



# Status of Women: A Socio-Historical analysis in different Ages of Indian Society

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to examine the status of women in different era in India. The broad narrative it sketches and seeks to explore in women's position in different sphere as in social, economic, political, legal, education and religion. This study will be done on the basis of primary data and secondary data collection. Tool of primary data collection will be non participatory observation method and secondary data will be collected by different Vedas, dharmashastra, smritis, different documents, studies done earlier. Critically evaluation will be done on the basis of data. This study will reveal the status of women in the process of civilization.*

**Keywords:** Women, historical, economic, political, social, legal, religious, education.

## Introduction

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

A Proverb: To the women Gandhiji gave a directive to become fearless and courageous and work for their own emancipation as well as for the freedom of their nation.

यत्र नार्यः पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः  
यत्रैयतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वस्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥ मनुस्मृति 3/56<sup>1</sup>

“Divine souls take birth in such houses, where the women are respected. Where they are not respected, all works become useless there.” (Manusmriti 3/56)<sup>1</sup>.

Women were worthy of worship. They are the fate of the household, the lamp of enlightenment for all in the household. They bring solace to the family and are an integral part of Dharmic life. Even heaven is under control of women. The God resides in those households where women are worshipped and in households where women are slighted all her efforts at improvement go in vain

Yagnavalkya also had the same opinion about women. They are embody of all divine virtues on the earth and also that Gandharva has given them sweetness of speech, soma has bestowed all his purity on them and fire has showered all his brilliance to make them most attractive. Similar ideas are expressed in Ramayan and Mahabharata too. In Mahabharata it is considered that at the centre of social organization man supposed to respect the will of his wife and adore her.

On the contrary there was written too much against the women. Women were considered feeble minded and not worthy of trust. They were seen as an object for lust of men, to serve men and

to provide them progeny. It is said in Mahabharata that women is the root of all evils. There is no creature more sinful than women. She is burning fire, she is the illusion that “Daitya Maya” created. She is the sharp edge of razor. In the Ramanya description of women” Faces of women are like flowers, their words are like the drops of honey, but their hearts are like sharp razors, the interior of them no one can know. These statements are given in the same contextual whose generalization may be fallacious .In this study we wish to judge the real picture through the analysis of socio, economic, political and religious institution. Efforts are made to understand the position of women in different period of time.

**Vedic Period (1500-1000 BC):** Women were regarded like mother goddess (shakti) A symbol of life with immense capacity of tolerance and sacrifice hence they had respectable place in the society.

**In ancient Rigvedic period: Social Sphere (1700-1100 BCE):** Women were co-partners of their husbands in their life, all pleasures, joys enjoying and bearing pains and sorrows together. Women used to enjoy freedom in their personal life and had access to education and thus society due respect to them. They were also familiar with social and political life and playing significant role in those matters. They would also attend meeting along with men. “जायेस्तम्” women’s position in the society was pivotal. Women were treated as “ardhagini” in domestic field. They were also familiar to social and political life and were played significant role in these matters. They were allowed to attend meeting with men. Widow was allowed to remarry. Divorces were not permissible for male and female both. According to Basham in his book he wrote “In Rgvedic period polygamy was not unknown. Kings and invariably Chiefs were almost polygamous, as were many Brahmins and wealthier members of lower order”<sup>2</sup>.

Though the earliest hymes of the Rgveda sons were looked on a great blessing. There might be religious reasons because without son no funeral rites could be performed.

**Economic sphere:** Production was based spinning; weaving of clothes was home based activities. Women helped men in all walks of life like in agricultural activities too. Educate women were engaged in teaching work.

**Inheritance:** Women had limited rights, as a daughter she had no right in father's property. Each unmarried daughter was entitled to one fourth of patrimony received by her brothers. After the death of the mother, her property equally divided into sons and unmarried daughters. A wife was entitled to one third of her husband's property when he was alive. After the death of husband she was supposed to lead an ascetic life and had no share in her husband's property.

