

Status of Women in India

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Abstract

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent, women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women. Women enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples. It is reported that in the Vedic period, women participated in religious ceremonies and assemblies organized by their tribes. There was no discrimination of women in domestic and social affairs. As the time passed, the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. During Aryan period, women started losing rights of property. Patriarchal Aryan society favored sons for inheriting land. Gautam Buddha and Mahavir protested but were not very successful. Brahmins made all the attempts to degrade women by projecting daughters as misery and image of darkness. Condition of Muslim women was not better with purdah and practice of polygamy. It was only in twelfth century, opposition to suppression started. During British rule, new elite Indians who were exposed to European liberalism, felt urgency to reform the society.

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Introduction

Women in India and their status have undergone many changes over the period of time. In ancient times they enjoyed equal status with men. During medieval period, the status went down through the low points. Many reformers tried to promote equal rights for women. The history of women in India has been full of events. It was only in twelfth century, opposition to suppression started. During British rule, new elite Indians who were exposed to European liberalism, felt urgency to reform the society. However, even today women in India continue to face atrocities such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings and forced prostitution of young girls.

Golden period for women-Vedic period (2500B.C.-1000 B.C.)

Traditional Indian Culture is rooted in the Vedas, the earliest of which (Rig Veda) was composed more than 4500 years ago. The four Vedas were composed over a long period of time extending from 2500 BC to about 1500 BC. Women during the Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in every field of activity-political, social, economic and religious. They were treated with dignity and respect. The prejudices and discriminations against the birth of a female child, which arose during the later centuries and which continues to this day, were unknown. During that period a girl was equally welcome as a boy and enjoyed the same privileges as her brother. Women's education then was a routine part of their daily life. The Upanayana-initiation of a child to learning – was as much a requirement for a girl as for a boy. Significantly, learning itself was deified as Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. There were numerous illustrations of women literatures during the Vedic period. There are women who composed about 200 hymns of

the Rig Veda. It was normal practice for the learned Rishis to initiate their wives into intellectual pursuits. Texts on Dharma Shastra say that women distinguished themselves in arts and sciences and even in the martial arts and influenced political decisions.

Girls and boys enjoyed freedom in the selection of partners. Swayamvara (self-choice of a partner) was in trend especially among the ruling families. There were fairs and festivals to which young men and women would flock and these places offered good opportunities for mate-selection. The universal type of marriage was monogamous though polygamy existed on a small scale. At a certain period, the man who wanted to have a second wife was taxed by the state. Child marriage was unknown in Vedic times. Divorcee and widow remarriage both were permitted. Widow Remarriage was not only in trend but was sanctioned by the Sacred Texts. A passage in the Rig Veda says about a widow as follows: "Rise up women; you are lying by one whose life is gone. Come to the world of living, away from the husband". Indeed, there were few widows as there was no child marriage.

The excessive emphasis on the male progeny, which was a characteristic of the later period, never existed during the Vedic times. As a matter of fact, when women could perform all the non-biological roles of a man, including religious duties and warfare, there was no need for preferring a male over a female child. Magasthenes, the Greek Ambassador at the Mauryan Court, speaks of the Emperor's Amazonian bodyguard of armed women, whom the people greatly feared. The son was not indispensable for performing the funeral and other rites as these could be very well done by a daughter. For these reasons, female infanticide also was unknown during this period.

The Vedic society had a very pragmatic view of social life and of man-women relationship and small deviations to the prevailing social norms were treated as natural. The varied social life of the five women-Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Thara and Mandodari-who are held out as models of successful women, powerfully illustrates this point. This is indicative of the liberal moral code which avoided double standards for judging the morality of men and women separately.

Women's downfall-Aryan period (1000 B.C.-500 B.C.)

The position described above continued during the later Vedic period (2000-1000 B. C.) and extended up to the Brahmanic, Upanishadic, Puranic and Epic periods. Gradually deterioration in the social position of women was visible during 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. The Aryan society during this period was undergoing a series of structural changes, largely as a result of the increasing complexity of their economic institutions. Expansion into non-Aryan territories and the need to marry non-Aryan women necessitated the integration of the non-Aryan with the Aryan Society. At the same time, they were not ready to accept the non-Aryans on equal terms because the latter were not fair complexioned and their culture was considered inferior. It was therefore necessary to restrict the freedom of the non-Aryan women in the Aryan family-both as wives and as domestic servants.

This period also witnessed the rigidification of caste system, probably again, due to the need to keep the non-Aryans down the social ladder. They were not allowed to climb up

social ladder for fear of pollution due to their color and culture. As interpreters for Vedic knowledge, the Brahmins evolved necessary prescriptions. In doing this, they kept the Aryan women in position which they found advantageous to them. As a matter of fact, this was a necessity for the Patriarchal Aryan Society when it moved from rustic to a settled, land-owning society. The streamlining of the laws of inheritance in favor of the son required not only the joy of the position of the male with all consequential rights, but also the deprivation of the female from all earlier privileges. Most of the unpleasant rules that were imposed on women found acceptance only among the upper castes. They percolated into the lower castes more because of the latter's anxiety to imitate the former and thereby to get recognition and status from them than because of any compulsion from above. As a matter of fact, the unequal position of women was much more applicable to the upper castes and to the land-owning community than to the masses.

Gautam Buddha and Vardhaman Mahavir Era

The first protest against this degradation of women came from two reformers of the 6th century B.C. Gautam Buddha and Vardhaman, Mahavir. However; their influence was confined to only certain areas of North India and, even here, it was short-lived. The Brahmin patriarchy was soon able to recapture the lost ground and reintroduce their rules.

