

# The Changing Status of Women in Ancient India Retrospect and Prospect

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## ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination or inequality is a patent fact in traditional culture of the developing countries. In India gender discrimination has been depicted in various ages of Indian history. 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 the Rig Vedic era, (2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C.) however was the golden era as far as equality of women, their status and freedom are concerned. In Gurukul women studied with men and many women were well versed like Apala, Ghosha, Gargi, Maitreyi, Visvara etc. Women were free to select their grooms. They were actively associated with men with every social and religious rituals and ceremony she could move freely out of her house and enjoyed freedom of movement by attending fairs and festivals, sabhas and assembly of learned person. Girls were educated like boys and had to pass through a period of Brahmacharya. Many of them used to become distinguished poetess. In social and religious gatherings they occupied a prominent position. Women had an absolute equality with men in the eye of religion they could perform sacrifices independently and were not regarded as an impediment in religious pursuits(Altekar,A.S.1938,P.29).

**Keywords:** Small Scale Industries, WTO and Reform, Impact, liberalization

## I. INTRODUCTION

The changes took place during the age of the later Samhitas Brahmanas and Upanishads (1500 B.C. to 500 B.C.). In the higher sections of society the sacred (upanayana), initiation of girls was common and they subsequently used to go through a course of education. Some of them used to attain distinction in the realm of theology and philosophy and a considerable number of women used to follow the teaching career. There was, however, a gradual decline in female education as the period advanced. Naturally, therefore religious and secular training became

possible only in the case of the girls of rich and cultured families(Altekar1938). As a consequence there arose a tendency to curtail the religious rights and privileges of the average women, many functions in the sacrifice, which formerly could be performed by the wife alone now came to be assigned to male substitutes. Though wife was not an impediment but an absolute necessity in the religious service.

The position of women deteriorated considerably in the age of the Sutras, the Epics and the Smritis (500 B.C. to 500 A.D.) women were considered ineligible for Vedic studies and religious duties. The growing

complexity of the Vedic sacrifices was another factors that tended to make the wife's association in religious rituals a more and more formal affair in course of time. The sacrifices became a very complex affair and the slightest mistake in its performance or in the recitation of its hymns and formulae was regarded as fraught with very grave consequences.

It required a long training to get the necessary capacity to follow intelligently the minute details of the complicated sacrifice and the average women had not so much time to devote for the purpose. In the Vedic Age she was married at about the age of 16 or 17, she could thus devote six or seven years to her Vedic studies before her marriage. The sacrificial ritual was also simple. Towards the end of the period of the later Samhitas and Brahmanas early marriages came into practice. The Aryans had settled down in a rich and prosperous country and their political supremacy had become unquestioned. Naturally they took to an easy and luxurious life and the marriageable age of boys and girls began to be lowered and as a consequence to discourage their upanayana and education. It was declared that marriage was the substitute for upanayana in the case of girls, they need not have any separate sacred initiation.

The discontinuance of upanayana, the neglect of education and the lowering of the marriage age produced disastrous consequences upon the position and status of woman. The new development affected the position of the widow. It strengthened the hands of those who were opposed to widow remarriage. A greater calamity that overtook the widow in this period was the Sati System. Society had began to discourage widow remarriages

A woman according to most dharmashastarkar was always a minor at law. As a girl she was under the tutelage of her parents, as an adult, of her husband, and as a widow, of her sons(Buhler,G.1964P.33). Even

under the liberal rules of Buddhism a nun, however advanced in the faith, was always subordinate to the youngest novice among the brethren. Early law books assess a woman's wergeld as equivalent to that of a sudra, whatever her class(Basham,A.L.1987P.324).

Most schools of law allowed a woman some personal property (stridhana) in the form of jewellery and clothing. The Arthasatra allowed her also to own money up to 2000 silver panas, any sum above this being held by her husband in trust on her behalf(Arthsastra,iii,2). The husband had certain rights over his wife's property; he might sell it in dire emergency, and he might restrain her from giving it away wantonly, but for practical purposes it was her own, and when she died it passed not her husband or to her sons, but to her daughters. Thus the property rights of women, limited though they were, were greater than in many other early civilizations. In fact women sometimes possessed more than was usually allowed to them by the rules of stridhana. Jalna tradition mentions a potter-woman of the town of Sravasti who owned a pottery with one hundred potter's wheels. Her status is nowhere mentioned, and it may be that she was thought of as a widow, for some legal schools allowed a widow to inherit when there were no sons(BuhlerG.1964P.34-37).