**Political Sphere:** Political system in ancient India was based on monarchy. Women were not permitted to enter in political arena. It was hardly any political rights to women.

**Religious Sphere:** Wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. 'अयग्योवाहयेषयोपत्नीक' without wife husband could not take part in Yagna ceremonies, if woman was not educated how could she recite the mantras? 'पुरा कल्पे कुमारीणां मौ. जीबन्धनमिष्यते।। पराशरमाधव-2/पृ.485<sup>3</sup>'. "In the times long gone by. Even the daughters had to bind belts, study the Vedas and chants Gayatri mantra." Parasara Madhav/2/pg. 485<sup>3</sup>. Upanayan samskar were observed for both men and women. The ideal age for upanayan samskar varied from verna to verna in vedic period. Eight years for Brahmins, eleven years for Kshatriya, twelve years for vaishya.

We find Gargi and Maitreyi distinguishing themselves in Brahavidya, the highest knowledge. Apala and Atreyi were also knowledgeable and authority on women, they suggested that matrimony was not mandatory for women. Hemandri referred to unmarried educated, knowledge of Vedas women as a vidushis.

From the above examples we can say that in Vedic period the status of women was very high and they enjoyed rights in social, religious field, limited rights in economic and political field. They enjoyed the same status as male.

**Later Vedic Period:** This was the time when Epics, Purans, were written. This period onwards status of women was started deteriorating. Rights which they had earlier were not enjoying in this period. Restrictions were put on social, economic, religious life. I will discuss each aspect one by one.

**Smrities and Puranic Era:** The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to vanished off as the time passes by. During smrities women bracketed with the shudras.

**Social field:** Pre puberty marriage came to be practiced. According to Baudhaya was declared "a father who did not give his daughter in marriage before her first menstruation incurred the guilt of one procuring abortion (a grave sin, worse than many kinds of murders) for every menstrual period in which she remained unmarried"<sup>4</sup>.

According to Manu "Bride was one third the age of the groom thus a male of twenty four should marry a girl of eight year i.e.Nagnika"<sup>5</sup>.

In the contrary some literature were totally against of early marriage of girl child for example According to Sushuta samhita "Ancient Indian medical authorities state that the best children are produced from mothers over sixteen and apparently recognize the practice of child marriage as occasionally occur"<sup>6</sup>. But it was disapproval later on.

In Hindus marriage is considered sacred or religious ceremony. There are three aims of marriage i. Dharma ii. Praja (progeny) iii. Rati (sexual pleasure). Marriage is a conjugal bond which is not indissoluble throughout their life. Divorce was quite impossible between both male and female. Widow remarriage were also prohibited. But in Mahabharata there are so many example found related to laviarate marriage, according to Basham " If husband died without producing male issue, his brother might act on his behalf. This practice of laviarate (niyoga) was well known in many ancient societies and references to it are common in early Indian legal literature"<sup>7</sup>.

Husband received the status as a patiparmeshwar (God). Women were denied to educate. Women were attending lectures of Gurus rarely. By the time of smrities vedic knowledge were only confined for male only. In Brhedaranyaka Upnishad tells of a learned lady Gargi Vacaknavi who attended the discussion of the sage Yajnavalkaya and a for a time so nonplussed him with her searching questions that he could only jestingly reply "Gargi you not ask too much, or you head will drop off"<sup>8</sup>.

Sati system were become to prevalent in this period. This was might be main reason of women often immolated themselves on the husband's funeral pyres. Widow had suffered a lot, she was to all intents and purposes an ascetic, sleeping on the ground and eating once aday simple meal, wearing no ornaments or colored garments. The widow had to maintain this austere regimen to the end of her days in the hope of being remarried to her former husband in her life.

Veil system came into practice. Polygamy in ordinary circumstances was not encouraged by earlier Hindu literature, according to Dharmashatra (Apastamba) "it is definitely forbids a man to take a second wife if his first wife is of good charter and has borne him sons"<sup>9</sup>.

