

# The Historical Expedition of Women in India: An Overview

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## Sabyasachi Mukherjee

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of Education,  
Mahatma Gandhi University,  
Meghalaya, India

## Pari Borkakati

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of Social work,  
Mahatma Gandhi University,  
Meghalaya, India

## Ariful Islam

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of Political Science,  
Mahatma Gandhi University,  
Meghalaya, India

### Abstract

It is universally true that the worth of a civilization can be judged by the place and position of women in its society. This is because women are considered the real backbone of a civilization; they are in fact the home-makers as well as the policy-makers. In speaking of India and its culture it is seen that Indian women, be it ancient or modern, enjoy a great prestige and honour. History says that women in ancient India were worshipped as 'devi' which is nothing but another form of goddess. They were treated as 'Ardhangini' to men and they were given much value by men in every aspect of life. Permitted them to do according to their own will and hence the bright names of women like Manu are still glaring inspirations to every woman in civilization. It is true however that down the ages, women suffered a lot in few times but irrespective of all the position of women in India is sound good. This article will hence focus on the power and position of women down the ages in India in building the nation and its prestigious culture.

**Keywords:** Women, History, Position, Power, Prestige

### Introduction

It is a fact that men and women are distinguish and individual figures of society. They are individual in every respect. They have similar capability in performing any kind of joy, be it indoor or outdoor. But what is unfortunate is that the real picture of society is something very opposite. Our society is strictly male dominated and here men are given priority. In such a male dominant society, women were never given proper respect and prestige. They history gives evidence that in ancient India, women were only treated as wives or 'Badhu'. They were kept indoors and their only duty was restricted to kitchen performance. There are rare cases of course but in most of the cases women were inferior to men, not counterpart of men.

However the empowerment of women got geared only after the reform movement in India. The social thinkers came to realize that real status of society could be changed only after the empowerment of women through education.

### Status of Women down the Ages

It is very pleasure to note that the status and position of women an ancient India was very praiseworthy. Women in ancient India were worshipped as Goddess. One can say for example that women in Rig Veda were highly respected. Despite they took a lead role in performing every religious ceremony. From the history it has also been sanguined that during the Vedic days, the prestige of women in society was high. In fact they enjoyed equal status with men. One can mention the names of great educated women like Patanjali or Katyani who were highly qualified in their fields.

### Rig Veda

It is noteworthy that the real empowerment of women at least in the field of education got started in the period of Rig Veda. The said period witnessed the rising graph of education of young girls. Women of those days enjoyed a lot of freedom in their life. They were free to choose their life partner even. The concept of 'Swayamvare' which was none other than the selection of right person from many was prevalent. Dowry system was not there. However the concept of marriage as a gift was prevalent. There was a close bonding between husband and wife. What is noteworthy is that society was somewhat liberal to the women in those days. The women were allowed to remarry but it was in few cases. The Sons were given top priority but at the same time the unmarried girls also claimed the property of their parents.

**Upanishad**

The position and upliftment of women in the era of Upanishad was not too good. There was declined of women power in society. Now the religious festivals were not performed by them and priests took their role. However in the post Upanishad decades, there was rising graph of women position. The system of marriage became somewhat flexible. It was permitted for a higher class boy to marry a girl belonging to a lower caste. This gradual graph of upliftment also got reflected in spiritual field also. There were separate temples for Gods and Goddesses. God and Goddess were equally worshipped. In case of uttering prayers through chanting, slokas were spoken in favour of each god and his wife. Hence the upliftment of women was seen in every field and this was how they were able to secure their position. One can give the example like-

“O Goddess, Let yourself  
Become the burning power of  
Fire; who is not able to burn  
Anything without thee. At the  
Conclusion of any mantra,  
Whoever taking thy name  
(Svaha), will pour oblations  
In the fire, he will cause  
Those offerings to go directly  
To the gods. Mother, let  
Yourself, the repository of all  
Prosperity, reign over as the

In the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Queen Mrgavati (in Sanskrit), or Migavati (in Prakrit) of the Vatsa mahajanapada ruled as regent while her son Udayana was either a minor or held captive by a rival king, and she earned “the admiration of even experienced ministers.”

