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## POSITION OF WOMEN IN MITHILA IN THE AGE OF VIDYAPATI

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### Abstract

My paper aims to present a detailed study of the life and condition of women in Mithila (North Bihar) between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Historical studies, owing to the nature of Indian society, polity and economy, have primarily been largely based on regional lines. It is through regional studies that one can broadly study Indian history as a whole. Regional history requires to be studied from a wider perspective, reflecting on a larger canvass. Vidyapati, a typical representative poet of Mithila during the period, vividly describes the social and cultural position of women in his works.

Mainly based on Vidyapati's writings along with some other contemporary writers and thinkers, the paper critically examines all possible literary sources of the period to present an integrated picture of women in medieval Mithila. It has also tapped some other sources, besides the literary ones, to meet its needs.

**Keywords:** Historical Studies, Medieval Mithila, Society, Women, Vidyapati, etc.

### Introduction

Women, an integral part of human civilisation, play an important role in the development of a society, or nation. A Woman, having different places in different cultures and ages, has never been, across the globe, considered and well treated equally to men. Being treated as 'second sex' for a long, a woman, in some parts of the world, still faces the patriarchy hanging the noose of suppression around her neck. In India, people fervently worship goddesses and spend days after days appeasing them to open up their treasure of blessings upon their devotees. But ironically, when it comes to worldly matters and dealings, it has been the male sex, for the longest time, whose deity has been worshipped and obeyed. Even the Manusmriti (the laws of Manu) does not recognize and acknowledge a woman's existence beyond that of her husband (Olivelle, 2005: 111). And, it is under this backdrop that my paper strives to explore the status of women in Mithila in the age of Vidyapati.

Mithila, having been regarded as an ancient civilisation (Jha, 1997), is one of the regions of the Indian sub-continent. It is, most historians of the region say, considered a repository of the most glorious elements of the history of the Indian sub-continent as "the great and unparalleled philosophical discussions" that were "ever attempted in the history of human thought and culture were held over here" (Thakur, 1988:3). The history of this region, unlike the history of battles and wars, deals with courts and kings mostly devoted to pursuits of learning. Invoking the king Janaka, the father of legendary Sita, The Sanskrit grammarian Panini too refers to Mithila as a kingdom of brave kings. Mithila, in the popular imagination, is most remembered in the context of the epic Ramayana. Mithila, as the home of the female protagonist of the Ramayana, has been represented as a land of learned men – the Janakas who belonged to the long line of the Videhan (a mythical name of Mithila) kings. Being devoted to the pursuit of learning, some early Videhan kings have also been regarded as 'philosopher kings.'

However, the progress of any society can best be measured through a sneak peek into the status of women in that society (openness towards change and the intent to accept new ideas). And, the social position of women in Mithila, like that of most societies, was almost the same. Not getting their names recorded in Panji (register), one of the most important documents of Mithila society, the contemporary women, in an institutionalised manner, started getting invisibilised. Women's education, in comparison to their male counterparts, did not get much importance. Though Mithila is also famous for several scholarly women, upper-caste women were bound to follow the purdah (veil) system. Lakhima, the chief queen of Shivasimha, was a scholar and poet who wrote a treatise, Padarthachandra, on Nyaya Vaisheshika (special justice). Her legendary wit and humour are evident in her description of Bikauas (the mercenary Brahmins) engaged in polygamy as a profession. Some other women of fame were Chandrakala, the granddaughter of Vidyapati, Queen Visvasa Devi who ruled Mithila for twelve years, and Queen Dharamati, the patron of Vidyapati. However, women, in general, were insubordinate to men.

A poet and courtier Vidyapati, widely known as a literary luminary who not only composed in several languages but also had an astonishing control over a wide range of genres, was a household name in Mithila (North Bihar) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He was a contemporary of Nund Rishi, a Kashmiri saint-poet during 1378-1440. It was his composition of songs in his native Maithili (the regional language of the area) that made him enjoy enduring popularity in Bihar. Being treated as the cultural and political



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imaginings of Bihar as a region, these songs are an archive of everyday life in Mithila. The genius of Vidyapati can best be understood by his mention in Mughal chronicler Abul Fazl's *Ain-e-Akbari* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and also become a model of inspiration for Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jha, 2018:304).