Women could at all times take up a life of religion, though of course they could not officiate as priests. A few Vedic hymns are ascribed to women seers, and among the voluminous Buddhist scriptures is a whole collection of poems ascribed to the nuns, many of which are of great literary merit. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad(iii,6,iii,8) tells of a learned lady, Gargi Vacaknavi, who attended the discussions of the sage Yajnavalkya, and for a time so nonplussed him with her searching questions that he could only jestingly reply. "Gargi, you mustn't ask too much, or your head will drop off!" References occur here and there in later texts to girls occasionally attending the lectures of gurus, and mastering at least part of the Vedas.. By the time of the Smritis, however, around the beginning of the Christian era, Vedic knowledge was closed to

women,. although the heterodox sects still catered for them. The tantric sects of the Middle Ages, who worshipped feminine divinities, gave women an important place in their cult and instituted orders of female ascetics.

In general, however, women were not encouraged to take up a life of religion or asceticism. Their true function was marriage, and the care of their menfolk and children. But the better class laywomen seem to have been educated, and there are several references to works of Sanskrit poetry and drama by women authors., of which some fragments survive. In Tamil the early poetess Avvaiyar has left work of great merit, and a splendid martial ode describing the great victory of the early Chola king Karikalan at Venni is ascribed to an unnamed potter's wife (Purananuru, 66). The ladies of Sanskrit courtly literature are often described as reading, writing, and composing songs. and they seem to have been well versed in the arts of the time. Though from medieval times until very recent years the arts of music and dancing were looked on as quite unfit for respectable Indian girls, and were practised only by low-caste women and prostitutes, this was not the case in ancient days, when well-to-do girls were taught singing and dancing, as well as other ladylike arts such as painting and garland making.

In early medieval period the Hindus of Northern India. adopted the system of *parda*, by which, from puberty to old age, women were carefully screened from the sight of all men but their husbands and close relatives.. Though such a system did not exist in ancient India the freedom accorded to married women has been often exaggerated by authorities.. anxious to show that the more objectionable . aspects of later Hindu custom had no place in India's ancient culture. Certainly the Rig Veda depicts young men and unmarried girls mixing freely, and gives no evidence that married women were in any way secluded, but this text belongs to a time which had

long passed in the great days of Hindu culture. Kings, at any rate, kept their womenfolk in seclusion. The detailed instructions of the Arthashastra make it quite dear that the *antahpura*, or royal harem, was closely guarded, and that its inmates were not allowed to leave it freely. It was certainly not so strictly secluded as in later Muslim communities, however, for early Arab travellers remarked that queens were often to be seen in Hindu courts without veils, and many other references show that, though screened from the general public and carefully watched, the royal ladies were not completely inaccessible, as in the Muslim system (Basham, A.L. 1987, P. 721).

The women of the upper classes were kept at a distance from the opposite sex. The Arthashastra, (iii, 3) in many ways more liberal than the religious lawbooks, lays down quite stringent rules for the punishment of immodest wives.. A woman who insolently takes part in games, or drinks., against her husband's wishes, is to be fined three *panas*. If she leaves her home without his permission to visit another woman she is to be fined six *panas*; if she visits a man the fine is twelve; while if she goes on such errands by night the fine is doubled. If she leaves the house while her husband is asleep or drunk she is to be fined twelve *panas*. If a woman and a man make gestures of sexual import to one another, or converse facetiously in secret, the woman is to be fined twenty-four *panas* and the man twice that sum. If their conversation takes place in a suspicious place, lashes may be substituted for *panas* and "in the village square a chandala shall give her five lashes on each side of the body". Thus the husband had almost unlimited rights over his wife's movements (Shamastra, R. 1915 P. 222—23).

Elsewhere the Arthashastra gives evidence of a different kind to show that even in Mauryan times the freedom of high-class women was considerably restricted by custom. In the instructions to the king's Superintendent of Weaving are told that the staff of

the royal weaving and spinning establishments should be made up of indigent women-a motley collection, including widows, cripples, orphans. beggar-women, women who had failed to pay fines and were compelled to work them off, and broken-down prostitutes. These were all of low class, and worked under male overseers(ii,23).