Polygamy became in fashion for only kings and their chiefs. Narad states once place that a polygamist is unfit to testify in a

court of law. The ideal models of Hindu marriage the hero was Rama and his faithful wife Sita. Polyandry was not wholly unknown, though it was impossible for ordinary people of respectable caste in most of the part of India. The locus classicus of ancient India polyandry was in Mahabharata, where the heroes, the five Pandavas brothers, shared their wife, Draupadi in common. According to Basham "The erotic life of ancient India was generally heterosexual. Homosexuality of both sexes was not wholly unknown, it is condemned briefly in the law books and the Kamasutra treats of it, but curiosity and with little enthusiasm. Literature ignores it"<sup>9</sup>.

Women were totally denied rights e.g. property, economic field. Most school of laws allowed a woman to have some personal property (stridhan) in the form of jewellery and clothing. According to Arthashastra "Arthashastra allowed her also to own money up to 2000 silver panas, any sum above this being held by her husband in trust of her behalf"<sup>10</sup>.

Divorce was forbidden for men and women both. Religious law book had not given permission for divorce, but in Arthashastra" it allowed divorce even after religious marriage to a wife who has been deserted by her husband and lays down waiting periods of from one to twelve years, which vary according to circumstances and class"<sup>11</sup>.

These provisions do not appear in later law books, and were probably forgotten by Gupta times, when divorce became virtually impossible for the people of higher castes. Even in lower castes divorce was still permitted by customs.

**Religious field:** Hindu Dharmashastra were denied to offer prayers and sacrifices, practices of penances and undertake religious pilgrimages to women. They were not allowed to chant Vedas mantras. They could not take part in religious discussions as they were participated earlier.

**ManuSmriti:** Manusmriti laid down various restrictions regarding the traditional rights of women in his book Manusmriti. The Manusmriti forms the beginning of a set of law books which have come down to posterity under the special designation Samhita, as a code of law. It has for centuries held sway over India and the Hindu population. The later law gives all based their treatises on Manu. Upanayan sanskar which was previously for both boys and girls are now for only for boys

"नास्ति स्त्रीणां क्रिया मन्त्रैरितिधर्म व्यवस्थितिः।  
निरिन्द्रिया हयमन्त्राच्च स्त्रीभ्योऽनृतमिति स्थितिः" ॥ मनुस्मृति 9/18<sup>12</sup>

Women could perform sacraments and samskars, but these were to be performed silently and no vedic mantras were to be recited. Women were passive observer rather than active participants. She could not even conduct any fast and vartas without her husband's permission.

**Anuloma and patrilocum marriage:** The theory of Anuloma and Patrilocum was based on such prejudices "Women have

desire for ornaments, passion, anger, dishonesty, malice, bad conduct and the like. Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; they give themselves to the handsome as well as the ugly, just for that he is a man".

According to this theory if a woman is chaste, it is because she has not found a proper man, place, or opportunity. It has been mentioned that a woman is possessed of love of scandals and the lust for sex. A woman deprived of sex grows old. Though her possession for man, her unstable temper and inherent heartlessness, they become disloyal to their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded, in this world.

"पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने।  
रक्षन्ति स्थविरं पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति" ॥ मनुस्मृति 9/3<sup>13</sup>

She was to be guarded in by her father in her childhood, by her husband in youth and by her sons after the death of her husband.

**Buddhist Period:** Buddhism emerged in against of rites and ritualism of Hinduism. Status of women in this period was slightly improved in religious field. They had their own sanghas "Bhikshuni Sanghas" exercised the same rules and regulation as monks. During Gupta period there were laws regarding marriage, dowry, inheritance and widow remarriage was allowed. Vikramaditya (Chandra Gupta II) expressed romantic and chivalrous attitude towards women. Rajyashri sister of Harshvardhan learnt laws from heuin tsang. Queen Prabhavati, the daughter of Emperor Chandra Gupta II played a prominent role in governing the country and on the death of her husband, she ruled for 13 years until her sons grown up to took over the charge. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century Queen Dida ruled in Kashmir, Apart from queen and princess there were women from the ordinary rank who distinguished themselves in the field of literature, philosophy, arts, maths. Bharti of mithila was famous philosopher who had appreciation from Shankaracharya.