Brahmins degrading women's status

Brahmins, because of their monopoly of Vedic knowledge, claimed to have exclusive privilege of interpreting the scriptures. They began to use religion for imposing a whole series of rules and regulations which were not only bad for the position of women as equal partners with men but, in many cases, totally offensive to the dignity of women as human beings. Many passages from the sacred books were torn out. Many customs were thus introduced into society through the back door.

In the newly defined social order, women could not perform sacred ritual and functions. Marriage was their only vocation with no existence outside it. Their only role is the preservation of the species through reproduction and care of the family. It was her supreme Dharma to sacrifice all other human qualities, rights and privileges. Several measures were slyly mixed with the old texts to get religious sanction for degrading women's status, reducing them to being unwanted progeny and finally having to mount the funeral pyre of the husband. The order that only a son could perform the elaborate death ceremonies brought final disaster for women, making a male progeny indispensable without whom the father would become a ghost or get thrown into hell. Even special rituals were instituted to prevent the birth of a girl. A wife who bore no son could be put away on that ground alone. A wife who was barren was even more detested. There were even warnings against eating in the house of a barren woman. A son came to be described as a heavenly light but a daughter a misery, an image of darkness.

In this context, child marriage followed as a natural effect even though there was no order in the Vedic or post-Vedic literature in favor of it. This mania went to such ridiculous extent that even little babies in cradle, would be married. In fact, this was supposed to gain special merit for the parents of the married. The punishment for non-observance of early marriage was not only harsh but vulgar.

When child marriage became a religious obligation, child widows became an inevitable consequence. As a woman could not inherit any property of her husband or father in the changed circumstances, and as she was forbidden from remarriage, a course of action to keep off destitution also was prescribed-Sati. In any case, there was no purpose in her continuing to live after the husband's death.

The fate of the widow's who outlived Sati was even more pathetic. They were debarred from any festivities and celebrations, denied good clothes and ornaments the head had to be shaved, probably as a sign of giving up the world forever. They were considered inauspicious, unlucky to even look at, so they had to hide themselves, make themselves look ugly and subject themselves to a whole lot of disgrace and dishonor.

Condition of Muslim women

The arrival of Islam did not make conditions better. On the contrary, it only created harder rules and oppressive practices against women. Islam came to India in its bad form, especially with the purdah which became the hallmark of respectability. Any Muslim women found without a veil was ruled as shameless and outside of decent society. The plight of the Muslim women in other respects also was unenviable. The practices of polygamy and easy divorce by men and the law of inheritance went against them. Education was denied to them even though upper class women were given some non-formal education and training in artistic skills. As far as Hindu women were concerned, the conditions prevailing before entry of Islam continued to exist with the addition of the purdah. One exception, however, was there. The Mughal rulers attempted to put down Sati. Humayun introduced a system of licensing to bring it under some control. Akbar actively pursued the opposition. Jahangir abolished it by law and Aurangzeb pursued the implementation of this law. But none of them succeeded, probably because they were preoccupied with conquest, wars and revolts and could not pursue their reform vigorously.

Women movements in twelfth century

During this period, there were localized movements for improving the conditions of women. In the 12th Century, the Lingayat Movement begun by Basavanna who rejected many of the Hindu beliefs and customs such as Sati, infanticide etc. which according to its founder, brought disaster to Hinduism. He upheld the individuality of women, their right to choose their own husbands, remarriage of widows and right to divorce under certain conditions. Under his able disciple Mahadevikka, the movement gathered further momentum.

In Tamilnadu, Andal and Avai, two Tamil poetesses broke away from their social nests to preach the freedom of womanhood. The first rose to sainthood and the second found a place among the Tamil classical writers. The contribution of Mira Bai in Chittoor also broke the prevailing concept about womanhood. Guru Nanak was a powerful force in the Punjab in the 16th Century and, Sikhism which he founded also advocated the dignity of womanhood.

A galaxy of such socio-religious rebels, men and women, rose all over the country, rejecting the prevailing religious and social practices. They were accepted and respected by followers of both sexes.

British Rule

The advent of the Europeans into India did not make any change in the situation of women. Like other western powers, the primary objective of the British in the earlier days was trade even though its pursuit landed them in wars and local politics resulting in conquest. Later, when they were faced with the administration of the newly conquered areas they thought it safe not only to keep the existing social structure intact but also to train its religious pundits, the Brahmins. Brahmins in the administration not only gave them necessary educated manpower support to run the Government but also legitimacy to their rule as the Brahmins were accepted by the Hindu society as the custodians of knowledge and of the social code.

The introduction of English education, first started to train Indians for jobs under British administration, created a small upper class elite who began to doubt the rationale of many of the existing practices in their society. The establishment and expansion of British rule also encouraged British missionaries to enter their domains in large numbers. These missionaries started schools, orphanages and destitute home especially for widows and stood against Sati, child marriage, purdah and polygamy; all considered objectionable by the church. The new Indian elite, already exposed to European liberalism of the 18th century through western education, now felt the urgency for reform of their own society. This produced tangible results in the subsequent period.

Conclusion

Thus, women experience several accumulated disadvantages. They face not only gender discrimination of various degrees but also suffer the most from sexual harassment, atrocities and crimes. All these factors, coupled with the low female literacy rate, make the life of women miserable. At present, there is an increasing awareness of the need to empower women in order to raise their status. It is strongly believed that providing education to women who have been denied opportunities in this area until now would bring about the desired changes.

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