### Position of Women

In comparison to the early phases of history, there was not any substantial change in the general condition of women in society. The olden texts are full of showing contemptuous respect for women. Nay, they also declare the women, the Sudras (Untouchables), the dog and the cow as. Anrta (falsehood) (Majumdar, 1965:420). The contemporary society had placed women and the Sudras on equal footing and hardly showed any respect for them (Trivedi, 1951:121). Purchase-marriage was known to all. One may contend that Mithila had the women like Sita, Gargi, Maitreyi, Dhirmati and others, but they can be said to be the oasis in the desert. These women, by their personal achievements, had earned importance in society. Talking about polygamy, Aitareya Brahmana clearly states that "if there were many wives, one husband is paired with them" (Kane, 1941:196). But polygamy, ironically, was allowed only for men, not for women. Women did not enjoy the privilege of inheritance. They had to follow the purdah (curtain) system and widows got the same treatment from society as they get today (Keith, 1920:13). Women in Mithila were destined to face the same status since time immemorial. To add more injuries to their miseries, Harisimhadeva, in the fourteenth century A. D., introduced Kulinism (elitism) that made Mithila women suffer further deterioration in their position in society. The Bhalamanus (elites), enjoying polygamy as the way of the day, began marrying as many as forty to fifty women. Daughters were sold regularly. In other words, society had hardly departed from Manu's concept of women (3). Consequently, women became so sick of their miserable, pathetic and condemned life that they did not even dream of being born again as women. And, such feelings are extant even today and can be found in folk songs (Tripathi, 1954: 864).

Vidyapati and some other writers of Mithila have very nicely presented the position of women in a feudal society. Comparing a woman to a tender creeper being dried up with the touch or press of an ordinary substance (Mitra & Majumdar, verse 80), Vidyapati depicts a woman needing youth and never refraining from dependence on another (Thakura, 1927, tale 21). Women in general, though Lakhima was an exception, in the history of Mithila, were barred from taking active participation in-state activities. Being considered to be weak-minded, and lacking in knowledge and wisdom, women's social status was that of dependence and pity (Mitra & Majumdar, verse 679). Women did not enjoy any social status in the modern sense of the term. A woman was treated as subordinate to a male and, at every stage of her life, dependent on him. She was bound to live a life of perpetual wardship and bear the stigma, stamped on her by social laws and customs, of mental deficiency. Radha's characteristic confession regarding her sex clearly suggests the social status of a woman (Thakura, 2012). Women, having a feeble brain, were not trusted in things that mattered. They enjoyed males' appreciation for their domestic help. Getting strictly confined to the home and domestic care, they could only dream of proving their devotion to their husbands and finding ways to please them. However, some virtuous women of the nobility, undoubtedly, enjoyed their positions amongst the reputed scholars. But the villages, where women were a part of the rural economy, lacked room for cultural growth. And, as a result, a male enjoyed a distinct preference over a female (Rakesh, 2012: 188).

Maithili Nibandhkaras (essayists) have presented a detailed description of marriage rules for women (Chandrakant, 1974:123-27). With a clear intention of creating strict endogamous castes, intercaste marriages, among other forbidden practices of the Kali (pulchritudinous) age, in three upper castes were forbidden. However, a Brahmana, according to Candeswara, might, in the anuloma (alternate) or regular order, marry girls of other castes one after another (Thakura, 1928:38). A married man, according to Smritis (Hindu scripture) (Chandrakant, 1974:465-66), was allowed to perform two duties – first, to perform sacrifices only with the wife of the same caste and second, to enjoy sexual pleasure with any married wife. To forbid marriages, owing to the sameness of gotra (clan), pravara (elite) and sapinda (a special kinship bond) relationship (Madanapala & Smrititirtha, 1893:129-33), the old exogamous rules got repeated and the relationship got extended much more toward the side of parents – a system that, after Harisimhadeva introduced the system of Panji (register), became more strict. However, Candeswara's thoughts on marriage age and rules, sometimes, appear to be confusing and contradictory. He, on the one hand, commends the marriage of a twelve- or sixteen-years old girl with a bridegroom of thirty years while, on the other, he finds the marriage of a young girl more praiseworthy if she marries a bridegroom of thrice her age (Thakura, 1928:39). Nay, he also finds the marriage of a nagnika (a girl below ten years) to be praiseworthy (Thakura, 1928:47). He also, without any comment, quotes a Purana (literature derived from the Vedas) text that fixes the proportion of the bride's and bridegroom's age as 8:24; 12:30; 16:32, etc (Thakura, 1928:83). If a guardian fails to bid farewell to the girl in her marriage before puberty, the girl was allowed to wait for three years (Thakura, 1928:42-63) but she, on the contrary case, had to wait only for the expiry of her three menstrual periods. He also quotes eight forms of marriages (Thakura, 1928:55) and opines that a girl, in any one of the first five types of marriages, can be given away only once (Thakura, 1928:48) while she, in the other three forms, can be given away afresh to a suitable bridegroom. The bridegroom's selection ceremony was considered to be sufficient even if there was any fault in the bridegroom's selection (Thakura, 1928:54). However, Candeswara quoting from in



