

THE FAMILY VALUES IN VEDIC CULTURE

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Introduction

Our cultural history is indeed unique, no other culture can match it in its antiquity, it opens the vision of the aspirant by disclosing far – stretching forces of human activity at work, making countless currents to flow in various divergent directions, with one music as it were, in the ceaseless process of self-expression and self -adjustment. Bharat attained the highest pinnacle of cultural glory when the other nations (those of which may consider themselves as advanced now) were in their period of infantile tutelage, in Bharat the Ṛṣi had propounded profound systems of philosophy, laying regulations for social as well as political organizations, there were discussions on the life and death and the mysteries behind it. There was the all – sided development over many ages, thus it was able to occupy and maintain the pre – eminent position in the civilized world of ancient times in every department of human activity. That was the time when a rigorous and constant effort was made to understand the meaning and purpose of life. In this article I am trying to analyse the basic unit of society i.e. family, which values were promoted and appreciated and that lead to the overall development of man and society.

Family in Vedic culture

Vedic optimism is not anthropological but, on the whole, cosmological, based on cosmotheandric¹(anthropo - cosmis) view of reality. A life is a journey, an aspirant move from ignorance towards knowledge, from materialistic attachment towards the spiritual domain and in order to progress physically, psychologically, spiritually family is an imperative part of one's life. Be it three debts (*Pitr ṛṇa*, *Deva ṛṇa*, *Ṛṣi ṛṇa*) or the purusarthas (*dharma*, *arth*, *kāma*, *mokṣa*) all can only be pursued by the family man. The importance of family can be seen even in Ṛg Veda² where importance is given to the feeling of love and affection while staying together. The duties of all the family members are discussed in several scriptures.³ According to Manu Smṛti⁴ there are four basic motives to pursue a family life, firstly one can have progeny and by having children not only the kula / vansh is continued but the future of human race is secured, secondly in

order to perform dharmic karma, as propounded by Atharva Veda⁵ man requires a wife in performing the moral and spiritual acts, be it yajñas, dāna, *śrādhā* and so on. There is a famous example from Rāmāyaṇa, when Śrī Rāma has to perform rajsurya yajñas, a gold statue of Sitā is prepared and along with her Śrī Rāma performs the yajñas. Thirdly, in order to serve the humanity or society it is important to have a wife, as she will be the one taking care of parents and athiti (guest), giving alms to the brahamcaris, sannyasi, monks and other dependents. It is through her participation that the aspirant (husband) attains status in the social, moral and spiritual domains and lastly to fulfill his desire for sex.

The family in Vedic culture consisted of parents (maybe the step mothers), grand- parents, uncles and aunties, wife (wives), siblings (half -brothers and sisters), cousins and their spouses, one's own children and children of other family members. All these people living together in a loving, prosperous and harmonious manner. The basic function of the family is to provide food, shelter, security and protection along with the moral support in the adverse situations, thus, a holistic development of all the members of the family is taken care of. On the other hand, each individual has a set of duties like earning, taking care of the young ones and old family members, cooking food, taking care of property and so on. At this stage it is important to note that distribution of work used to be judiciously shared by all the members of a family for its overall growth.

The duties of all the members are well defined, but to explain the few, Ṛg Veda⁶ considers father as the best person who has his children's welfare at his heart, he is considered as the agent who creates and builds his progeny. Sukaharyaacharya niti⁷ also advocates few necessary duties for father for example, father should take care of child's education, his source of income by which the child can lead his family in a proper way in future and make sure that he (father) does not leave any lone for his son to repay. Bhrid. Up.⁸, Manu Smṛti⁹, Chandogya Up.¹⁰ The values and the duties which were promoted in Vedic culture are so important to follow, in Mahābhārat era. when father (Drithrastra) ignores the evil deeds of his son

(Duryodhna) one can see how it led to bad consequences i.e. complete annihilation of Kauravas . The teaching of ethical values and guidance was the prime duty of father, for that it was necessary to for him follow that path which he promotes to his son. The Mahābhārat ¹¹ shows the importance of elder brother, he should be considered as father figure (in case one's father dies or takes on Vānprasth **asram**) and wife and children should be protected as one's own body.

