

Status of Women in Ancient India

Paper Submission: 15/11/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/11/2020, Date of Publication: 27/11/2020

Abstract

The position of women reflects the cultural, aesthetic, moral and spiritual attainment of society. The elevation of the feminine principles pervades Vedic thought. Women enjoyed an almost equal status with man in Rigvedic period. The main purpose of this research paper is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in Ancient India. In Ancient times, the women were considered with respect and dignity. During this period there were women rishis, and they were held in high esteem. In royal households, women were given respect and they even rendered a significant contribution in the making an important part in politics as well.

Foundation of human civilization and endorsement of its potency are the consequences of prolonged women endeavor, which through its history of superiority and confinement, convey the picturesque of civilization, although the tale of women's accomplishment remained subdued in history, yet the ancient Indian texts symbolizes women's visibility in this regard. Indian society influences the genders with its diversified socio-cultural practices, which varies extensively over space and time. The present study has assessed the women's status in Ancient Indian civilization, mainly based on the ancient scripts and texts. The purpose of this study is to make the people aware about the strengths of women, whether in home or in office or at workplace.

Keywords: Ancient India, Vedas, Education, family, Society, Women
Introduction

Women's endeavor plays the key role to en-strength the dynamism of human civilization by dint of their superiority and confinements to make a rapid progress of it in all spheres on this globe since Ages. Although the tale of women's accomplishment remained subdued in history, yet the ancient Indian texts symbolizes women's visibility in this regard where women's status had varied with space and time.¹ Many historians claim that women enjoyed an equal status with men in ancient India. It is said that women were educated, had a say in family matters, took important decisions of life and were free to choose their own husbands. The ancient system of 'Swayamvara' is mentioned in holy scripts and also in many epics. A woman in ancient India was respected and was given due importance in the society Child marriage was unheard in Rigvedic times.

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent – all male domination- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions makes references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to temples, dharamshalas not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well. In Vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. No religious rites and rituals could be performed without the wife.

Women during the Pre- Vedic Period

In this phase of history i.e. in Harappam Period, the Mother Goddess was the eternal symbol of life.² The clam life, in which the mother headed every family, created the mother Goddess and raised her to the supreme position. Considering the analogy between seed and earth, and male and the female, men are thus dependent upon women, because she is the sole provider of his comforts. Women like earth gave life, sustenance and strength.³

It is difficult to ascertain women's situation in pre-Vedic times, because historians have not been able to trace the happenings and operations during that period. Women's subordination began with the society's development. There had been clear-cut demarcation between women's and man's world of work. Men's activities were always

Anjana

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of Ancient History
K.N. Govt. P.G. College
Gyanpur, Bhadohi, India

appreciated while women's undermined. Women's physical weakness did constitute to a glaring inferiority situation.⁴

Centered on the Indus River valley, the oldest known civilization in India ranged from ca. 2500-1500 B.C. In this vast span of time, Archaeology, and artifacts are being used to reconstruct the lives of women. "The earliest materials found by archaeological excavations suggest the worship of goddess. The most famous ancient artifact is that of a young slender girl posing confidently. Numerous toys found convey a society that valued family life, while their inscribed ancient seals have not been deciphered to determine the actual meanings, extensive female images have been found that suggest goddess played a central role. Several of the seals suggest a goddess associated with vegetation and fertility.

Women during the Vedic Period

The Rig Vedic Aryans had developed a healthy family life, in which the ties of wedlock were held sacred and indissoluble.⁵

The Rigveda points to a highly organized society. Monogamy was the general rule, but among the princes polygamy was also practiced. Marriage was a sacred bond which could not be broken by any human action. However, widows were allowed to remarry particularly when they were without a child. In Rigvedic society, the wife was the partner of the husband at the time of religious ceremonies and no ceremony was considered to be effective without her participation. Child marriage was unknown, the choice of the father counted in the selection of the bridegroom but the girl was also given measure of independence in that matter⁶

