



ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

Nilay Singh, Research Scholar
Department of Ancient History, Culture and Archaeology,
University of Allahabad

The status of **women in India** has been subject 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 eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers and Governors.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT PERIOD

Women in Vedic Period

Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian woman enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome. The Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded woman as useful and productive members of society. The condition of Vedic Woman was good. Woman also enjoyed religious status like that of men, especially in Vedic initiation and studies. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of woman with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge.

The Rig Veda had rendered the highest social status to qualified woman of those days. But status of woman fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. They were not at all treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal rights and privileges as compared to men. Though the woman participated in each family ceremony with men but they only played a role as a silent observer not an active participant. As per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority over their wives. Child marriages, Polygamy and Sati were prevalent at that time. Still out of these entire things woman at that time were respected by the society. However, changes into the status of woman introduced in 15th century. Saints and supporters of Bhakti movement were expounded and spoken about equality of woman with men. During these period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm.

Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on woman as Kautilya dismissed woman's liberation. They were not free even to go elsewhere without husband's permission. They became worse off in the Gupta period.

In Vedic period position of woman was not worse as that of today. Our history shows that woman in Vedic period was also on strong footage as compare to men and therefore they were not subjected to 'Female Foeticide' and Infanticide or people never think about that. Though the overall position of women was lower than men, yet on the whole the position of woman was good. In the post Vedic period, woman started being discriminated on the ground of education and other rights. The 'Child Marriage', emphasis on physical chastity of woman and their unquestioned obedience to husband lead's to progressive deterioration of their position. In the Smriti Sastras as well, as in Manu, it has been mentioned in strongest terms that woman should be honored. But then again Manu has given absolute rights to men to inflict corporeal punishment on her and discard her if she said anything disgraceful to him. Thus, a contradiction in the rules of treatment to

woman was there. Manu's system continued for long after the Mauryan period in the Indian society. However, the upper class woman enjoyed freedom and were respected in society. Besides these women, a vast majority worked in the fields and homes. Their condition worsened in the 20th century.

Female infanticide: The father of daughter was supposed to give huge dowries to the boy's family and this system was also recommended by the Vedas. Hence a girl was seen as a burden. The woman who gave birth to a daughter was ashamed. Husbands were not supposed to have intercourse with a wife who bore only daughters. Hence infanticide arose as a convenient way of getting rid of the burden called daughter. Holy Aryan texts say:

“Tasmat striyam jatam parasyanti ut pumamsam haranti“

It means, Hence they reject a female child when born, and take up a male.”

Child marriage: It was common in ancient India due to the custom of dowry and to avoid scandals. Old Hindu mythology books including vedas prescribe that the best partner for a man in one-third his age.

“A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age; if (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner.” [Manu Smriti]

Wife-Burning: An Aryan husband could at any time accuse his wife of infidelity. In case the wife protests her innocence, the council of village elders would then order an ordeal by fire. The accused wife would be required to pass through a blazing flame. Not just death, but any signs of burns would be taken as a sign of guilt and the wife would then have to undergo the penalty for infidelity. Adultery carries the death sentence in Aryan law, so either way she would have to pay with her life for her husband's or elders' mere suspicions. The ideal role model for this custom was Sita, Ram's wife. She was required by her spouse, the 'ideal husband' of the 'Hindus', to pass through the fire ordeal after her return from Sri Lanka.

Jauhar: It refers to the practice of the mass burning of all the wives and daughters in an entire town/district to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemies. Often the husbands forced their unwilling spouses, sometimes the women practiced it themselves, encouraged by the elders. It is merely a variant of sati, since it occurred in anticipation of the women's widowhood.

Sati: The Aryans, upon their invasion of India ca. 1500 B.C. introduced the horrific custom of sati, i.e. the burning of a woman after the death of her husband. When performed singly it is referred to as sati, when performed en masse by all the women and daughters of a town in anticipation of their widowhood (e.g. when the men were to fight a battle against all odds), it is known as jauhar. It is sanctioned by their most sacred texts, and was practiced from the fall of the Semito-Dravidian Indus Valley civilization to the modern age.

Methods of punishing women in Ancient India

Cutting off the ears and nose of wives: Aryan husbands cut off the ears and nose of their wives if they left the house without their prior permission. The Ramayana and Lord Ram practiced the cutting off of women's noses for minor offences, thereby providing divine sanction for the custom. Shurpanakha was a Dravidian lady who fell in love with Ram. She proposed to him, but he directed her to his brother Laxman. He cut off her ears and nose for this crime.

Death Penalty: The death penalty was prescribed for Aryan women guilty of infidelity. Manu Smriti says “when a woman deceives her husband (with another man), then the king should ensure that she be torn apart by dogs in a public place and the evil man should be burnt in a bed of red-hot iron”. Infidelity to husband was considered a grave sin and it was believed that such women went to hell. The husband had the power to

curse the wife who was disloyal to him. Thus the sage Gautama cursed his wife Ahalya for sleeping with Indra though through no fault of her own. During the Maurya period, if a woman was found guilty of a carnal crime her generative organs were cut off and she was ultimately sentenced to death.

Other Restrictions:

- **No Property Rights** — Women and Sudras in ancient India have no property rights.
- **Dressing** — Aryan women had to wear a face-veil when going out. They were not supposed to entertain strangers.
- **Not allowed to Sleep alone** — Ancient women were not allowed to sleep alone. During the absence of her husband, she was supposed to sleep with one of her female relatives.
- **No Education for women** — Women and Sudras were declared to be unfit for study of the Vedas.

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