Apastamba sutra (c.4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) captures some prevalent ideas of the role of women during the post Vedic ages. The Apastamba Sutra shows the elevated position of women that existed during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE:

A man is not allowed to  
Abandon his wife (A 1.28.19).  
He permits daughters to  
Inherit (A 2.14.4). There can  
be no division of property

**Sutras and Epic Era**

The fact is that the era of Sutras and Epics as remarkable in the sense that women occupied a prestigious position in society there. They enjoyed all social festivals and had no boundary to them. The men gave them their proper respect. They worked with them in every field of life. The widow marriage was allowed and hence women enjoyed their life to the full. Nowhere were they humiliated. It is also seen the rate of education of women was also high there. Naturally, women were both socially mentally, physically and educationally enlightened.

It might be easy to be a woman today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it has not always been this way. There was a time when the word ‘feminism’ or ‘women empowerment’ was not even coined. There was a time, when women struggled to break society’s

so-called ‘norms’ and achieve what they were truly born to be. This Women’s Day, we round up a list of golden women who shone from the pages of our history books to become the inspiration to our lives.

**Objective of the Study**

The objectives of this article can be –

1. To make a historical graph about the position and status of women in India.
2. To make a clear picture of recession both decline as well as graph of women status in different phases of Indian history.
3. To draw a good friend of social acceptance of women in a context of Indian history.
4. To highlight the women contribution in building the nation in different era of history.

**Ancient and Early Medieval periods****Gupta Period**

The Gupta period is a golden period for Indian women where instances are not rare of women participating in an administrative job. Chandragupta I, founder of the Gupta Empire, ruled the kingdom jointly with his queen Kumara Devi. Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of Chandra Gupta II of the Gupta Empire and the wife of Rudrasena II of the Vakataka dynasty, and performed administrative duties in her kingdom. Instance of women of the upper classes extending their phase of activities beyond the domestic circle are provided by the queen and queens regent in Kashmir, Rajasthan, Orissa and Andhra. Institutions were established for co-education. In the work called Amarkosh written in the Gupta era names of the teachers and professors are there and they belonged to the female sex.

**Muslim Period; the Gradual Decline**

The rights of a Muslim woman were impacted by the custom of hijab or purdah in Persian. Despite of this, women took part in arts, writing, rites and rode horses while their habits sometimes swayed from the opinion of the ulama. The hijab and burqah was a practice in West Asia and became a part of regal practice under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. The practice of purdah was later emulated by Hindus in North India. The queens often played a part in imperial politics behind the scene. In South India, some communities who adopted Islam have continued their ancestral matrilinear traditions like the Mappila. Ibn Battuta in the Muslim principality of Hannaur witnessed 13 schools teaching Muslim women. Both genders were taught by mullahs, however, lower-classes were more uneducated.

It is a fact that the position and status of women in India got declined during the Muslim period. In the Muslim period, society did not pay any kind of honour and respect to the women. The Muslims from Afghans in the eleven century came India and tried to influence India with an own culture. The Muslims did not give any liberty to the women. The women to them were nothing but either sex machine or source of production. Women there did not get any kind of opportunity to study. The always remain indoors and were far away from any kind of enjoyment in life. The women were compelled to keep themselves within the four walls of their houses with a long veil on their faces. The Muslim women were allowed to go outside

with 'Burkas'. What is unfortunate is that the husband in those days can divorce a lady only by saying three times 'Talaak, Talaak, Talaak'. On the other hand women were not in a position to take their own decision in the life. Naturally there was no women development in speaking of any kind of life. They were morally, physically, economically, educationally lagged behind.

#### **The Renaissance, the wake of Modernization**

In the wake of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's movement against women's subjugation to men and British influence on Indian culture and civilization the position of women had once again undergone a change. However, it was only under the position or women had once again undergone a change. However, it was only under the enlightened leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that they re-asserted their equality with men. In response to the call of Gandhi they discarded their veil and came out of the four walls of their houses to fight the battle of freedom shoulder to shoulder with their brothers. The result is that the Indian Constitution today has given to women the equal status with men. There is no discrimination between men and women. All professions are open to both of them with merit as the only criterion of selection.