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extensor, a text from the Narada (a religious book) dealing with the rules for revocation of marriages and the fourteen classes of eunuchs, says that the girl should be, in case of the fault in a bridegroom is known beforehand, barred from marrying to the defective bridegroom (Thakura, 1928:33). The abandonment of a chaste and gentle wife was prohibited (Thakura, 1928:86). A suppressed wife enjoyed Stridhana (property belonging to female or wife) to the extent of a newly married wife or as much as to make their shares equal (Thakura, 1928:86). He, somewhere else, also advocates for not attributing death or mutilation to an abandoned woman (Thakura, 1931:426).

The Maithili essayists, propounding their views in a new way with almost the same old theme, profusely quote from several old Smritis that hail the concept of women's subjection and also their dependence, at successive stages, on their male relations. The husband was morally bound to protect his wife and keep her engaged in the household work (Thakura, 1931:409). However, these essayists, in the case of property rights, base their arguments on simply discussing the views expressed by Yajnavalkya (Yajnavalkya, 1918:115). A father, according to Candeswara, was allowed to make his wives equal or unequal shares (Thakura, 1931:65). A wife who fallen off from her vow could get only her maintenance (Misra, 1932:92-93), while the wife of a man dying without a son, grandson and great-grandson could take his property (Misra, 1863:236). If a son died without any issue and had left no principal or subsidiary sons and had no wife, his parents became the heirs of his property (Thakura, 1931:589-93). A widow, before being allowed to inherit her husband's property, had to perform the first as well as the annual Shradha (religious rite for the dead) for her husband (Misra, 1863:237). Some texts (Misra, 1932:93), in order of succession, preferred the father to the mother while some others preferred vice versa (Thakura,1931:595 & Misra, 1863:241). The contemporary texts have presented a complete and exhaustive treatment of Stridhana (Thakura, 1931:511 & Misra, 1863:217). We can also find a wider meaning of Saudayika (dowry) in both Candeswara and Vachaspati. There were different ways to interpret the limitation of Stridhana and Candeswara found the older text more reliable (Misra, 1932:82-83). The wife was granted freedom to dispose of her Saudayika or Stridhana at her will (Thakura, 1931:511-15; Misra, 1932:81; & Misra, 1863:218-21). The framework of special rules of succession for the Stridhana was based on the older texts (Thakura, 1931:516-18; Misra, 1932:382-84; & Misra, 1863:221-24).

The introduction of Kulinism (elitism), solely aiming to preserve the so-called pristine purity of the family and the caste, appeared to be a great stimulus to child and early marriage. Marriage, before puberty, turned out to be the way of the day. Owing to the varied marriage rules, every kulina (elite) family was bound to get daughters married before puberty. Though the Sastric (sacred writings of Hinduism) injunctions were a bit confusing and contradictory, they fully supported 'early marriage.' A kulina was privileged to marry as many girls as he wished. But the dark side of this privilege was that the husband hardly met most of these unfortunate married girls and they, as a result, suffered a lot. We can discern the pathos of such tragic order in Vidyapati's writings and some other folk songs. Unequal marriages were in practice Mitra & Majumdar, 1885, verse 597). A man of eighty could marry a girl of twelve (Singh, 1944:246). Afif rightly observed that the poorest married their daughters at a very early stage (Elliot & Dowson, 1871:344). In this respect, Vidyapati's poetry needs no comment. It is, rather, self-explanatory. Since women were practically barred from saying even a single word in matters such as marriages, they virtually surrendered themselves before their fate and accepted everything as a gift from God or destiny (Rakesh, 2012:60). It was the system introduced by Kulinism that paved the way for unequal marriages and other untoward situations arising out of it (Rakesh, 2012:155). This system was directly related to polygamy in medieval Mithila. Not to talk only of the kings, ministers and feudal lords, even the kulina Brahmana also were engaged in marrying a large number of girls of all ages. Nay, they, to all extent and purpose, maintained a harem.

