

The Indian Woman through the Ages of History

(A Historic-Contemporary Approach)

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Abstract

Woman, the invaluable creation of nature known for her wholehearted submission, devotion, sacrifice, tolerance, adaptation to the changed circumstances, house-keeping, sense of compromise on the one hand, and on the other, for her inexplicable strength, has to face several phases in her entire life. Beginning with her doll-like-life with her parents, she ends her life sacrificing herself for the happiness of her husband to whom she is married off, and to the husband's family including the children. In fact, at no stage of life she lives for herself. She always finds the society and its threatening norms before her when she is willing to do for herself. Preferring the society to herself, she keeps leading the life of a puppet that always depends on others for all her decisions. The male members in the social-set up, such as, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, male neighbours, teachers, friends, husband, father-in-law, male kinsmen, sons or even grandsons etc. govern her entire existence, and she finds herself no more than a dancing puppet at the hints and directions of others.

The Indian woman, described and interpreted by the literary personages variedly, has seen several phases of life and style through the ages of history. Unlike the modern woman of the twenty-first century, the woman of all the previous ages of history was confined to the four walls of the house seeking therein her entire happiness. From time-to-time, the contemporary social norms forced her to adopt a particular life style in the interest of the orthodox society and its fundamentalists who probably felt pleasure in imposing bans on her liberty.

Grounded in the women-theories and with a feministic analytical approach, the paper which is a theoretical writing, concerns the life of the Indian woman through the various ages of history. An attempt is there to analyse that in the different ages of history, the Indian woman faced different impositions and obligations for her survival, and that she has always proved herself capable of adapting herself to the changed situations.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Ages of History, Dominance, Patriarchal Society, Submission, Carrier of Human Values, Mal-Practices, Puppet-Like-Existence.

Introduction

One way to judge the state of nation is to study the status of its women. In reality, the status of women represents the standard of culture of any age. The social status of the women of a country symbolizes the social spirit of the age. However to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. Women's history is the study of the role that women have played in history and the methods required to do so. It includes the study of the history of the growth of woman's rights throughout recorded history, the examination of individual and groups of women of historical significance, and the effect that historical events have had on women. Inherent in the study of women's history is the belief that more traditional recordings of history have minimized or ignored the contributions of women and the effect that historical events had on women as a whole; in this respect, women's history is often a form of historical revisionism, seeking to challenge or expand the traditional historical consensus.

The Indian Woman through the Ages of History

For the purpose of depicting a brief history of the changing position and role of women in India, the following six broad categories are considered-

1. 2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C. Vedic period
2. 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C. Post Vedic period
3. 500B.C. to 500 A.D. Smriti period
4. 500A.D. to 1800 A.D. Muslim period
5. 1880 A.D. to 1947 A.D. British period
6. 1947 A.D. onwards Contemporary period

The Indian Woman through Vedic Period

The early vedic period of the Indian history allowed the women to enjoy an equal status with men in all aspects of life. They were at liberty to get education and even to marry the man of their choice. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rigvedic verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their own husbands in a practice called *swyamvar* or live-in relationship called *Gandharva marriage*. Gargi and Maitreyi are the examples to confirm the fact.

The Indian Woman through Post Vedic Period

In Later Vedic period, the position that the women folk enjoyed in the early Vedic society, was not retained. The married life of the women in the post-vedic period was not happy, and it was simply because their husbands were allowed to have more than one wives and this was especially quite common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society.

The Indian Woman through Smriti Period

Following quotes from Manusmriti make the balanced status of women in India clear:

1. "Swabhav ev narinam" – 2/213. It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females.
2. "Avidvam samlam....." – 2/214. Women, true to their class character, are capable of leading astray men in this world, not only a fool but even a learned and wise man. Both become slaves of desire.
3. "Matra swastra" – 2/215. Wise people should avoid sitting alone with one's mother, daughter or sister. Since carnal desire is always strong, it can lead to temptation.
4. "Daiv pitrya....." – 3/18. The offerings made by such a person at the time of established rituals are neither accepted by God nor by the departed soul; guests also refuse to have meals with him and he is bound to go to hell after death.

The Indian Woman through Muslim Rule

The position of Indian women in society further deteriorated during the medieval period, when child marriages and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some communities in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought *pardah* to Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the *Jauhar* was practised. In some parts of India, some of *Devadasis* were sexually exploited. Polygamy was practised among Hindu *Kshatriya* rulers for some political reasons.

The Indian Woman through British Period

During the British Raj, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

and Jyotirao Phule fought for the betterment of women. Missionaries' wives such as Martha Mault née Mead and her daughter Eliza Caldwell née Mault are rightly remembered for pioneering the education and training of girls in south India. This practice was initially met with local resistance, as it flew in the face of tradition. Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of *Sati* under Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for improvement in the situation of widows led to the *Widow Remarriage Act* of 1856. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women.

The Indian Woman through Contemporary Period

Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)) and Article 42. In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42). It will not be injudicious to say here that the destiny of the modern age when the woman is at liberty to get education, cast her vote to the candidate she pleases, to work in private or public sector, live with any man she pleases, walk shoulder to shoulder with man, and can enjoy her life in her own way, is all changed.

Review of Literature

Menon-Sen, Kalyani; Kumar, A.K. Shiva (2001) "Women in India: How Free? How Equal?" In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42)

Kamat, Jyotsana (January 2006). "Status of women in medieval Karnataka (blog)". The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought *pardah* to Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the *Jauhar* was practised. In some parts of India, some of *Devadasis* were sexually exploited. Polygamy was practised among Hindu *Kshatriya* rulers for some political reasons.

