Status of Woman as Per Bruhat Trayi-A Review

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Abstract

The status of women in India has been subjected to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, their history has been very eventful. In modern India women have held high offices and attained highest post in almost all the fields. As per the different descriptions scrutinized from the Ayurvedic classics, many references indicate the subordinate or inferiority status of the females and male dominancy was depicted and was highlighted at several instances. In the present article an attempt has been made to find out the status of women by looking into the descriptions given in the three great textbooks of Ayurveda. Based on the observations a conclusion was drawn that even though woman was considered as inferior to man, her emotional and aesthetic value were regarded highly and her social value as the perpetuator of the race was almost adored.

Keywords: Status; Woman; Samhita; Brihat trayi; Medical ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Male and Female, the two basic components of our human society, depend upon each other and each one of them constitutes about half of the population. The primary as well as the secondary sexual differences of the woman from those of

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man has given her a distinctive social position throughout the many ages of human history. In the ancient world she held either a privileged position by virtue of her charm, delicacy and relative weakness or an inferior position to man's and was regarded as a subordinate, ornament and sense satisfaction, to be possessed, decorated or pampered. It is only in recent times that her claim to equality with man has been seriously put forth and has gained recognition in all civilized countries. It is only now that she claims neither the privileged position with its implication of relative weakness and inferiority nor the subordinate position as an object of sense gratification. She is now asserting her equal partnership with the man in the enterprise of life and wants neither more nor less. Over the years, sociologists and other scholars have tried to assess the problems faced by women and to study in their status around the globe in general and in Indian society in particular.

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The status represents the position of an individual in the group. The word status denotes the position of an individual in a system with attendant rights and duties. It is the position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age, family, occupation, marriage and achievement. The status of woman refers to her position in the network of social role, structure, privileges, rights and duties. It refers to her rights and duties in family and social life. The status of a woman is generally measured in the comparative amount of prestige and respect accorded to her with that of man.

In view of this, it would be interesting to see what position and tasks she was assigned in the various contexts of social life as portrayed in the texts of Ayurveda and more particularly in the texts of Brihat trayis (the three Great text books of *Ayurveda*) –*Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita* and *Ashtanga Hridaya*, the work under review.

AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To study the status of woman as mentioned in Brihat trayis (the three Great textbooks of Ayurveda)

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

All the literatures related to this aspect were scrutinized and selected from all the Brihat trayees (the three Great textbooks of Ayurveda – Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya) and were analyzed. Some references of Ashtanga Sangraha were also taken wherever it was found necessary.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

We get scanty references in Brihat trayeesregarding the status of woman in those periods. Based on these descriptions we can divide the available references into two classes namely,

- A. *The medical references* These are the references in which her growth, aging, nature and constitution, the diseases (general and special, she is liable to), modification of medications and dosage, and the last but the most important the physiology and pathology of the maternity period she passes through, and
- B. *The general references* These are the references in which the social aspects related to woman, direct as well as indirect references were dealt with.

Now we shall explore the above aspects with the references available in the texts of *Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya*.

A. Medical References

- a. The woman is likely to get affected with all diseases which a man is recipient to and in addition to these general diseases she suffers from diseases peculiar to her due to the special structure of her sexual organs. These diseases are called gynaecological disorders (*Yoni rogas*) and a special chapter has been devoted to them (*Yonivyapat chikitsa*) in *Charaka Samhita Chikitsa sthana*¹, *Sushruta Samhita Uttaratantra*² and also *Ashtanga Hridaya Uttarasthana*.³ This shows that our great sages were well aware about the physiological and pathological aspects of the female body.
- One special branch of the Ashtanga Ayurveda b. has been especially devoted to the physiology and pathology of the maternity stage of a woman's life along with the paediatric science i.e., Kaumarabhritya. Under this branch itself the detail description of maternity state, month wise development of foetus, various diet and necessary treatments during the period of pregnancy, pathological conditions related to the maternity were described beautifully in all three greater treatises of Ayurveda. By looking into the above descriptions it is very obvious that both Obstetrics and Gynaecology were given equal importance just like in allied science along with the other general conditions when the treatment aspects is taken into consideration. But nomenclature related to Prasuti or Stree roga as one among the eight branches is not mentioned by any of the treatises of Ayurveda, while it is a specialized branch in contemporary science.
- In the chapter on Gulma chikitsa (treatment of C. phantom tumour), a special variety of it called Raktaja gulma (morbid growth in the uterus caused due to the vitiated blood) described by all Acharyas which is peculiarly seen in female species because of their characteristic feature to pass menstrual blood through the uterus. Again in the chapter of Gulma Nidanadhyaya while describing its concept it is said thatVataas the main involved dosha in the occurrence of Raktaja Gulma, Charaka states various factors for the vitiation of Vatadosha including the status of woman and her nature viz., her subordinate positionin the family or dependency on man, her lack of enlightenment or ignorance and her natural inclinations to shyness, delicacy and