Similarly, mother also has been assigned some duties, she is also considered as first guru who introduce saṁskārs to her child, *Rg Veda* ¹², Arharva Veda(3.30.2) has *Bhumi sūkta* where it sings the praises of mother, her relation to the offspring and the care which she takes in raising her child, mother's love is the most selfless in nature thus, Vasiṣṭ Dharma Sūtra ¹³ says father holds higher place than guru and mother holds the highest place, Mahābhārat ¹⁴also discusses the duties of mother. There is famous story of Chandogya UP. ¹⁵ of Satyakama Jabali, who speaks the truth regarding his lineage, that he does not know who is his father (as told to him by his mother). Later on, he goes on to become a great sage. In the Brih. Up. ¹⁶ there is a philosophical discussion between Yajñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi, on the topic of Self and immortality, projecting the intellectual and spiritual knowledge of Maitreyi and she later on follows the path of mokṣa. Similar instance can be witnessed in the dialogue of Sulbha with Janaka in mokṣa dharma parva with in the shanti parva, the is a tale told by Bhishm of brahmavadini Sulbha with King Janak, where Sulbha has a philosophical debate with King Janak in his court in the presence of several wise people , and she proves him wrong by establishing that self is not gendered, thus even the women has write to take sannyasa, they can also cultivate yogic powers by their own dedication and tapas. ¹⁷ This shows that the women of ancient times were knowledgeable and wise who set the value system in the society by giving values to their children and having in dialogues with contemporary men of their times they were brahmavadini.

The birth of the daughter is equally important in a family, Brih. Up. ¹⁸ discuss the birth of a daughter for the couple who desire to have a one. She also had a choice to follow brahmacharya and get education She has the right to the property, she or her son can also be nominated as the successor. ¹⁹ Though men were the rulers in ancient times but there are instance of women leading the nation as well as family ²⁰. Daughter is considered as the pride of the family, princesses were addressed by the kingdoms to which they belonged for example, Gandhari, Kakyie, Kaushilya and so on. It was important duty of parents to get their daughter

married at the appropriate age, to the well deserving man. In Mahābhārat there are many women who were strong and took decision for the welfare of family and nation, for example, Satyawati wife of King Shantnu, when her sons died young without any offspring, she decided to call her first born Ṛṣi Ved- Vaysa for niyog , as it was considered ethical in those times to have child sired from brother- in -law if husband dies without any offspring. Although Bhisham was also a brother in law, due to his vow of Brahmacharya he denied to participate in niyog . It was the decision of Satyawati to let her secret out, that prior to her marriage to Shantnu, she had a son, though Kunti did not show such courage and declare Karan as her son, but she is seen taking care of both her sons and her step sons without any partiality and guiding them from time to time against all odds. Gandhari on the other hand also tried her best to stop Duryodhana from performing evil deeds, (she warns Dhritrashtra of bad consequences) while bestowing her blessings prior to the beginning of the war she blesses by saying that, may the side of dharma win. In this epic there are several instances where the lady makes an independent choice for the man she wants to marry, be it Hidamba, Rukmani, Subhadra and so on, which depicts that women were strong enough to make decisions, and many a times even go against the wishes of her parents. No one can ignore how Dauropdi 's decling Karṇa to participate in the swayamvar. The situation in court room after the game of dice when Dauropdi is humiliated publicly there too she does not cry or seeks pity but on the contrary she challenges all and gives such an ethical, political and social rationale that wise men like Bhishm, Vidur, Drona, Kripacharya, Yudhishtra along with the Pandavs, Karan and others are left speechless.