It might happen that sometimes a better-class woman fell on evil days, and was compelled to earn a living in this way. She was catered for, however, in a different manner. If she could still be a maid, the maid might fetch the yarn from the weaving shop, and bring it back in the form of cloth; but if the lady was compelled to fetch and deliver her own material stringent precautions were laid down so that her modesty should in no way be offended. She was to go to the weaving shop in the dim light of dawn, when she would not be easily seen. The official who received her work should only use a lamp to examine its workmanship; if he looked her in the face, or spoke to her about anything other than her work, he incurred the fine known as "the first amercement", from forty-eight to ninety panas. It is evident from these instructions that upper-class women, though their faces were unveiled,. were not normally seen in public without their menfolk(Shamsastry,R.1915).

There were certainly wide differences of custom however. Girls of good class and marriageable age are described in story as visiting temples and taking part in festivals without guardian or chaperone. Early Tamil literature, more popular in character than that of the Aryan North, makes many references to the free association of young men and women. Early sculpture gives the same impression. At Bharhut and Sanchi wealthy ladies, lean from their balconies to watch processions, and scantily dressed women in the company of men worship the Bodhi Tree, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. We may conclude that, while a woman's freedom was

generally much restricted, it was rarely completely taken away.

A wife, however, had little initiative. Her first duty was to wait on her husband, fetching and carrying for him, rubbing his feet when he was weary, rising before him, and eating and sleeping after him(Buhler,G.1964).

"She should do nothing independently even in her own house.

In childhood subject to her father,  
in youth to her husband,  
and when her husband is dead to her sons,  
she should never enjoy independence....\_

She should always be cheerful. and skillful in her domestic duties,  
with her household vessels well cleansed, and her hand tight on the purse-strings....

In season and out of season  
her lord, who wed her with sacred rites,  
ever gives happiness to his wife,  
both here and in the other world.

Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure  
Though he have no good points at all,  
the virtuous wife should ever  
worship her lord as a god."

Passages of this type are frequent in literature of a religious and semireligious type, and stories of obedient and faithful wives are numerous. The great models of Indian womanhood are Sita, who faithfully followed her husband Rama into exile and endured great hardships and temptations for his sake and Savitri, who, like the Greek Alcestis, followed her husband Satyavan when he was being carried away by the death-god Yama, and so impressed the god with her loyalty that he released her lord. A tale gives an even more striking example of wifely fidelity:

A woman was holding her sleeping husband's head in her lap, as they and their child warmed themselves in winter before a blazing fire. Suddenly the child crawled towards the fire, but the woman made no attempt to save it from the flames, since thus she would wake her lord. As the baby crawled further into the flames she prayed to the fire-god Agni not to hurt him. The god, impressed by her obedience, granted her prayer, and the child sat smiling and unharmed in the middle of the fire until the man awoke(Bhojaprabandh,90).

Though the early Indian mind, prone to exaggeration, perhaps overdid the necessity of wifely obedience, her status was not without honour.

"The wife is half the man,  
the best of friends,  
the root of the three ends of life,  
and of all that will help him in the other world.

With a wife a man does mighty deeds...

With a wife a man finds courage.

A wife is the safest refuge....

A man aflame with sorrow in his soul, or sick with disease, finds comfort in his wife,  
as a man parched with heat  
finds relief in water.

Even a man In the grip of rage will not be harsh to a woman, remembering that on her depend the joys of love, happiness, and virtue.

"For woman is the everlasting field,  
in which the Self is born."

Passages like these, showing the honour and esteem in which women were held, are quite as numerous as those which stress their subservience. Everywhere it is stated that a woman should be lovingly cherished, well fed and cared for, and provided with jewellery and luxuries to the limits of her husband's means. She should never be upbraided too severely, for the gods will not accept the

sacrifice of the man who beats his wife. The ancient Indian attitude to women was in fact ambivalent. She was at once a goddess and a slave, a saint and a strumpet.

The latter aspect of her character is frequently brought out in semi-religious and gnostic literature. Women's lust knows no bounds:

The fire has never too many logs,  
the ocean never too many rivers,  
death never too many living souls,  
and fair-eyed woman never too many men.

No one man can satisfy a libidinous woman's cravings; unless constantly watched she will consort with every stranger, even with a hunchback, a dwarf or a cripple and in the last resort will have recourse to Lesbian practices with members of her own sex. Her deception is as all-embracing as her lust, and she is incorrigibly fickle(Basham,A.L.1987).