modesty, impose restrictions on the prompt discharge of natural urges.⁴ In a roundabout way, the social status of woman is depicted here by saying her as subordinate or inferior to man.

- d. We get references in our classics about foster mother or wet nurse (*Dhatri*) in *Charaka Samhita*⁵ and *Sushruta Samhita*⁶ as substitute mothers for taking care of and feeding the new born children. This indicates that in those periods also, the women in the form of *Dhatri* (wet nurse) were helpful in bringing up the health of the children and in turn helping the needy in the society.
- Her constitution, being considered weaker than e. that of a male, is compared with the constitution of the child and the aged persons, and accordingly medications are to be made milder for her as told by Sushruta in the context of Madhutailika basti (enema prepared with honey and oil).⁷ The same theory has been adopted by him even in the case of surgical procedures too. For eg; while discussing the leech therapy he advocates the different personalities who are by nature weaker in constitution for leech therapy.⁸ Similar notations are also described by Charaka while describing Karyadesha (the site for the administration of therapies with a view to bringing about equilibrium of *dhatus*) stating if strong therapies are immediately administered without any proper examination, to a weak patient, this might result in his death. In this context he further states that this type of therapy should be specifically meant for ladies because they are by nature unsteady, light and of sensitive or weak temperament and also because they are mostly tender and subordinate to others.9 Further, Sushruta enlists certain personalities in whom the curable diseases also sometimes become difficult to cure and women are one among them.¹⁰ This also shows the lesser immune power and lesser inner strength the women have when compared to the men.
- f. The sages of India, by their long observation and by the deep knowledge of the science, were knowingthe difference in the pace of growth and decay of the constitutions of both man and woman. In physical and mental development and maturity as well as in their decay man is slower than woman. This fact is depicted in observations like "it has been mentioned that a woman at her age of sixteen years and a man at his age of twenty five years will attain full growth and vitality". In the same way the stage of senescence is also described for the woman at

the age of fifty years where menstrual discharge comes to cessation while for males it has been said as after sixty years. Both references indicate the faster maturity, growth and degeneration can be seen in women.^{11, 12, 13, 14}

- g. In few references, woman is mentioned as a therapeutic agent in certain conditions. While describing the different therapeutic techniques for the persons of Pitta constitution presented with Pitta disorders Charaka mentions the company of agreeable ladies wearing cooling garments and garlands.¹⁵ Apart from this, certain disease conditions like fever or Jwara¹⁶ and alcoholismspecifically, *Vataja Madatyaya*¹⁷ and *Pittaja Madatyaya*.¹⁸ This suggests that psychologically too woman can have cooling and consoling effect.
- The ethics of the medical practitioners as h. described in the texts indirectly give us an idea of the status of woman in ancient India. It is mentioned in Charaka Samhita that "Women in the absence of their husbands or guardians should not be treated by vaidyas19 and also, vaidyas are advised not to accept any joyable things given by a woman without the consent of her husband or guardian.²⁰ Sushruta also opines the same by stating physician should not accept gifts other than food from women along with not indulging in laughter or jokes with them.²¹ Thus, it displays that women were not having any independency and moreover they were always overshadowed by either guardian or husband throughout their life.
- i. The code of the surgical nursing prescribes the services of a female nurse. Not only that even the sight of a woman is considered undesirable as mere seeing them also may become the reason for the seminal discharge.²²

