithila and divided the marriageable girls in to five classes.<sup>20</sup> The more orthodox section namely the Brahmanas of Mithila

<sup>16</sup> Storia, III, pp.-61

<sup>17</sup> Ain-e-Akabari, (J & S), pp-339

<sup>18</sup> Indra Kumar Chaudhary, Op. cit, pp.-142

<sup>19</sup> G.A. Grierson, Bihar Peasant Life, Delhi, 1875, pp.-358

<sup>20</sup> Indra Kumar Chaudhary, op. cit, pp.-143

would have justified the practice of early marriage by referring to the regulation of Manu might have encouraged among the Hindus of Mithila. In Mithila during the period under review, child marriage was a normal thing. The problems of 'Bal Vivah' as well as 'Anmel Vivah' have been so acute in Mithila that several folk songs have been composed on this line which are sung on many occasions. Vidyapati informs us that because 'Anmel vivah' the position of women was pitiable in society during the period under review.<sup>21</sup> We also get references to early marriages or unequal marriage in the contemporary literature. Vidyapati gives references to such an unequal marriage in a folk song. In this song a married young lady whose husband is simply a kid and her junior in age, is lodging a complaint with her father that you keep a milking cow and give milk to your, son-in-law (her husband) so that he will soon become young.<sup>22</sup>

'Polygamy' was almost an over of the day especially for the upper classes of the society in Mithila. Rama Nath Jha, in his introduction to the "Purusha Pariksha", informs us that the poet Vidyapati had two wives,<sup>23</sup> and Shiva Simha the patron of Vidyapati also had six wives.<sup>24</sup>

Because of 'Panji Prabhandha'<sup>25</sup> social stratification of Mithila in the period concerned was encouraged which helped in spreading the polygamy at a large scale. The kings, Ministers and Zamindars married a large number of wives of all ages and to some extent maintained some kind of a harem.<sup>26</sup> The Kulin Brahmanas (bikaua) also used to marry a large number of wives. This also helped from the bikaua institution in medieval Mithila. A bikaua was one who came from the upper stratum of the Brahman hierarchy and got married due to consideration of wealth in families which were placed lower down him on the same hierarchy. Social recognition was also one of the main reasons for the origin of this system. It is said that in the bikaua system, the wives lived even with their parents and such wives were called 'Kanyadani'. The husband used to visit the places of his wives in rotation.

Amongst the high class of Muslims too, the evil of 'polygamy' was more prevalent than among their Hindu counter parts.

M.M. Dr. Ganga Nath Jha throws some additional light on Raja Madhava Singh's efforts for marriage reforms to stop polygamy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Upendra Thakur, op. cit, pp.-346.

<sup>22</sup> Purusha Parikha of Vidyapati, Edited by Shrisurendra Jha 'Suman; Maithili Akadami Patna second edition, 1988, pp.-18-19

<sup>23</sup> Varnratnakara of Jyotirishwara, edited and Translated by Prof. Anand Mishra and Pandit govind Jha, Maithili Akadami, Patna, 1990, pp.-44-45

<sup>24</sup> R.K. Chaudhary, op. cit, 158

<sup>25</sup> Kirtilata of vidyapati, edited and Translated by Gobind Jha, Maithili Akadami, Patna 1992, pp.-20

<sup>26</sup> Journal of Bihar Research society-XXVII, Part-I-II, pp.-121-23

<sup>27</sup> Likhnavali of vidyapati edited and Translated by Dr. Indra Kant Jha Indralaya Prakashan Rajendra Nagar, Patna, 1969, pp.-43

The system of 'dowry' played a very important part in marriage during the period under review. In the contemporary literary works, in the accounts of the foreign travelers as well as in contemporary Persian chronicles, numerous incident references of dowry are available.

Both Chandeshwar and vachaspati have given a wider meaning of the term 'Saudayika' (dowry) which a daughter receives either before or after marriage at her father or her husband residence from her father or mother or other members of their respective families. Numerous folk songs are also available relating to the dowry system depicting the serious and embarrassing position created by the son-in-law and the father-in-law. When sufficient 'bidai' (dowry) or other gift was not given to the son-in-law, he used to leave the marriage place.<sup>28</sup> But this was not a very general rule. In medieval Mithila, the system of dowry was encouraged by the system of Kulinism also. The matrimonial alliances turned in course of time into monetary alliance as higher groups demanded money from the lower groups.<sup>29</sup> The practice of taking dowry has also been referred to be Manucci.<sup>30</sup> The practice of dowry was also widely followed by the Muslims.