Singh, Shweta (2009). "Examining the Dharma driven identity of women: Mahabharata's Kunti", in Swami, Indu Few texts exist that specifically deal with the role of women an important exception is the *Stri Dharma Paddhati* of Tryambakayajvan, an official at Thanjavur c. 1730. The text compiles strictures on women's behaviour dating back to the *Apastamba sutra* (c. 4th century BCE). The opening verse goes:

Nelasco, Shobana (2010). *Status of women in India*. In 1917, the first women's delegation met the Secretary of State to demand women's political rights,

supported by the Indian National Congress. The All India Women's Education Conference was held in Pune in 1927, it became a major organisation in the movement for social change.

Parihar, Lalita Dhar (2011). Women and law: from impoverishment to empowerment. Lucknow. Women's rights under the Constitution of India — mainly includes equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women.

Hirday N. Patwari (2011). The Status of Women as depicted by Manu in the Manusmriti. While defending Manusmriti as divine code of conduct for all including women, apologists often quote the verse: "*yatr naryasto pojyantay, ramantay tatr devta [3/56] (where women are provided place of honor, gods are pleased and reside there in that household)*", but they deliberately forget all those verses that are full of prejudice, hatred and discrimination against women.

William W. Hagen(2012). German History in Modern Times . The Age of Reason did not bring much more for women: men, including Enlightenment aficionados, believed that women were naturally destined to be principally wives and mothers. Within the educated classes, there was the belief that women needed to be sufficiently educated to be intelligent and agreeable interlocutors to their husbands. However, the lower-class women were expected to be economically productive in order to help their husbands make ends meet.

Norton, Alexander, Block, Mary Beth, Ruth M., Sharon (2014). The study of history is value-laden in regard to what is considered historically "worthy." Other aspects of this area of study is the differences in women's lives caused by race, economic status, social status, and various other aspects of society.

Catriona Kennedy (2016). "Women and Gender in Modern Ireland," In Ireland studies of women, and gender relationships more generally, had been rare before 1990; they now are commonplace with some 3000 books and articles in print.

Objectives of The Study

Going through the literature on women

1. Peeping into the past of the Indian woman through the various ages of history
2. Comparing and contrasting the women in different ages of history
3. Focussing on the contemporary Indian woman in the twenty first century
4. Developing a familiarity with the new challenges the woman these days have
5. Analysing her changed status as well as the changed outlook of the society

Hypothesis

1. Woman is the most wonderful creation of God blessed with the capabilities of continuing the creation, carrying humanity, managing home and all its affairs
2. The history of woman is embarrassing
3. The different ages of history had different implications about woman

4. In all the ages of history, she was stratified as secondary to man
5. The woman of the twenty first century has new challenges to meet with

Research Methodology

Grounded in the woman-theories and feministic approach, the paper is designed with the specific purpose to reflect the existence of the Indian woman in the various ages of history. Though interdisciplinary in stuff, it concerns History most as it evaluates the situations and norms that were faced by the Indian woman from time-to-time. For the purpose, the secondary data alongwith the investigator's non-participant observation of the women of the twenty first century was used. Selection of the topic on the theme, study of the literature and reviews of literature relevant to the subject, hypothetic assumptions and testing, collection of the secondary data from the available sources, non-participant observation within limited range, exploring the points of comparison, and finally the interpretation of the modern woman of the twenty first century in a historical perspective are the strands of methodology adopted for the purpose of preparing the paper.

Analytical Perspective

1. With the exception of the few, most of the women in all the ages of history had more or less the same social and ethical bindings, situations and bindings and impositions
2. The Indian woman in the medieval period of history had the worst situation to face, as with the arrival of the Mughals, several unexpected and undesirable bans were imposed on her, and in her own home she seemed to be living like a prisoner with no liberty even to move out unveiled.
3. The modern woman with the changed approach of the fundamentalists and of society at large to her, is more blessed than the woman of any other periods of history

Findings & Conclusion

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. The history of woman begins with the birth of the first woman on the earth. The formal history of the Indian woman begins with the early vedic period, the most favourable period of history to the Indian woman. In early vedic period the woman in India had a very high status which could not be retained in the post vedic period. The Smriti period reveals a moderate status of the woman in India. In medieval times, this was dismissed on the ground that this was only the case in a previous age (yuga). The period under the Muslim rule was the worst period for the woman in India. In modern India, the women of India 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 setting aside all the previous records. Today she finds herself much more blessed that the woman of any other historical age.

She is ready to bear any responsibility given to her by her family and society at large. Now she has an incredible sense of liberty, self-dependence, orientation to educational and professional goals. Though divided between her family and work whether in private or public sector, she is ready to face everything that befalls her path.

To conclude, The melting pot of the female Indian psyche is in a state of perfect liquidity, with multifarious socio-economic and psycho-spiritual ingredients thronging from all sides. Out of this emerges a new self-image taking on the fascinating hues of freedom, self-respect, self-worth, confidence and allied attributes. But the process of change can be understood only in terms of neo-historicism. Therefore an examinationcum-analysis of the historical data relating to Indian womanhood is imperative. This alone can bring forth vagaries and vicissitudes which have been constructing and destroying the evolving image of the average Indian woman. A historical over-view of events and situations leading to the varied shifts and value scales of the Indian female is a logical necessity to be studied and understood over again.

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