Vedic era was the golden era so far as status and the personal freedom of women are concerned. They were given due respect in the family and society. They were given all types of freedom and rights to act according to their own choice. In this period, the place of women in the family was recognized and honoured. The Rigveda shows that women were fully the equals of men as regards access to and capacity for the highest knowledge. During this period woman enjoyed a fair amount of freedom and the equality with man. The Atharva Veda asserted, "the success of women in her married life depends upon her proper training during the Brahmacharya."⁷ The education of Vedic period had wisely divided women into two groups namely-Brahmavadinis and Sadyodvahas. Brahmavadinis were the life-long students of philosophy and theology. Sadyodvahas used to prosecute their studies until they got married at the age of 15-16 years. The Vedic Age has witnessed many capable and sagacious women like Apala, Ghosha and Vishvavara, who used to compose mantras and were said to be rose to the rank of rishis or sages. Women like Gargi and Maitreyi were considered to be highly advanced intellectuals. The women did not use Purdah. The women represented the best example of conjugal love, offering the supreme sacrifice of their lives as a demonstration of their feeling for their partners in the journey of life. This was to be an

enduring legacy of Vedic women who performed sacrifices to the gods by the side of her husband as equal partner in offering of oblations.⁸

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (vi,4,17) mentions a rituals by which a person prays for the birth to him of a daughter, who should be a pandita or learned lady. The Kaushitaki Brahmamana (vii,6) tells of an Aryan lady, Pathyasvasti. Proceeding to the North for study and obtaining by her study the title of vak, i.e. Saraswati Goddess.⁹ During Rig Veda, the entire responsibility of the household was vested in the hands of women and they were also working and serving as guardians to the children and members in the family¹⁰. The Mahabharata treated women as the better halves (Ardhangini) of their husbands and even they were also treated as friends. During illness and times of danger she works as the medicine and peace for the family. A man continues to be half as long as he remains a bachelor, but after marrying a wife he becomes complete. The wife is her husband's ardhgini and the marriage ritual seeks to stress and reinforce this conjugal intimacy¹¹. But the value of son could not be denied in the Vedic Society to the extent that sons were useful to them than daughters.

Women during post- Vedic Periods.

During this period, the caste System developed The society was divided into four castes namely Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudras. The position of the women has considerably come down. Certain social evils came to rule the society badly affecting the dignity of women. Pre-puberty marriage was practiced and they have no religious or any social duties to perform.

Fixing of marriageable age of girls during this period was one of the root causes of the unfortunate development. The main idea behind this move was to preserve the physical purity. Manu permitted child marriage and polygamy. In the Dharma-shastras women were unambiguously equated with the shudras. Even the "Bhagvada Gita" describes the life of women as being of sinful birth, this system of child marriage had a great effect to degrading position of women Girl married at the early age hardly got the chance of having any education beyond receiving elementary stage. They did not have the life of studentship. Because of the lack of educational knowledge they became unfit to participate or perform any religious duties. But generally, the education of women reached a very low level and the time was there even literacy of women was unwelcome. Child marriage made the turning point in the life of girls.

The women become dependent on men. The marriage also lost its independent value. The role of Hindu women in conjugal right began to be confined to the kitchen and producing of son. The daughters become unwelcome to the then society marriage were only the way through which she was granted salvation. Her consent in the marriage was immaterial. She has to produce son for offering pind to the deceased forefathers. Life of women without son became miserable. There was a significant change in the attitude to men towards women. We have seen in famous epics i.e. Ramayan and Mahabharats, the story of desertion of Sita and using

of Draupadi as chattel by Yudistira. According to Manu, the earliest exponent of the law, women were always dependent on somebody either the father, or the husband, or the son. Manu smriti is full of paradoxes of respect and neglect of women. "In a house, where women are honoured, Gods are pleased. But where they are not honoured, and are insulted, nothing done in that house yields good results {Manu(I-II-56)}". Manu was against the remarriage of women.