'Divorce' was completely unknown among the higher caste of Hindus. Contemporary writers have not given any reference regarding divorce during the period under review. However, it was prevalent among those belonging to the lower section of the society. Abul fazl also informs as that divorce was not popular among the Hindus.

The position of widows in the Hindu society in Mithila was pitiable. Widow Remarriage was not allowed among the Hindus. The description about the helplessness of widows is all the more disheartening.

Widow marriage was however, prescribed among certain lower castes. Such second marriage of a Hindu widow as called 'Sagai', 'Sambandh' or 'Samadh'. Thus widow marriage, though prevalent among the lower order, was strictly prohibited among the higher castes.

The idea of 'Pativrata' i.e. being devoted to the husband alone was deep rooted in the mind of Hindu women that immolation became not only customary but also their highest aspiration. The act of burning of the Hindu wives under certain conditions after the death of her husband was called 'sati'.

In Mithila the practice of 'sati' was not unknown; king Bhavasimha's two wives become 'sati' on the bank of the 'Vagmati river. From the contemporary sources it appears that prostitution was prevalent in medieval Mithila also. It should be noted here that Vidyapati mentioned three types of women in 'Purusha Pariksha' viz. (I) one's own (II) women belonging to others, and (III) woman that are common property. The last one is a harlot and her main desire is to acquire money by any means.

<sup>28</sup> Upendra Thakur History of Mithila, op. cit. pp.-332.

<sup>29</sup> Vibhagasara of Vidyapati, edited and Translated by Gobind Jha Maithili Akademy, Patna, 1979, pp.-61.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid pp.-64.

She does not show any hatred to a rich man, even if he is worth less, but she shows no affection even to a worthy poor man.

Jyotirishwara in his *Varnratnakara* has also given a detailed description of the prostitutes and the light women. He considers 'Vasantsena' to be the best among the prostitutes. It may be noted here that from an account of the gambling house he passes to an account of a 'vesya' and then gives the description of an old woman acting as a go-between in love intrigues. The story of a fraud lady is the theme of his '*Dhurtasamaganataka*'. It also contains an account of the prostitutes, named 'Anangsenā'. Dancing and singing girls formed an important part of feudal society. Women used to be in secret love with the person other than husbands. Bad character women were there in the society and they were sarcastically known as 'kulta'.

Slave girls were not absent in the households of the aristocracy. The kings sometimes retained hundreds of slave-girls in their places. Concubine relationships came to be regarded as more chaste and tolerable forms of adultery. Thus it appears that even though prostitution as an institution did exist in Mithila during the period under review like other parts of the country, it had not assumed respectability in the society.

Women do not seem to have had a specific right to property in the modern sense of the term. However, there is evidence from contemporary sources that in certain conditions they acquired a right to certain kinds of property. Vidyapati in his '*Vibhagasa*' gives a detailed description of 'Stridhan' (Women's property).

It appears that 'Stridhan' had a considerable importance in Mithila during the period under review, and even the king had no power to take the property of women. We find the following six types of property called 'Stridhan'. Which is given to her during the time of marriage, coming to the house of the husband, gifted by father-in-law during the time of Pranam, gifted by brothers, gifted by mothers and gifted by father.<sup>43</sup> Property gifted for maintenance, ornaments, fees and gifted things are called 'Stridhan'. The wife herself is the proprietor of such property to utilize. Husband may be used such property only in the emergency otherwise not.

As noted above, the social status of women in general in the early and the Medieval period was demoralizing. The Sudra and the women were placed in the same category. The society had no respect for them. They were treated as an object of luxury and sexual gratification. They were not allowed to expose themselves physically as it was regarded as the worst dishonor, devoid of her husband's protection a chaste woman had no other place where she could live in peace and happiness and she could not even go to her father's house without his consent. In the long run they became dependent upon him at every stage of life.

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