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WOMEN AND SOCIAL EVILS IN MEDIEVAL KARNATAKA - A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The progress or regress of any society has a direct relation with the status of women in that society. Historical data on socio-cultural scenario of India portray pictures where women had prominent role and sometimes negligible and curtailed the freedom in society. In the history of Indian civilization, women dominated the social scene for a long period and were the virtual head of the families when men were busy with their nomadic life and hunting pursuits. During Rig Vedic period, women were entrusted with full religious rights and educational opportunities for the development of their personality.¹ They played important role in family matters, took crucial decisions of life and were free to choose their own life partner. The ancient system of 'Swayamvar' mentioned in the holy scripts and epics is a testimony to this. Child marriage as a socio-cultural menace was not found during Vedic period. Woman was dignified and was given due importance in the society in ancient India. In short, they not only enjoyed the equal status with the men in that period but also had more prestigious position at times than the men had.



KEYWORDS: status of women , religious rights and educational opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

However, women started to lose their importance as well as the position and their status began to deteriorate in the later Vedic period. Though few women enjoyed educational rights and acquired fame for learning, their social status in general was not the same as that in the Rig Vedic period. Social laws gradually curtailed down the freedom of women and undermined them in family matters as well as political, social and economic matters of the society. Polygamy was practiced on large and child marriage came into vogue. The Aitareya Brahmana, daughter has been described as a source of misery for parents, the Atharva Veda also gives a picture of deplorable condition of women, for example the widow has to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse in the funeral pyre in later stage this became the Satidaha custom in society. During the period of Smritis, a similar status of women is found equal to the sudras and they were deprived the right to study the Vedas, chant Vedic mantras and perform Vedic rites like their male counterparts. Marriage and domestic life became the primary and compulsory duty of a woman and they were restricted to lead their life in the four walls of parent's and husband's home had to work like machine. Traditional belief in law-maker Manu's oft-quoted statement that women are not worthy of freedom, strengthens this expectation. However,

inscriptions, literary sources and sculptures of the period give an astonishingly different picture of the status of women in Karnataka in medieval times.²

SOCIAL EVILS AND WOMEN OF MEDIAEVAL KARNATAKA.

Since early times, the queens of Karnataka patronized art and architecture, Vijayabhattacharika the daughter-in-law of Pulikesi-II was a well-known poetess³. The tradition continued in Rashtrakuta and Western Chalukyan periods. Besides, women held important positions in administration. Northern India did not witness any women as administrators of provinces or kingdoms during this period.⁴ In contrast, Karnataka had women who administered villages, towns, divisions, provinces and headed social and religious institutions.

But the picture of social position of women in Karnataka did not differ much from that of their north Indian counterparts. They were subjected to many inhuman practices like Prostitution, Sati, Devadasi, Bondmaids, Strict widowhood etc.

WOMEN AND MARRIAGE.

Marriage was compulsory for all girls except for those who opted to follow asceticism. Mm. Kane observes that, the rule for Brahmin girls to be married between 8 and 10 years became general, from about the sixth or seventh century and continued till the modern times.⁵ Works like Yasastilaka and the Nitivakyamrita, clearly stated that a twelve-year-old maiden and a boy of sixteen are fit for marital relations.⁶

Polygamy was permitted to all who could afford and it was popular among Kshatriyas for political reasons. The king's favorite queens took pride in having titles like 'Suppressor of co-wife's ego' (savati gandhavarane or savati madabhanjane).⁷ Sovaladevi was so beautiful and dominating that the co-wives had no hesitation in kissing her pretty lotus-like feet.⁸ According to the Manasollasa, the king should marry a Kshatriya girl of noble birth for a chief queen, though he is permitted to have Vaisya and Sudra wives only for pleasure.⁹

Women had enough freedom in deciding to marry or not to marry, and whom to marry. There are examples of Bontadevi who remained single for life and Goggavve married at her will, another woman Guddavve who stayed in Kalyana for several years as a devotee of Siva (Sivasarane) and later returned to her village, got married and settled down.¹⁰ These instances clearly indicate that they had attained the usual age of marriage. This was due to the liberalizing influence of the Virasaiva movement.

PROSTITUTION/COURTESAN.