B. Charaka Samhita being primarily a medical treatise, takes a scientific and biological view of man and woman. Yet the social practices of the age and the relative imposition of woman have been mentioned explicitly sometimes and implicitly more often.

a. The dominancy of males during that period was very obvious by looking into the indirect references mentioned in the treatise. Eg: While describing the aetiology of *Rakta Gulma*, the social position of the woman in general is referred to. Charaka states her position as dependent on man and she has lack of enlightenment or ignorance and she has natural inclinations to shyness, delicacy and modesty.²³ The description of dependency of women

over men shows the subordinate nature of the females and the supremacy of males at that period.

- b. Another reference which indicate the weak and delicate nature of the woman as quoted by Charaka. In the context of posology description the woman has been described as unsteady by nature, tender, wavering, easily disturbed and generally delicate, weak and dependent on others. It is owing to this reason that in emergency a weak patient should be treated first with non-distressing, mild and generally delicate remedies and later on gradually, by heavy remedies which do not upset him or give rise to complications. Such therapies are specifically needed for ladies because they are by nature unsteady, light (not deep) and of sensitive or weak temperament and also because they are mostly tender and subordinate to others.24
- c. In the chapter instructing the principles of good way and behaviour of life to man (Sadvritta), it is said "One should not insult women folk nor one should have too much reliance upon them, one should not confide secrets to them nor one should authorise them indiscriminately or place her in power."²⁵ This again shows the unsteady nature of the females and henceforth it was said not to reveal any secrets to a woman. Furthermore, it was said that superior position should not be given to females which means that they are considered as subordinate or inferiorto man in those periods and man was given the prime importance. Even we can assume by above verse that woman may be considered as incapable of superior posts as she is considered weak by nature and difficult to manage the superior posts.
- d. Women were also trained to play the part of companion and entertainer to man in his pursuit of pleasure. Charaka describes the part played by the women attendants and carriers who actually were to be well trained in the art of entertainment.²⁶
- e. In the description of the selection of the wife, life's partner one of the qualifications she must possess apart from *atulyagotra* (unequalled family descendants) was her being *vashyaa* i.e., amenable or agreeable. It is said that, ".... who is analogous (*samana satva*) to him in mind, who is amenable to him and pleased with his advances, who enthrals all his senses by her excellent qualities."²⁷ That means to say she also should have the similar capacity of thinking as that of the man, who agrees wholeheartedly

with his success and helps in uplifting of the man.

- A woman's body and appearance have been f. considered as the best aphrodisiac. In the context of Vajikarana chapter of Charaka Samhitait is said that "A sexually excited female partner is the aphrodisiac par excellence. She is the receptacle of the sex act. Each individual item of beauty gives immense pleasure to an individual. Let alone the conglomeration of all these objects (at a place, i.e.,) in the body of a young woman. This accounts for her excellence as an aphrodisiac. All objects of beauty are assembled in a woman in a compact form, and nowhere else. All the objects of senses found in the person of a woman evoke the maximum delight in a man. The woman is, therefore, the most loveable object for a man. It is the woman who procreates children".28
- g. We get the references in our classic as man is advised to have as sexual partners different types of women according to the season; e.g. one should have a plump and passionate woman with her body besmeared with *aguru* (eagle-wood) as bed-mate in the winter.²⁹ Further, it is stated that in spring season one should drink wholesome *Seedhu* or honey wine and enjoy the youthful loveliness of women and the gardens.³⁰ In this context polygamy of man is accepted and women were used as sense of sexual gratification.
- If we scrutinize the Samhitas we get the reference h. of Putreshti yagya which is performed in desire of having male progeny is available in Charaka Samhita.³¹ Again this shows the male dominant society in those periods. There is another corresponding prenatal "savana" ceremony as we have the Pumsavanavidhi for male progeny named by all Brihat trayees.^{31,32,33,34} Chakrapani describes it as 'Pumstvakaraka' that means these are the rites or therapies performed to get a male child. But while describing the various therapeutic procedures the Acharyas have given importance to female progeny as well (for those who wish to have) along with the male one. For example: the Errhine therapy (Nasya) prepared out of Lakshmana, Vatashrunga etc. drugs is carried out and these drugs should be put into the right nostrils to have male progeny and into the left nostrils for female progeny. But while naming the ceremony there is no special naming of such ceremony as Streesavanavidhi however its description is available within Pumsavana vidhi itself. Thus in naming a ceremony also the superiority of the male in the society is