**Women in the medieval period:** First in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslims invaded in India. This is a contemporary period of Shankaracharya. In his leadership Hindu society was trying to re-establish the supremacy of Vedas and also advocated the equality status between men and women.

In 11<sup>th</sup> century Mohd.Gazanvi attacked on India and conquered it, from this period to 18<sup>th</sup> century nearly 700 years, a general decline were observed in the social institute dismantling political structure, economic depression in India. All these culminated in the general decline in the status of women. In Bhakti movement 15<sup>th</sup> century took place which introduced new trends in social and religious life of women. Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Meera, Ramdas, Tulsi, Tukaram, advocated women's rights for religious worship as a result women secured certain social freedom too. Emphasis is given to 'Grahastashrama" did not permit husband to sanyas without the consent of his wife. During the Bhakti movement women were encouraged to

educate themselves. Though this movement did not bring drastic change in the status of women in economic, political field but in social and religious field some positive changes were seen, yet some evil practices were also observed like Devdasi custom, child marriage, sati system.

**British Period:** 18<sup>th</sup> century-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century British ruled in India. British government brought about changes in the economic and social structure of Indian society.

Arya Samaj in North India, Brahma Samaj in Bengal, Christian Missionaries came into aid of Indian girls and women in all sphere of life.

First school was opened by Mrs Meada in Nagercoil in 1819. Mrs Norton opened a school for women at Allepey in 1920, Mrs Wilson opened a school for girls in Bombay in 1830, known as St. Columbia school where Parsees girls sent 16 girls to the school. 1875 Calcutta, Madras universities did not permit admission of girls. 1882 Girls were permitted to get admission for higher education.

Social reformers tried to improve status of women a lot. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshabchandra sen, Ranade, Annie Besant, sister Nevedita, Dayanand Sarawati, Vivkananda, Mahatama Gandhi.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy raised the voice against Sati Pratha, Child Marriage, veil system and fought for the right of inheritance for women. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar launched a movement for the right of widow to remarriage and also pleaded for female education. Maharshi Karve took up the similar cause and worked for them. He established the S.N.D.T. University in Maharashtra in 1916.

Some important laws that were enacted in British Era: i. Sati Prohibition Act 1829, ii. Widow remarriage Act 1856, iii. The special Marriage Act 1872, iv. The Married women's property Act 1874, v. Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, vi. Hindu women's Right to Property Act 1939.

Though we observed that so many laws were implemented by British Government but women's position was not qualitatively improved as per the expectations. These laws were lopsided, were not implemented and executed honestly. Implementing agencies were inefficient and complicated so desired results were not attained.

**Women in the Post Independence Period:-** The status of Indian women has radically changed since independence. These changes have been seen in structural and cultural sphere. Improvement in the status of women can be observed in the light of major changes that have taken place in areas such as legislations, education, economic and employment sector and awareness of their rights on the part of women.

Constitutional and legislation in support of women's cause: i. Constitutional provision for equality to women- constitution of India provides the following rights to women at par with men, ii. Right to equality: It includes equality of opportunity, equality before law, equal protection of law and no gender discrimination in the matter of public employment etc., iii. Right to freedom: It refers to freedom of speech, expression, residence and occupation., iv. Right against exploitation: It prohibits forced labour. v. Right to freedom of religion: It refers to professing, preaching, and propagating religion freely. vi. Right to property: It includes acquiring, holding and selling property. vii. Cultural and educational rights: It gives right to individuals to follow its culture, free to open education institution and get admission to educational institution. viii. Right to constitutional remedies: It means approaching courts for the enforcement fundamental rights.