According to Kautilya, a woman might also marry again if her husband was of bad character, or away for a long period or likely to endanger her life. Attachment of importance to the birth of a male child became responsible for the gradual decline in the status of women. The widow was given an inferior position as she was unfortunate enough to lose the all powerful protecting male partner.¹³ The deterioration in the status of widows commenced from the epic period. Widowhood was considered both undesirable as well as inauspicious. The position of widows became more pitiable. The custom of widow burning came into existence. Though there were instances of widows surviving their husbands and offering them funeral oblations, on the whole the position of widows was not so honourable during this period.¹⁴

The goal for women, as spelt out by the ancient Hindu legislators, was Pativrata dharma, Brahminical Law makes woman the property of man, whose fate is death upon the funeral pyre when he dies.¹⁵ Until her death" says Manu, let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled, and chaste, and strive to fulfill that most excellent duty, which is prescribed for wives, who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches Heaven, though she has no son, just like those chaste men."¹⁶ Thus, the position of the widow gradually becoming worse and worse, the custom of "Sati" gradually came into existence. The custom of 'Sati' become more prominent when Rajput women had resolved to mount the pyre to allow the men to go and fight without the fear of their women Talk being ravished when the kingdom was surrounded by alien armies.

The position of Indian women becomes more and more critical when the country was invaded by foreign rules. For reasons of security, movement outside was restricted which in turn denied opportunities in community affairs.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in Ancient India. Position of women in various periods of ancient india i.e. Harappan Period, Vedic Period and post vedic period etc. is studied with the help of relevant sources in this research paper.

Conclusion

In religious matters, Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity. One of the things most misconstrued about India and Hinduism is that it is a male dominated society and religion but the truth is that it is not so. It is a religion that has attributed the words for the strength and power to feminine. "Shakti" means "power" and "strength" All male power comes from the feminine. The Trimurti (Bramha, Vishnu, Shiva) are all powerless without their female counterparts.

The position of women, on the whole, was fairly satisfactory. This community, as a whole, was showing proper concern and respect for women, allowing them considerable freedom in the different activities of social and political life. As a matter of fact, religious sanctions, social recognition, family support and, above all, the highly determined self by the woman, made her a big achiever whatever may be the field, she excelled and earned glorious achievement.

References

1. Chakravarti, U, & Roy, K. (1988). *In search of our past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of women in early India. Economic & Political weekly*, 23 (18).
2. Rama Mehta, (1987). *Socio- Legal status of women in India Pp 38-39*
3. R.K.Majumdar & A.N. Srivastava (1996), *An Easy Approach to Indian History. Pp. 33-34*
4. Poonam S. Chauhan (1996) *Lengthening Shadows- Status of women in India, Pp 14-15*
5. Rama Shankar Tripathi, *History of Ancient India, (EA, 1999), p. 32*
6. V.D. Mahajan, (Reprint Ed. 2005) , *Ancient India, p. 120*
7. S.R. Myneni, (2nd Edition, 2006), *Indian History for Law Students, p. 56*
8. Monica Chawla, (2006 Ed.), *Gender Justice, women and Law in India, p. 2*
9. S.vats, (1999, Ed.) *Women and Society in Ancient India, p.5*
10. R.K.Majumdar & A.N.Srivastava(6th Ed.1996), *An Easy Approach to Indian History, p. 55*
11. V.D. Mahajan, (Reprint Ed. 2005), *Ancient India, p.120*
12. Dr. Anjani kant (2003), *Women and The Law, Pp 29 and 34 S. Vats, (1999 Ed), Women and Society in Ancient India, Pp 45 and 46*
13. Dr. Rekha Roy, (1st Ed. 2006) *Women's Rights in India: A feminist perspective, P. 40*
14. *Ibid* , P. 43
15. S.M. Myneni , (Reprint Ed. 2003), *Women and the Law, P. 3*
16. Dwarka Nath Mitter, (2006,Ed.), *The position of woman in Hindu law, vol.2, Pp. 361-362*