Parents desire the birth of a son who can continue their lineage and also perform the **shraddha** ceremony for ancestors. According to Manu Smṛiti ²¹son is necessary for the family, there is a reference of putrakamashti yajña ²², parents are like God for son ,²³ one can witness that to fulfill the wishes of his mother and to complete the vow of his father Śr ī Rāma went to exile for fourteen years .²⁴ In Mahābhārat ²⁵ also, to fulfill his father's desire (to marry Satyawati) Devrat takes a vow to remain brahmachari and thus is known as Bhishm. In Rāmāyaṇa there is a famous story of Sharvan Kumar who carries his blind parents for tirth yatra (visit to holy places) and on the way is (accidentally) killed by the hands of Dasratha , soon after hearing the demise of their son the parents die . This shows a strong bond of love between parents and their son. Similarly, Nachiketa took it as his duty to stop his father's act of dana, as the cows which were collected (to be given in dana) were too weak (as if they were about to die) and Nachiketa knew that,

the act will bring ill fame to his father and forefathers, so he readily accepts his father's wrath²⁶ by asking him again and again that being a son he is most dear to his father so to whom is his father gifting him to ?

In ancient times a child was known by the name of both the parents, for example, Devki nandan, Yashoda nandan (Devki and Yashoda both are Śrī Kṛṣṇa's mothers), Vasudeva Kṛṣṇa (Vasudev was Śrī Kṛṣṇa's father), Kaunteya (son of Kunti), Pandavas (Pandu's five sons), Radhyea (since Karan's mother was Radha), Janaki (Janak's daughter i.e. Sitā), Dropadi this shows the importance of both the parents. Amongst the brothers also one can observe the love and affection for example, Śrī Rāma has affection for his younger (half) brothers and his younger (half) brothers they have reverence towards him, which can be established by the fact that Śrī Rāma leaves his coronation and readily agrees to go to exile and Lakshman goes with his elder brother to exile (even though he was not told by his parents) and Bharat on the other hand, does not accept the thrown and waits for the return of his elder brother; similar is the case with Pandavas, they all agree to the directions given by Yudhister and he treats them with love and affection without any partiality (as Nakul and Sahadev were his step-brothers). The affection of Śrī Kṛṣṇa towards Balram and Subhadra is also well acclaimed. On the other hand, one can also observe the relation of jealousy and hatred which Duryodhana had towards his cousins and Bali had towards Sugriv which resulted in the annihilation of the families, thus was universally rejected.

The Grastha āśram starts after the marriage, in Vedic culture there was a choice given to the daughter to choose her future husband as discussed earlier. The relationship between husband and wife is the basis of the family. In Vedic culture (Ṛg-Veda, VIII.31.5-9) the married couple was known as 'Dampati', the relationship was not based on physical intimacy only but had psychological and spiritual relation also. As the wife is known as Dharam Patni i.e. the care taker of moral and spiritual journey of her husband. In the pursuits for *puruṣārtha*, she not only fulfills the desires (*kāma*) and is equal partner in accumulating wealth (arth) but also diligently performs all the moral, religious as well as social duties (dharma) and later on when husband proceeds on the path of sannyasa to attain mokṣa she either follows him like Maitrye or takes care of the house hold like Devhuti (mother of Kapil muni, propounder of Samkhya philosophy). Husband too along with his wife had duties towards his wife. He must fulfill her desires, it was the duty of the husband to provide food, shelter, protection to the wife. As the Vedic society was based on *āśram* system, it was the duty