Moreover, women are quarrelsome and given to pique. They quarrel with one another, with their parents, and with their husbands. The henpecked husband was well known in ancient India. Many verses in medieval anthologies depict the emotion of *mana*, an untranslatable word implying a mixture of anger, wounded pride and jealousy. Early Tamil literature contains a whole class of poems describing the efforts of the husband to calm his wife's anger, roused by his attentions to a rival, usually a prostitute. If Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana, is invariably meek and compliant before her lord, Draupadi of the Mahabharata can round on her five husbands and reproach them in no uncertain terms. The Mauryan kings were guarded by amazons trained in the use of sword and bow, and the Greeks were impressed by the ferocity with which the women of some of the Panjab tribes aided their menfolk in resisting Alexander. In later times women sometimes took part

in war and the tradition was continued among the Rajputs.

The only sphere in which the position of women improved in the age of later Smritis. commentators and digest – writers (C 500 A.D. to C 1200 A.D.) was the one of proprietary rights. The right of the widow to inherit the share of her husband came to be eventually recognised all over the country by c. 1200 A.D. Proprietary rights apart, in all other spheres the position of women continued to deteriorate in this period. The upanayana of women went completely out of vogue. From the theological point of view the woman therefore came naturally to be regarded as of the same status as the sudra. This inflicated an incalculable harm on their general status and prestige. The sati custom had become common in the fighting classes. In the early medieval period the purda entered the families of feudatories and nobles and then it gradually spread among higher classes in northern India. The prohibition of widow remarriage, the revival of the Sati custom, the spread of the Purda and the greater prevalence of polygamy and suppression were prevalent during this period.

The status of women in ancient India experienced positive as well as negative effects. They were provided with opportunities as well as experienced discriminatory treatment. There was a connection between the status of women and their economic position. This in turn is dependent upon the rights and opportunities for rendering an effective contribution in economic activities. Majority of the population of India was employed in the agricultural sector. In addition, men and women were engaged in jobs, such as weaving, craftsmanship, pottery making and so forth. Hence, women were normally married off at an early age, they were deprived of acquiring education, they were meant to implement the household

responsibilities and take care of the needs and requirements of the family members. Women usually remained within the house, as they primarily dedicated themselves towards the management of the household.

Thus the changing status of women would be of considerable use to us in understanding and solving most of the problems that confront today. Women began to lose all along the line the moment their education began to be neglected. So the need and advantage of female education is now fully understood. Girls equipped with proper education enter matrimony, they cannot but be treated with instinctive respect and consideration by all the society around. Family responsibility and inherent incapacity, would be the normal cause of their not being earning members of their families, they would therefore receive the same respect that is instinctively given to the bread winner. Their practical attainments would add to the beauty of their households, lead to economy in its expenditure and promote sounder education of the children of the family. This would surely ensure for them an equality of status with their husbands in all cultured families.

It is high time now that poly gamy should be legally prohibited and we should insist that there should be no double standard of morality in sexual matters, husbands should be required to remain as faithful to their marriage vows as wives, Any transgression in this respect on the part of the husband should meet with instantaneous and severe social opprobrium.

Marriage should continue to be regarded as a sacred bond. The condition of divorce should be very stringent, but its necessity in modern times has to be recognized. Widow remarriage should be prevalent. We will have to change and even revolutionizes some of its customs and institutions in order to accord the proper place. Which justly belongs to woman. These changes are not in any way against the spirit of our culture. The code of social and socio – religious rules

and regulations have never been a fixed and rigid one which show how our customs and institutions have been changing from age to age under the influence of new ideals and environments. It is further important to note that even orthodox Smriti writers like Manu have recognized that a time might come when their rules would become obsolete, and have therefore declared that if any rules framed by them are found to be not conducive to the welfare of society, or against the spirit of the age, they should be unhesitatingly abrogated or modified.

So we should recognize that times have changed, old ideals of extreme asceticism have ceased to appeal, the age of authority has gone and is succeeded by an era of rationalism and equality. We must therefore read just the position of woman to the new situation by introducing the changes. If this is done, the capacity efficiency and happiness of women will increase, and as a consequence, our community will be enabled to take its right full place in the comity of nations and make important contributions to the progress and happiness of mankind.

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