highlighted.

- i. The virilification section or section of aphrodisiac which forms one of the eight branches of the *Ashtanga Ayurveda* is devoted solely to help the man (*Vajeekarana tantra*) and there is no mention of a woman in this process.
- j. When we look into the different text books of *Ayurveda* we come across several male renowned physicians. There is no mentioning of any renowned female scholar or *Vaidyas* in any of the texts. This is another indication that women were usually kept aloof from learning the medical science and this is another reference which shows that women are considered as inferior partner.
- k. There is a concept of executioners in the form of *Vishakanya* (poison maiden) described by Sushruta³⁶ and Vagbhata³⁷ which clearly indicates that in those period women were also used as weapons to kill the opponents. Any contact with these toxic ladies maybe in the form of touch or in contact with exhaled air or any other form of contact with them would mean death. Gradual feeding of different types of poisons continued throughout the girls' early age from their birth onwards to make them immune to the lethal effects.
- 1. While describing the constitution of different organs and body parts six components (6 *bhavas*) have been explained among which the delicate and soft parts or organs of the body are considered as originated from the mother (*Matruja bhava*).³⁸ This reference again strengthens the fact that by nature the females are delicate.

But all these references which indirectly give us a glimpse of the status of women in those times need not lead us to the conclusion that she was regarded as no more than a chattel or a useful toy to please the whims of man. Although her natural weakness and her anatomical peculiarities kept her far behind in the race as against man, her status as mother was highly respected. She was the fountain source of the propagation of the race. Childlessness was not only deplored, it was despised. As said by Charaka, "The man without progeny is like a solitary tree that yields no shade which has no branches, which bears no fruit and is devoid of any pleasant odour. The man without progeny is regarded as a painted lamp, a dried up lake, or a pseudo-metal which only has the appearance of the precious metal and is like a man of straw possessing only the shape of a man. Again, such a progeny is regarded to be not well established, bare, like a void, and possessed of only one sense and as having lived a purposeless life."39

So it was the women who brought the very purpose of life to fruition. Again, a child, a male child, was absolutely necessary in order that the person be free from one of the three debts which he has enjoined upon to discharge. As said by Sushruta, "Good and filial sons who are thus born, who are handsome, truth speaking, long-lived and are righteous owe a debt to their parents (and should discharge the same)".⁴⁰

Woman is the only source of progeny and as such she was highly respected. As a matter of fact it was the protection the woman received as the source of progeny, family honour and the repository of dignity that kept the women from coming to the forefront. So her very usefulness was turned into her weakness. Charaka when he comes to speak about this aspect of woman's life, waxes eloquent and surpasses others in his eulogy of the woman. The quotation goes like this, "Indeed it is the object that is found in the person of the woman that evokes our pleasure greatly. Hence it is that man's pleasure is mainly in the woman and that in her is established the source of progeny. In her also are established righteousness, wealth, auspiciousness and the two worlds – this and the other".⁴¹

CONCLUSION

Thus although the biological picture of a woman as given in medical texts of old, is not so glorifying to the woman, as she is by nature weak and inferior to man, her emotional and aesthetic value was regarded highly and her social value as the perpetuator of the race was almost adored. She was regarded as the fountain source of the propagation of the race and in this aspect the values of the women were considered very high.

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