



## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.2331(UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 7 | ISSUE - 2 | NOVEMBER - 2017



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### SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF WOMAN IN ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

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#### ABSTRACT:

*Study of ancient Indian society is incomplete without racing history of the status and position of woman according to A.S. Altekar, "One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilization and to appreciate its excellence and to realize it cannot study the history of the position status of women in it". As we study the educational opportunities given to women would show that the predominantly patriarchal character of ancient Indian society did not deny them the right to education. The freedom they enjoyed and their participation in public life demonstrate the sense of justice and fair play developed in a community.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ancient Indian society , spirit of civilization.*

#### INTRODUCTION :

The study of laws of marriages and customs help us to evaluate the extent husband give value and respect to his partner. The cooperation of the wife is necessary for the Happiness and success of the family.

The rules about sex morality would not only provide us with a better insight into the ethical tone of society prevailing at that time but also to ascertain how far men were prepared to be themselves judge by the standard they had set for women.

Freedom to choose their partners in life and the management of their household help us to recognize their propriety rights indicates men capacity to control natural love.

Most authorities have always regarded women as a minor in terms of the law. As a girl, she was under the supervision of her parents, as an adult, of her husband and as widow, of her sons. Her freedom was also circumscribed which is quite evident from the declaration of Manu that, "by a girl by a young woman, or even by an aged one nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. There was gradual deterioration in her status and position There was greater erosion in her status and position in the medieval, modern period, which prompted Swami Vivekananda to make this following forceful observation, "That country and that nation, which do not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in future. The principal reason why your races so much degraded is that you have no respect for these living images of Sakti. If you do not raise the women who are the living embodiments of the divine mother, don't think you have any other way raise. Thus, the study of the history of the status and position is both interesting and helpful. This paper mainly focuses on the status and position of woman in ancient Indian society.

The status of women in primitive communities was barbaric as women had always been considered subordinate to men. According to Altekar in early uncivilized societies, the communities "had not yet emerged from barbarism, and there hardly existed any checks on the tyranny of men over women". So,

he expressed deep satisfaction over the fact that the position which women occupied in the Hindu Society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been. According to some anthropologist, early societies were sexually egalitarian, having relations of reciprocity rather than subordination.

### RIG VEDIC PERIOD

In Rig-Veda, woman held a position of honour as her participation was found to be necessary in the production process. In the Rig Veda, the husband and wife are called the dampati indicative of an egalitarian society in which relationships between these sexes were based on reciprocity and autonomy in their respective spheres of activity.

They took equal part in sacrificial rites. Press the Soma rinsed and mixed it with milk and offered adoration to gods. The woman frequently associated themselves with Vedanta (the earliest folk assembly) and participated in its deliberations. Instead of being a mute participant woman enjoyed an equal voice with men.

### PERIOD OF THE LATER SAMHITAS

From the study of the Satapatha Brahman, we learn that woman was regarded as an equal sharer with the man of the responsibility and duties at home. After her upanayana (Initial ceremony), she initiated her Vedic studies. Sita is described as offering Sandhya prayers that are ritual prayers that are offered with mantras in the morning, noon and evening. She was not an obstacle in the path of religion and her presence and cooperation were necessary for religious right and ceremonies. Unmarried one was not competent to offer ritual prayers and sacrifice. In fact, the duty of singing the mantras at the sacrificial ceremony was to be performed by the wife. She thus enjoyed high religious status and her presence was indispensable from the religious and spiritual point of view. The term patni regularly applied to the wife in the Brahmanas is indicative of her equal share in the social, religious side of the husband's life.

Now the woman started losing her relevance as the men were regularly employed as a priest offer important obligations in certain ceremonies instead of the wife. Upanayana now discouraged for girls whereas marriage was considered as a substitute for upanayana in case of girls.

According to Altekhar participation of women in productive activities such as agriculture, manufacture of cloth, bows, arrows, and other war materials was at the root of the freedom and better status of women in Vedic age and their position began to deteriorate, when the cheap or forced labour of the enslaved population or of the Sudras, become available to the Aryans and woman thus ceased to be productive members of the society. Thus, reducing the age of marriage for the woman from 16 or 17 to 8 or 9 and the practice of Sati are some of the instances of deterioration in their status.

Buddha attitude, though a born democrat, was in no way different from others. However, he granted women the right to the monastic life and found an order of nuns. According to the jataks of all the snares of the senses, which ignorance sets before the unwary, the most insidious, the most dangerous and the most attractive, is woman. When Ananda the favourite disciple of the Buddha asked the master why in public life women are not treated on par with men, the Buddha replied "Women, Ananda are hot-tempered; Women Ananda are jealous; women are envious Women Ananda are stupid. Another of Buddha saying is, "Crying is. The power of child anger is the power of women. The Buddha gave this as the reason for women not having any place in public assemblies for not carrying on and for earning their living by any profession.

