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A Quest for answers: ṚṢIKĀ GĀRGĪ and her debates

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Abstract:

The silencing of woman in a patriarchal society by adopting the method of threats, menace, warnings and insults is a common scenario witnessed in contemporary times. Though, this phenomena is not only seen in the present times but has been customary in the Vedic times as well. As an example, a famous debate between the philosopher sage Yajnavalkya and Rsika Gargi from the Yajnavalkya Kanda of Brihadaranyaka Upanisad has been taken into account. This debate is an epitome of male egoism and women subordination which can be related to the position of women in present times as well. An important weapon to place our point of view in front of the society and reach to the conclusive answers is by the method of debate through apt justifications and reasoning and one must not stop till indisputable answers are reached. Thus, this paper is a tentative elucidation of how a woman is silenced in a quest for answers from Vedic times to present time.

Keywords: Debate, threat, wisdom

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Mānavadharmasāstra or *Manusmṛti*, an ancient legal text to formulate the Hindu law by the British colonial government preaches that “A woman should never be independent but should be under the protection of her father in youth, husband in adulthood, and son in old age and that a woman should always worship her husband like a god”² It also declares that women must be honored and adorned and where women are revered, there the gods rejoice, but where they are not, no sacred rite bears any fruit.³ Although it is often regarded that *Manusmṛti* offers an inconsistent and internally conflicting perspective on women’s rights but with close perusal of the above mentioned two verses, we may deduce that women should be honored and exalted only in their confined space of firstly being a daughter, wife and mother of someone and secondly being entirely dependent upon others. If a woman worships her husband like a god and nicely upholds her responsibilities towards her family, then only she will be adorned.

This stature of women pronounced in *Manusmṛti* puts forth a number of questions like,

- Why can’t we think of a woman entirely independent of others?
- Why can’t we think of a woman engaging in philosophical discussions and debates rather than being captured in the nutshell of her home and imagining that taking care of her family is the sole duty of a woman?
- Is the position of women in a society as mentioned in *Manusmṛti* still persisting in modern times?

To answer these questions, the debate between a great *Brahmavādinī* and a natural philosopher *Gārgī* with the sage *Yājñavalkya*, which is perhaps the most famous debate between a woman and a man in Vedic times, has been taken into account.

Vedic time is attributed as a golden era for the women of Indian society. Scholars agree that women’s status declined from the Vedic period to the period beginning about the first century and unfortunately this

² *Manusmṛti*, 2.67-2.69 and 5.148-5.155

³ *Manusmṛti*, 3.55-3.56

demeaning position of women persists even today. From ancient times, the women's status in the society has been a debatable issue. There are numerous hymns in the *Rgveda* indicating the high status given to women in Vedic society. The *Rgveda* states that a girl should herself choose her own husband and the marriage hymn states that the daughter-in-law should be treated as a queen *samrajni*⁴. *Rgveda* also has hymns composed by women although this fact cannot be denied that out of 1000 hymns, only 12-15 are attributed to women. Out of them, a great philosopher and renowned expounder of the Vedas, who was respected by the elite of the society as well as the highly placed ascetics and is said to have written many hymns in the *Rgveda* was *Gārgī Vācaknvi*. She also participated in the religious discourses and debates and remained a celibate throughout her life.

Debate (*vāda* or *vāda*) may involve formal discussion on a particular topic, structured question and answer or logical argumentations between rival schools of thought. It is a powerful tool to reach to the conclusion with

reasoning and justifications and an opportunity to enhance knowledge of a given topic. It was used by scholars and philosophers of not only in India but other parts of the world as well. For example, the Socratic debate which is considered as the Socratic method is a form of a dialogue between individuals to reach a conclusion by asking and answering questions. A similar method of debate in the form of conversation or discussion was applied by *Gārgī* to find the answers for the ultimate reality.

According to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1, *Gārgī* once asked *Yājñavalkya*, "O *Yājñavalkya*, if all this (earth) is pervaded by water, by what, pray, is water pervaded?" *Yājñavalkya* replies that water is pervaded by air. *Gārgī* then asks a series of questions about what pervades the air, sky, the world of *Gandharvas*, sun, moon, stars, gods, *Indra*, *Prajāpati* or *Vīrjī*? *Yājñavalkya* replies to all her questions patiently by answering that air is pervaded by sky, sky is pervaded by the world of *gandharvas* which in turn is pervaded by the world of sun. The world of sun is pervaded by the world of moon, moon by the world of stars,

⁴ *Rgveda*, 10.85.26

stars by the world of the gods, gods by the world of *Indra*, *Indra* by the World of *Virjī* which is pervaded by the World of *Hiranyagarbha*. *Gārgī* then asks “By what, pray, is the world of *Hiranyagarbha* pervaded? To this *Yājñavalkya* said, “O *Gārgī*, do not question too much lest your head falls off. You are indeed questioning too much about a divinity about which we are not supposed to ask much. Do not, O *Gārgī*, question too much.” Thereafter, *Gārgī Vācaknṛī* kept silent.⁵ *Yājñavalkya* was in a bind. He was dealing with that which cannot be defined- the Absolute Brahman. If he did not explain this, he would be rendered guilty of non-comprehension, on the other hand if he tries to explain the unexplainable, he would commit the mistake of contradiction that is defining which cannot be defined. If he answers he looks foolish and if he doesn't, he admits defeat. Due to his male and scholarly ego, he could not accept his defeat in a court full of scholars. Thus, in order to shut *Gārgī's* mouth, he warned her to stop asking any further questions otherwise her head will fall off. This is an example of

the silencing of women in patriarchal society. Not only in ancient times, this case of male ego is still prevalent in present time where threat and warnings are a way to keep women silent and undergo repression. *Gārgī's* questions were an attempt to reach the ultimate truth but were interfered with a menace and hence, she remained silent. Although, *Gārgī* portrays an example of a woman with wisdom and virtue but the readers must not use this incident as an exemplar. It's time to overcome these authoritarianism and despotism and question until you reach the final answer. This is how we must question the women's status in homes, workplace and society and stop not till we reach the answer because posing questions in search for answers is the first step towards equality in this patriarchal society.