#### **Pre Independent Decades**

It is an established fact that after gaining the position of dignity. Today's Indian women are distinguished in almost every sphere of life, be it social, political, economical, administrative and so on. They work honestly and enthusiastically. To be more true there is no field left, when Indian women did not leave their footmarks. They are everywhere. What is more is that they do their best in parliament they seek appointment in public office and go hand in hand with men in almost every sphere of life. Naturally, women in recent times are stronger or powerful than those of earlier women. They in fact enjoy liberty in making their future. They enjoy their life and take their own responsibility.

#### **Post Independent Era**

It is a fact that women are intelligent hard-working and efficient in work. They put heart and there is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in the last fifty years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. The Hindu Code Bill has given the daughter and the son equal share of the property. The Marriage Act no longer regards woman as the property of man. Marriage is now considered to be a personal affair and if a partner feels dissatisfied she or he has the right of divorce. But passing of law is one thing and its absorption in the collective thinking of society is quite a different matter. In order to prove themselves equal to the dignity and status given to them in the Indian Constitution they have to shake off the shackles of slavery and superstitions. They should help the government and the society in eradicating the evils of dowry, illiteracy and ignorance among the eves. The dowry problem has assumed a dangerous form in this country. The parents of the girls have to pay thousands and lacs to the bridegrooms and their

greedy fathers and mothers. If promised articles are not given by the parents of brides, the cruel and greedy members of the bridegrooms' family take recourse to afflicting tortures on the married women. Some women are murdered in such cases. The dowry deaths are really heinous and barbarous crimes committed by the cruel and inhumane persons. The young girls should be bold enough in not marrying the boys who demand dowry through their parents. The boys should also refuse to marry if their parents demand dowry. But unfortunately the number of such bold and conscientious boys is very few. Even the doctors, engineers, teachers and the administrative officers do not hesitate in allowing themselves to be sold to the wealthy fathers of shy and timid girls. Such persons have really brought disgrace to their cadres in particular and society in general. The government should enact stringent laws to afflict rigorous punishment on dowry seekers, women's murderers and rapist.

It is noteworthy that the present status of women in India is very bright. But it has to be ensured that their future is also to be secured. They can enjoy a great future and can get a tension free life only when society would give them security. All kinds of social evils must be abolished. Even now women are not secure in many parts of India. Somewhere also their life is restricted. They cannot perform their own duty according to their wish. This should be stopped at any cost. It is still a shameful fact that the rate of raped Indian women is on ascending graph. The killing of baby-girl in every year of India is still going at an alarming rate. They are still not allowed to take part in ritual ceremony in some orthodox society in India. All these take women back in society.

It is however a pleasure to mention that the recent governments of India, both central and state are giving form on the upliftment of women. They are taking effective measures in favour of women empowerment. One can say for example that the steps taken by present Prime Minister Narendra Modi are really praiseworthy. 'The Beti Bachao', 'Beti Parao' is one such fruitful and effective bill that can ensure the enlightenment of Indian women. It can ensure the completion of education of all those Indian women who can wish to read and want to be successful in life. It is also a golden opportunity to all those meritorious girls to fulfill their dreams in life. Despite, many state governments are also taking few measures to make women position strong. One such wonderful step has been taken by the honorable Chief Minister of Bengal Mrs. Mamata Banerjee. 'The Kanyashree Prakalpa' is the very name that secures many women in Bengal. It is that platform that gives golden opportunity to the girls of Bengal to complete their education without any financial headache. The Government here stretch its supportive hands financially to the guardians of those girls.

#### **Conclusion**

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul. Unfortunately the liberty and equality enjoyed by Indian woman today have not reached the vast majority of women citizens in India. When a brief study was

comprehensively done through facts, there is opposite picture. Selection of boy child over girl child is quite shocking and very disturbing and very much widely practiced even today in almost parts and sections of people in India. The question arises here – are we a nations of mass murders? Does a girl not have a right to born peacefully and with the same respect like a boy child in our so called cultural and spiritual enshrined land?

To conclude, we can quote SwamiVivekananda – “It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. ‘It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.’ So, one can conclude that the Indian woman has to make her way through all the socialized prejudices against her and men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country’s way forward. Here in lies the proper prestige and status of women in India.

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