As far as the position of a wife is concerned, Vidyapati opined that "taking a second wife is the crime of a man who hath abandoned decency" (Thakura, 1935:152). Since Vidyapati himself was a devoted husband, he regarded the wife "as the partner in all pious acts...the sharer of evil deeds and merits...and the cause of all happiness in this world...what fellowship be there where there be no sharing alike of sorrows and joys" Thakura, 1935:151). Referring to the prevalence of the Sati (self-immolation of a Hindu widow) system, a system looked down upon as a relic of the barbaric past, he found the women of the Middle Ages considered it of immense importance and the last proof of perfect unity in body and soul between a wife and a husband. According to Vidyapati, only fortunate and holy women could get good husbands. He had a very high and lofty ideal of conjugal life. However, he also did not regard women as equal to men though his verses, in the garb of propitiation towards God, sang the praise of nadir of men-women love. Some quotes from his book Purusapariksa suggest the same:

- (a) Chaste women followeth her lord (Thakura, 1927, tale 2);
- (b) Women live a life of dependence (Thakura, 1927, tale 3);
- (c) The only refuge of wives is a husband (Thakura, 1927, tale 8);
- (d) It is through the virtue of her son that a woman is a light (Thakura, 1927, tale 9);
- (e) Except for the wife...Other women, like flowers or betel, are but sources of pleasure for a moment (Thakura, 1927, tale 31);
- (f) ...in their happy delights doth a woman counts upon the kindness of her husband (Thakura, 1927, tale 41); and



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(g) ...wife is a handmaid of his pleasure (Thakura, 1927, tale 41).

A wife was supposed to easily surrender to her husband without looking into his bad qualities. Vidyapati has also very nicely depicted the traditional quarrel between a wife and her husband's sister (Mitra & Majumdar, 1885, verse 16). The contemporary writings are replete with these and various other examples, typical representations of contemporary Mithila life.

Prostitution was well known in the medieval period. It had no dearth of society girls and prostitutes. Vidyapati had, describing the state of prostitution largely based on the writings of Jyotirishwara, one of the greatest erotic writers of the age, referred to three types of women – one's own; women belonging to others; and women as common property (Thakura, 1927: tale 21). The last category represented the harlots desiring mainly to acquire money without showing any hatred for the rich and affection for the poor. Different Hindu and Muslim sources testify to the prevalence of prostitution. Amir Khusro's description of a lustful wench, Vidyapati's harlots as 'highest treasure of passion' and Jayasi describing the public women sitting on the balconies to bewitch the people clearly suggest that an organised system of prostitution was running in the then society. Vidyapati had marvelously described the stylist public women in the market of Jaunpur (Thakura, 1957:34). Jayasi also found the mart of public women bewitching people by their accomplishments. Prostitution, it seems, was a legalised social evil. Dancing girls were also very common (Thakura, 1357:42). Considering 'Vasantasena' as the best among the prostitutes, Jyotirishwara presented a detailed description of the prostitutes and the like women (Thakura, 1940:26-27). He, passing from an account from the gambling house to hetaira (prostitute), described an old woman acting as a go-between love-intrigue (Thakura, 1940:27). We can, here, also note him dealing with the preparation of different aphrodisiacs, drugs, articles of toilet, charms and filters and describing several types of women and nayikas (heroines) in his five sectioned verse Panchasayaka (a Sanskrit book of desire).

The Mithila women also indulged in practicing different acts of sorcery and superstitions. They, anticipating their lovers' arrival, played different tricks and tried their luck otherwise. They were very much associated with the crow's call at a particular portion of a house on a particular occasion. They promised everything to the crawling crows. This tradition is deep rooted in our society even today. The left eye tremor was considered to be an inauspicious sign. Mithila people regarded witchcraft as a very old belief. The lighting of the auspicious Dipa (lamp) on the first day of marriage or on any pious occasion was superstitiously taken for the longevity of the married couple (Thakura, 1972: verse 8). People considered an oath sacrosanct (Mitra & Majumdar, 1885, verse 61, 115). Observing these social beliefs and behaviours of Indian people as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century A. D., Marco Polo rightly said that while going somewhere if a person heard anyone sneezing, he would sit down on the spot as long as he thought that he ought to tarry before going on again. All these activities indicate that the then unsophisticated villagers exhibited unflinching faith in gods and supernatural powers.

## Conclusion

This brief study of women's status during the period suggests that women's general condition in contemporary society was far from satisfactory. It can be contended that the inscrutable character of a woman was compared to the horrors of a burning ghat (bank of a river) and described as unfathomable, dark, deep and unseen. But it can also be borne in mind that with the passage of time the old notions about women had undergone considerable change. Women's condition in the period was pitiable and prostitution was prevalent among them because of economic and security reasons.

However, it is also to be noted that women in India have faced discrimination for a long because of their social, political and economic inequality to men. But the situation has changed a lot and is still in the process of changing. Indian constitution has given them freedom and equal opportunity in every walk of life. They are slowly and steadily becoming more educated, self-reliant, independent and getting better treatment from society. They are developing courage in themselves, not entertaining any discrimination, but rather strongly raising their voices against it. And, the days are not far away when they will enjoy their social status equal to men.

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