Apart from fundamental right, the state government has been empowered to enact special laws for protecting women.

There are so many laws which are pertaining to women's social life. These laws give rights to women to lead her life in the manner they wish to live. Laws are basically related to education, marriage, inheritance of property rights, divorce, restraint to Child Marriage Act etc.

i. The Hindu marriage Act 1955: It Prohibits polygamy, Polyandry and child marriage. ii. The Hindu succession Act 1956: It provides for women the right to parental property, adopt a child and to claim maintenance from the husband if she is divorced by him. iii. Special marriage act 1954: It provides the right to inter caste marriage, love marriages and registered marriages, minimum age for marriage at 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls. iv. Dowry prohibition act 1961: It declares taking and giving dowry an unlawful activity and thereby prevents the exploitation of women. v. The suppression of immoral traffic of women and girls act 1956: it gives protection to women from being kidnapped and /or compelled to become prostitute. vi. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971: It legalizes the abortion on the grounds of physical and mental health. vii. The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1983: it seeks to stop various types of crimes against women. viii. The Family Law Court Act 1984: it seeks to provide justice to women who get involved in family disputes. ix. Domestic violence Act 2000: This law prevents women physical, mental and psychological torture.

**Women in the field of education:** education is important tool on the basis of it women can empower herself. If we do comparison the data regarding the literacy rate among women in India in 1901 literacy rate of women was just 0.6%, whereas in 2001 rate of literacy is 53.7 and 2011 it was a constant 65.5.

Women have realized that education maps a lot of difference in the social status of individuals. There is a need to make more efforts to literate women in rural areas.

**Women in the economic sphere:** There has been remarkable increase in the number of women going out of their houses for working in different sectors. They are teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, bank employees, clerks, typists, telephone operators, receptionist, personal assistants etc can be seen all the position through out India. Employment has given their economic freedom to women. This has boosted self pride and self confidence among women.

**Women in political field:** Indian constitution has sanction two political rights to women. i. Female enfranchisement. ii. Eligibility for the legislature, after independence political awareness has developed among women and some of them have attained very high position in political parties' legislature and assemblies. 73 amendments of the constitution in 1992, according to amendment one third seats were reserved for women in Panchayats. It is a tragedy that the women's bills which requires 84<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution was not passed due to same political leaders were against of it.

Prof. Ram Ahuja studied about the awareness among the women about their rights, he found in his study that 75% women were unaware about their rights, 20% of them did not have any awareness about their political rights, less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> women had a chance of inheriting their husband's property and only 0.5% of them got share of their father's property.

On the basis of above study it could be concluded that although women are not too aware about their rights, but they are being identified as an independent individual. This process is started and will not stop anyhow. In the age of liberalization, globalization and privatization women are perusing higher education in different technological and professional education and performing excellent in their respective fields.

## Conclusion

Women in India are not treated as equally as men. They are legally or constitutionally equal as male. But there is a social

barrier which still discriminates between men and women. As long as the problems of women remain as women problems, and not as social problems, the attempts at the solution of these problems do not get the fast speed.

Indian women are socially politically economically are equal to men. They have to change their mindset and come out of the shackles of social evils. After that they get greater freedom, better, better education, self reliant, independent, good jobs better treatment from men. It will only happen when they develop courage, power among themselves and not entertain any discrimination and raise their voices against any discrimination. It will definitely influence their social status and the socio economic conditions in the days to come.

## References

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About the Book *Women in Early Indian Societies* is an anthology of excerpts from the works of authors who have shaped our understanding of gender relations in early India. Also included are papers which provide fresh insights or explore alternative paradigms and possibilities. Most attempts at historical analyses confront and attempt to circumvent certain fundamental problems. One of these pertains to situating women vis-à-vis what are identified as major historical processes. We can observe two broad possibilities which are often combined, either explicitly or implicitly. Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India. 150. Section III: Socio-Sexual Constructions Of Womanhood. Polyandry in the Vedic Period. 175.