



**A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA:
ANCIENT TO MODERN**

Manohar Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Saltora Netaji Centenary College
Village +P.O. + P.S.- Saltora

Corresponding Author- Manohar Kumar

Email: mnkmar@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Man and woman are designed to be companions on the journey through life. A woman is the fundamental unit of society. With their unrivalled attribute of peacefulness in mind, they are the ideal homemaker. Only the efforts of women can build the foundational elements of a perfect society. The secret to sustainable development lies with the women. Our constitution provides men and women equal rights. Women have made contributions in every sector, including politics, business, education, and employment. In order to attain empowerment and to live in society with dignity, several laws have been put into effect to protect their rights to liberty, equality, and justice. The woman class still struggles to achieve equality in the socioeconomic framework, despite its reawakening. The patriarchal mentality is not inclined to provide women all of these liberties and privileges. Women are shackled everywhere even if they pretend to be free. Daily headlines include rape, violence, molestation, exploitation, and persecution. This paper looks at how women have been treated throughout history in India. It also examines the breach between women's emancipation and contemporary social trends.

Keywords: *women, society, status, education, empowerment.*

Objectives of the study: The status of women throughout history, from Vedic times to the present, shall be the main topic of this essay. The study's main objective is to present arguments in support of the empowerment of Indian women by examining earlier and more recent eras in India to identify the fundamental underlying causes that exist in our society to improve the dignity and honour of the Indian women community and to identify some corrective measures to deal with the issue.

Methodology: The present study is basically a fact-finding study which is based on the secondary sources. Various books, journals, newspapers have been taken as the secondary sources of knowledge and information for analysis and interpretation. Different constitutional points related to the study have been studied..

Women in ancient times:

Women had important positions throughout the Vedic period. They had the

same status and entitlements as their male counterparts. Society was liberal and sanctioned equal rights and freedoms for women, allowing a woman to accomplish everything a male could do. Women are praised in the Mahabharata as the "light of the house, mother of the cosmos." The philosophical notion of 'shakti,' the feminine principle of energy, took the form of worshipping goddesses who were depicted as the womanly personification of significant characteristics and powers. Female power represents various forces such as goddess *Kali* (destructive energy), *Durga* (strength of power and protection), *Laxmi* (fortune), *Saraswati* (learning and creativity), and to show respect for female divine, the form is usually addressed first, just as *Radha- Krishna*, *Sita-Ram*, *Uma-Mahesh*, and *Laxmi-Narayan*.

The birth of a girl child is lauded in Vedic literature with the words, "A girl should be brought up and taught with considerable effort and care." Many seers or sages, such as *Lopa*, *Apala*, *Biswabara*,

Gargi, Maitreyi, and others scripted Veda Stottros. They could participate in the holy thread ritual *Upanayana* (a sacrament to pursue Vedic studies that is still reserved for men today). The '*Brahmabhadina*,' were extremely brilliant and knowledgeable. They were allowed to read the Vedas. A co-ed educational system appears to have existed. *Kshatriya* females were taught martial arts and given weapons training before going to combat with their husbands.

In Vedic age, there were various sorts of marriage ceremonies (such as *Daiva*, *Prajapatya*, *Kanya*, and so on), the most important of which was the '*Sayambara*,' where the girls had the freedom to pick her spouse from among the suitable bachelors invited to her house for the occasion. The girls' became Grihini and Ardhangini (better half) when they got married. They formed a *Greeha* in which she was regarded *Samrajni* and had an equal share in religious procedures. They were permitted to divorce or remarry if her husband passed away. They could have spent the rest of their lives as a *Sannyasini* if they so desired. Every sacred ceremony and ritual was carried out with the assistance of women. The man could not conduct any ritual with perfection without the assistance of his wife. "Among the many societies that can be found in the world, we have seen that some of the most venerating regard for women has been found in Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of women, and has retained the greatest respect within its tradition." (*Stephen Knap, Women in Vedic Culture*). Women continued to enjoy the same freedom in internal house-hold activities during the later-Vedic era until the 6th century B.C., but societal limits were put on them. "Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there

was no restrictions upon her remarriage." (*Will Durant - Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage*).

During the post-Vedic and Epic periods, it steadily changed and began to lose some of its privileges to a significant extent. Women's respected standing in the household and society began to shift dramatically. Rishi Gautama limited the scope of a wife's religious activity. He says "Let her not violate her duty towards her husband and let her restrain her tongue, eyes and actions," though he was liberal about widow re-marriage, right to property for women and some other fields of life. After him, Baudhayana recommended that a widow live an austere life for one year before marrying again. Apastamba, created rules to further restrict women's rights. He opposed widow remarriages, and Bashishtha imposed other limitations, such as child marriage. Later, in his Manusmriti, Manu, who codified Indian laws, stated, 'where women are revered, the Gods delight, where they are not honored, all holy ceremonies prove futile, the home must entirely die.' On the contrary, He said, "She is under control by her father in her childhood, by husband in youth, and by son in older age." Manu declared that a man should enjoy the supremacy over his wife. Women were not granted right to study Vedas. Child marriage, polygamy, Sati custom began to emerge in the society. Still "Women were held in higher respect in India than in other ancient countries, and the epics and old literature of India assign a higher position to them than the epics and literature of ancient Greece. Hindu women enjoyed some rights of property from the Vedic Age, took a share in social and religious rites, and were sometimes distinguished by their learning. The absolute seclusion of women in India was unknown in ancient times." (*R.C. Dutt - The Civilization of India.*)

Women in medieval period:

Following the Muslim conquest of India during the mediaeval period, a rule with a new dimension, mentality, and culture began to develop. As a result, women's conditions deteriorated. With the

start of the sultanate's growth, the country entered a socioeconomic crisis, which weakened the position of women historically. The Muslim conquest of India changed the course of Indian history. It is said that the major reasons of such degradation were the invasion of foreign invaders and the Brahminical iron rules. as 'caste law dominated the entire social life, *Mitakshara* law for the entire country and the *Daya Bhaga* in Bengal, reduced women to the status of slaves. Widow Remarriage was now disallowed. Women could not inherit property. Girls were treated more as burdens or liabilities than as assets.' (Rao, C.N.Shankar, *Sociology of Indian Society*). There were several issues with current society traditions and practises. This rule exacerbated the situation. Child marriage, widow remarriage prohibition, Purdah system (women under the veil), Sati practise (stepping into the pyre of fire beside the departed husband), and Devdasi custom (girls' commitment and devotion to the temple of God) had become visible in the society. In compared to Hindus, Muslim women were likewise denied rights and benefits. Muslim women did not get equal position in the society. They were not authorised to pursue an education and were not permitted to engage in public life or cultural activities. (Rao, C. N. Shankar, *Sociology of Indian Society*).

Status of women in colonial rule:

During this time, there have been some notable improvements in the process of women's emancipation. Many attempts were made to establish various possibilities for the women's community to become a part of the main current of society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Dadabhai Nauraji, Jyotiba Phule, G.K. Gokle, Mahatma Gandhi, and other social reformers stepped up to break the tie of the class of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against the cruel Sati custom, and with the support of the British government, succeeded in banning it by imposing the rule of Prevention of Sati System in the society. He also spoke out against child marriage, the parda system, and the ability of women to inherit. Widow

Remarriage was advocated by Vidyasagar, and the colonial authorities approved the measure. By establishing several schools for the girls to receive education, he devoted himself to the cause of the improvement of the female class. Swami Vivekananda fought for the equality, liberty, and empowerment of women. Other reformers also improved the status of women by emancipating them and releasing them from social prejudice, repression, and exploitation. In public, Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to come out of their houses. It was the beginning of the end for the segregationist attitude toward women.

During colonial rule various initiatives were taken up by the British power to enlighten the women of India by setting up schools for girls. The Hunter Commission of 1882 stressed upon the female education. Christian Missionaries and Indian social reformers set up many schools for the girls. In the twentieth century, various organisations emerged to develop the thoughts of women's rights in different fields like economy, politics, education etc. 'These organisations came forward for women and raised the voice for women education. They also demanded for abolition of social evils, Hindu law reforms moral and material progress of women equality of rights and social opportunities.' (Ahuja, Ram (1993) *Indian Social System*, Rawat Publication, New Delhi.)

Independent India and the women empowerment:

After independence, the constitution of India guarantees the rights of women in every field of life. Being the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the constitution Dr. B. R. Ambedkar legalized the women's rights in regard to social, economic and political justice, freedom, and equality. Many provisions were included in the constitution to protect the rights of women. It established the equality between men and women in relation to any legal matters.

Women in present context:

Indian Constitution ensures that women have vital rights such as equality and freedom. Women are now

participating in various activities towards the process of progress of the nation. Nowadays the women have taken on leadership roles and have become active participants in many aspects of life. They are interested in sociopolitical concerns, administrative matters, cultural needs, educational institutions, employment sectors, professional positions, economic activities, literary domains, sports facilities, and so on and contributing significant role in every field. Many laws and acts such as Domestic violence including all forms of discriminations Act (2005), Dowry prohibition Act (1961), The Family Courts Act, (1984), The Maternity benefit Act (1961), Immoral traffic (Prevention) Act (1956), Suppression of prostitution (1949), The National Commission for Women Act (1990), The Right to property Act etc. are enforced to protect the interest of the women. However, women still have a long way to go before they are truly empowered, especially rural women.

Women and empowerment:

The problem for the progress of women is still in chains. Despite all development and all legal assistance, rights, and facilities, women are still in misery, subject to various socioeconomic restraints in rural and urban areas alike, owing to financial independence, social conventions, a lack of quality education, and a feminine mindset. They are becoming victims of mental and physical torment, as well as sexual harassment. Rape has recently been a hot button issue. According to a survey undertaken by WHO and the Indian National Bureau, the incidence of rape crimes in India is on the rise. Every time, they fall victim to so-called society-bound regulations, such as the dowry system. Sometimes it becomes the cause for domestic violence. Child marriage, female infanticide, domestic abuse, female child abortion, and the lower female literacy rate all pose threats to the empowerment of women. The problem is made worse by rape, sexual harassment, and unethical trafficking. Girls are not often permitted to travel alone or pursue higher education. The treatment of widows differs from that of

married people. They are not permitted to take part in many religious ceremonies or family gatherings. It is generally forbidden for women to serve as priests in any temple. In rural places in particular, the woman is blamed when a young husband passes away too soon. By being accused of being a *witch* and being the victim of the society's blind superstitious beliefs, the women become the target of murder or excommunication. It is difficult to comprehend that such wicked traditions are still prevalent in our culture.

Conclusion:

From the discussion above, it is clear that Indian women passed through the ages with great honour but yet they are subjected to a number of atrocities, such as domestic and societal violence, which constitute barriers to their overall growth. Even if there are no legal or constitutional restrictions on equality, they nevertheless cannot enjoy all of the same rights as men. One issue is that the women believe that their true territory is contained within four walls. Instead, they demand peace, education, self-reliance, decent care, and a safe environment. The patriarchal framework of the home, society, and state continues to exert significant control over women. Women are unable to comprehend the true nature of the patriarchal rule that permeates our culture. Women's status will stay unchanged for the foreseeable future unless and until society changes its patriarchal mentality toward them.

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