Contemporary evidences of the period give vivid descriptions that courtesans or vesyavarnana had become an essential part and some refer to them as varangane or ganike, sule (harlot), panyangane (public woman) and dancing girl (patra) who broadly came under this class. They were recognized, tolerated and at times held a respectable place in society. According to the Parsvanatha Purana, courtesans formed an essential part of the royal court (asthana).¹¹ King Amoghavarsha is described as having a thousand courtesans in his palace.¹² The Hoysala king Narasimha had three hundred eighty-four concubines.¹³ Manasollasa informs that the ganikas along with the women of the royal family, dancers, pandits and feudatories had to attend the king's assembly on special occasions. The public women (panya-yoshitah) were invited along with the ladies of the harem and the nobles to attend sports and amusements.¹⁴ Dharmamrita and the Somesvarasataka, mention that ganikas formed an essential part of the royal entourage.¹⁵ The royal celebrations on festive occasions were preceded Music and dance by courtesans.¹⁶

Classics of the time give eloquent description of the courtesans' quarters. They lived in beautifully decorated mansions; they dressed and put on ornaments in the most elegant manner and used perfumes. They had soft beds, decorated bedsteads, comfortable chairs, swings, large mirrors, unguents, fans, pan and drinks. Some of them were quiet rich and had musical instruments to entertain.¹⁷

DEVADASI SYSTEM.

Dedicating girls to temples was an ancient practice and by the tenth century, it had become well established and widespread. According to the Agni Purana, a man acquires fortune and attains heaven by dedicating female slaves, servants, ornaments, cows, lands to a deity.¹⁸ Marco Polo had observed that in the southern region many young girls were consecrated to gods and goddesses.¹⁹ Prof. Kundangar holds that the devadasi (servant of God) system originated because the learned and the noble who were concerned with the duties of the temple could not attend to menial work like cleansing, sweeping, and washing which was assigned to temple girls. An inscription mentions that one Vambiyakka, an admirer of Harihara's poetry, became a *devadasi* at the temple of Pampapati on her own free will ²⁰, which shows that the system was acceptable for some enlightened women as well. Temple grants usually included expenses incurred on residence and maintenance of the temple girls.

BONDMAIDS.

All menial tasks like sweeping and cleansing in temples and private households were undertaken by the bondmaids whose position was not high in society.²¹ The saint-poet Basavesvara exclaims that it is better to be a tottu (bondmaid) in a devotee's house than a queen in a palace, because the former would have an opportunity to serve God by doing petty service for him.²² Works on Basavesvara show that he tried to better their lot and that of their children by declaring that after initiation into Virasaivism, the latter were to be considered holy and be duly honoured.²³

SATI SYSTEM/SAHAGAMANA.

Sati system or sahagamana was prevalent among a certain upper class of women, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honor to die on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Ibn Batuta observed that sati was considered praiseworthy by the Hindus, without however being obligatory.²⁴ The Agni Purana declares that the woman who commits sahagamana attains heaven.²⁵ However, Medhatithi declares that the practice of sati was nothing but suicide and as such was not permissible according to sastras.²⁶ In an age of such divergent views, the women of Karnataka followed a middle path. They were not coerced to undergo such a ghastly death; some, on their own volition, immolated themselves. The majority of women did not accompany their dead husbands to the other world. Some of them are mentioned to have erected memorials to their deceased husbands [123].²⁷ Mahasati stones (masti-kallu) were erected in memory of the brave women who committed sati, and are periodically worshipped. The number of such stones are few, indicating that a small percentage of women became mahasatis. There was always an option for a widow to lead an austere life like a nun. There are no instances of remarriage of widows.

LIFE OF WIDOW.

Alberuni states that Indian women preferred self-immolation by sati to remaining widows and suffering ill-treatment throughout life.²⁸ Ibn Batuta also states that the plight of widows was miserable.²⁹ A widow was considered as an inauspicious person and had to lead the life of an ascetic. She was forbidden to wear ornaments and colorful clothes, apply unguents, decorate hair, and chew pan (tambula), as is seen from descriptions in inscriptions and literature.

Altekar has proved that the tonsure of widows was not practiced during the Rashtrakuta times,³⁰ so was the case in the following age. The Mitakshara Samhita, a contemporary commentary on the Yajnavalkya Smriti, quotes a text of Manu (not found in the extant book) to the effect that tonsure should be restricted to those who kill the cow and violate the vow of abstinence (brahmacharya). However, learned men, the king and women should be exempted from tonsure. Besides the Mitakshara, Apararka's commentary is also silent about the tonsure of widows and Kane opines that the practice came into vogue gradually among higher castes.³¹

Jaina women widowed early could undergo study. Nayasena tells about Narayanadatta, a friend of the queen Prabhavati, who being widowed early had read the Tarkasastra and was known as a pandita.³²

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