of a house holder to take on the responsibility of all the three āśrams (the whole society), looking after the needs of brahmachari, Vānaprastha as well as sannayasis, performing the rituals for the welfare of the world he gives his contribution to the holistic development of all. To remain true to her husband is considered as primary duty of wife. She, must possess a strong moral character, adultery committed by wife can lead to several immoral consequences and in moral decline in society. But it is important to note that there was injunction that the wife (dharm patni) should not be ill-treated, her words should be taken seriously by her husband otherwise it can bring problem for the family, there are several instances which establishes this, to explain this I am taking the instance from epics, Mandodari was wise person, wife of Ravana who many a times advised her husband to return Sitā to (her husband) Śrī Rāma²⁷ but Ravana ignored her advice and warnings and was not only killed by Śrī Rāma but his sons and many warriors got killed. He brought total annihilation to his kula. Gandhari wife of Dhritrashtra, also advised her husband to check the hatred her son had for Pandavas which later caused the war and annihilation of whole family. Manu Smṛti²⁸ declares that the homes where their women are respected Gods reside there. So, it is important that the females members of the family are not ill-treated.

Conclusion

The family constitutes the fulcrum of the society, culture and consequently nation and they were able to make a harmonious relation between social and political organizations, for the holistic development of the society it was mandatory that people from all walks of life, of both the genders should participate in the social dialogue. A morally, socially and economically strong families helps in creating a strong society which will be well balanced and it will help in building a great nation. It is important to observe that, in that era no family member is seeking the rights but are motivated to perform their duties, if we compare it with the present scenario where every member want to grab his rights and conveniently forget the duties. The basic motivation of an agent is selfless in nature in Vedic era as compare to today's selfish approach which is leading towards jealousy and hatred and is destroying the homogeneous atmosphere in the family. In ancient times the fulcrum of the family bonding was love and sacrifice for other members, maybe these people did not even have the notion of 'other' as they considered the whole world as a big family and with love, care and sacrifice they made strong bonding and created a peaceful atmosphere for the holistic growth of all. The famous saying of the scriptures 'Vasudhava Kutumbhikam' has presently shown the world the importance of

considering the whole world as a family, not having enmity with anyone be it man or Nature. One may think that I have been very selective in my approach²⁹ but my major focus is to see the positive values which were taught and practiced by the family members in ancient times. If we are able to promote the selfless love for everyone, emotions like compassion and sympathy then we may be able to revive the peaceful and harmonious existence for all.

Notes and References

1. For detailed study see Pannikar,
2. Ṛg-Veda X.111.2
3. Manu Smṛti 3.80 ; Yajnavalkya Smṛti 2.45 ; Garud Pūraṇa 1.85.6
4. 9.28
5. 11.1.17.27
6. IV. 17.17
7. 3.256
8. 6.2.1
9. 3.3
10. 5.3.1
11. XII. 243.20-21
12. VIII.18.11
13. 13.48
14. XII. 266.32-33
15. 4.1.4
16. II.4. 9
17. For detail see Ruth Vanita.
18. 6.4.17
19. Manu 9.130
20. YV 22.22; AV 1.14.3
21. 9.137
22. Ṛg-Veda 10.85.43
23. Tati. Up. 1.11.2
24. Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa 2.26.19
25. 1.100.87.96
26. katha Up. 1. 1-4
27. For detail see Lanka kāṇḍa
28. 3.56.57
29. As there are several instances, like Kekayie whose cruel planning lead to disturbance in her family, along with the various example of women like Anusuya, who by her spiritual power could even defeat the Gods. When these people are judged one can notice that, for the betterment of the society one requires people like Anusuya and Gandhari rather than Kekayie, as they fulfilled all obligations and had a positive effect on the society.

Abbreviations

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| 1) Ṛg-Veda | RV |
| 2) Atharva- Veda | AV |
| 3)Yajurveda-Veda | YV |
| 4) <i>Bhagvad Gītā</i> | BG, Gita |
| 5) Mahābhārat | Mbh. |

- 6) Upaniṣad Up.
- 7) *Brhadāranyaka* Upaniṣad Brih. Up.
- 8) Taittiriya Upaniṣad Tait. Up.
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11. Radhakrishnan S. The Bhagvad Gita, Harper Collins Publishers India 2010.
12. Ruth Vanita, "The Self is not Gendered: Sulbha's Debate with King Janak", NWSA Journal, 15, 2003, pp. 76-93