But this debate portrays another side of *ṛṣikā Gārgī* also. Unlike *Śākalya*, she is not foolish and stubborn enough to ignore *Yājñavalkya's* warning. The ninth section of the *Yājñavalkya Kāṇḍa* in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* deals with the dialogue between *Yājñavalkya* and *Śākalya*. *Yājñavalkya* was able to

⁵ *Bṛhadāraṇyak Upaniṣad*, *Yājñavalkya Kāṇḍa*, II, IV, *Gārgī Brahman*

judge that the motive of *Śākalya* was not to reach to the ultimate answer through debate but to ask such questions which he cannot answer and can be defeated. After a series of theological questions asked by *Śākalya* to test the knowledge of *Yājñavalkya* and to defeat him, *Yājñavalkya* in turn asks one question to him with a condition that if he cannot clearly explain the answer, his head shall fall off. He was unable to answer, thus, his head fell off and robbers snatched away his bones, mistaking them for something else. Hence, the silence of *Gārgī* is also a symbol of her non-egoistic self and a real inquiry for the truth. The threat of head shattering in these dialogues used to portray a tense atmosphere for philosophical debates. Its original application, in fact, originated from philosophical discussions rather than incorrect performance of ritual actions. By means of threat, *Yājñavalkya* accuses *Gārgī* for asking questions beyond her own knowledge. It is seen that the knowledge of women is not indorsed with expansive authority even when they make same philosophical claims as knowledgeable *brāhmins*. This example shows *Yājñavalkya's*

aggressive and incorrect way of debating.

In words of Mahatma Gandhi, "women are queens of kitchen." But he was unaware of the fact that once questioned for her knowledge and power, she's no less than men. Be it a housewife, a single woman or an independent woman, awareness is the key to become wise; one must have control over their senses. Self-realization and right practice lead to the path of emancipation. According to Kant, women are irrational, even Nietzsche considers woman as the source of all folly and unreason, the siren figure who lures the male philosopher out of their appointed truth-seeking path. But they were unaware of the fact that even women can partake in philosophical discussions and can be superior to men in wisdom and reasoning.

Women internalize their subordination to the extent that they do not protest or question it. But how would we know the potential and virtue of these women and the courage to outdo their male counterparts. This can be done by adopting the method of debate wherein battle of words is more powerful than action. In today's time,

whenever you are in search for answers or in a quest for answers- always question the authority and indulge in the method of debate since it is seen as the most powerful method, from Vedic times, to reach to answers through apt reasons and justifications which can question the preconceived notions.

Gārgī being an independent woman with courage, knowledge and inquisitive nature, didn't stop until she received the apt answers for her questions. She continued the debate with *Yājñavalkya* with the support of *Uddālaka* and got her answers. Thus, it is very important to debate until conclusive answers are reached. Debate should not be done in order to win an argument, but to reach to an indisputable answer.

Patriarchy and oppression of women have existed in all periods of history, the question is what the extent of this oppression was. Due to the patriarchal and patrilineal nature of the household in Vedic times, women were denied access to resources. Unfortunately, most people have forgotten these women who were unparalleled by men of their times.

These *ṛṣikās* are an epitome of wisdom, virtue, nobility and power. A lot can be

learnt from them and their lessons can be applied in contemporary times. *Ṛṣikā Gārgī*, although a person with knowledge of *Brahma Vidyā*, but silenced by a male through terror tactics when she was in search for the answer of the question, "On what are the worlds of *Brahmā* woven or pervaded?" Making a learned woman silent only because *Yājñavalkya* didn't knew the answer and was conscious of his self-image in the court is an example of male egoism and arrogance. He relied on threats and insults to intimidate the opponent. If *Gārgī* didn't keep quiet then her head would have fallen off. But if *Gārgī* herself knew the answer, she could have silenced *Yājñavalkya*. Thus, education is the first step towards enlightenment. The inquiry for truth should not stop till you reach the truth. It very essential to educate girls so that they can question the authority and when herself confronted with a question, they can answer with pride and courage. The deep inquisitiveness to unravel the nature of truth should not stop even after hindrances of threat and warning. With an objective to answer the three questions possessed in the beginning of the article, it can be concluded that

celibate women are not less than anyone in their way of living and not necessarily a woman have to be dependent on others for her existence or survival. Their living should be full of wisdom, virtue, nobility and courage. We may also think of a married woman following the traditional path of wifely devotion but equal or superior to males in wisdom and virtue. In present time, it is essential to rise above all odds and sustain our position in this society. We must not let male counterparts overpower and suppress you, rather we should stand for our own equality and empowerment.