### EDUCATION

Rig vedic women took part in the intellectual life of society. After the upanayana ceremony, Women specialize in Vedic theology and philosophy. Husband and wife took equal part in the sacrificial rites. The authorship of some of the Vedic hymns is ascribed to women in fact there are twenty such woman authors. In the Upanishadic period, there are references to women of high intellectual attainments. We learn from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad That once in the presence of Janak Yajnavalkya Discussed with learned

Brahmanas. Among his interlocutors was a learned woman, Gargi Vacaknavi, who possessed the highest spiritual knowledge. Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya, is represented as holding with her husband, philosophical discussion on the relationship of the Universal Soul (Parmatma) to the individual soul (jivatma). These instances demonstrated the highest of intellectual and spiritual entertainments to which a woman could rise.

There were two classes of women teachers. Brahnavadini (lifelong students are sacred texts) and sadyodvaha (those that prosecuted their studies till their marriage). Some gifted women took to teaching career and they were known as Upadhyayas. The Puranas also speak of women teachers and Bhagavata refers to two daughters of Dakshyana as expert in theology and philosophy. Later texts also refer to girls attending lectures of Scholars and mastering at least part of the Vedas. The Mahabharata has portrayed an exalted picture of womanhood in Draupadi who is called Pandita (learned) and fearlessly argues with her husband on all topics, not excluding political ones. Her spirited behaviour on many critical occasions shows a worldly woman at her best.

But after 300BC, the situation changed right to study denied for women. Upanayana ceremony denied for girls and lowering of marriageable age for girls prevented them from acquiring Vedic knowledge. They came to be held in low esteem and the education that was given to them was one that suited them to fulfil their duties in the household of husband. Manu declared "Let the husband employ his wife in the collection and expenditure of wealth, in keeping everything clean, in the fulfilment of religious duties in the preparation of his food and in looking after the household utensils. Higher education was not permissible for girls. They were given training in Fine Arts like music, dancing and painting from early times. Thus, around the beginning of the Christian era, the doors of Vedic knowledge were closed to women.

## MARRIAGE

It was a social and religious duty and necessity and it was obligatory for girls as there will be more pitfalls in the path of an unmarried woman.

## FORMS OF MARRIAGE

This myth is recognized. Eight forms of marriage; Brahma A marriage of a duly dowered girl to a man of the same class By ceremony; Davia involving the gift of the daughter to the sacrificial priest as a part of his fee; arsa Dear, the bridegroom paid a token bride price of a cow and a bull; prajapatya where there was no dowry and bride prices; asura or marriage by purchase; gandharva, Or the voluntary union of a maiden and her lover; rakasa, or marriage by capture; paisacha Or the one in which a man by steel seduces a girl who is sleeping, intoxicated or mentally unsound. The first four are approved by different authorities as permissible religious, an undissolvable. The last four are condemned and viewed as improper because the father of the girl had no voice in this election and secondly wealth was a consideration.

## AGE OF MARRIAGE

In the Vedic age, girls were normally married after puberty. This is confirmed by the internal evidence in the Rig Veda. Whereas according to Buddhist literature, girls of the cultured families were usually married at the age of sixteen. The Kayaks record the story of maiden, Patachara, eloping with her lover because of the opposition of her parents to that marriage. Most authorities agree on one point that is that the girl must be younger by three or more years than the husband. Kamasutra also favours the marriage of a girl younger to the boy at least by three years.

The polygamous practice was prevalent among the rich and ruling sections of the society they regarded it as a symbol of high status. In contrast, the poor took to the plurality of wives to get a son to preserve and continue the family. There are few cases of polyandry occurred in Mahabharata and some Puranas.

## THE RIGHT TO PROPERTY

The Hindu jurists have never made a sincere effort to secure absolute woman equality with her husband in the ownership of the property of the family. According to A.S. Altekar: Landed property was held in common by the village community or by large joint families. The joint ownership of the husband and the wife does practically remain in legal fiction.

In practice, the husband was the sole owner of the joint family property and no legal remedy was there for her to claim a share even under unjust circumstances.

The lawgivers have recognized the claims of wife to stridhana (Woman's special property) which consisted of the bride-price, gifts given by the parents, relatives and non-relatives, and gifts given by the husband even subsequent to the marriage.

In later Vedic literature, the right to inheritance is denied to women. After 300 BC, sisters having brothers denied a share in the patrimony. The smritis and Kautilya concur with this view though Sukra recommended a small share to the daughter in the patrimony when she had brothers. Even if Vishnu and Narmada recommended the same course, she should enjoy it till her marriage.

## DIVORCE

Marriage was considered indissoluble once the seven steps (saptapadi) had been taken together. It could not be annulled even in the absence of consummation, and therefore there was no place for divorce. Manu lays down that in case the wife had wilful intercourse with a man of lower caste, she should be torn apart by dogs. "But the adulteress who stayed with the men of higher caste was more fortunate; most authorities agree that she should be made to wear dirty clothes, sleep on the ground, eat only enough food barely to sustain life until her next menstruation thereafter she must be restored to her husband's bed and her old position in the household".

A careful examination of the Dharma sutra literature suggests that abandoning of wife/husband was permitted well before the beginning of the Christian era under certain well-defined circumstances. Baudhayana quotes an injunction, which is also found in Manusmriti that "a barren wife should be abandoned in the 10<sup>th</sup> year, one who bears daughter (only) in the 12<sup>th</sup> one whose children all die in the 15<sup>th</sup> year, but she who is quarrelsome without delay. Instances of divorce also occur in Buddhist literature. A woman named Kana was unwilling to return to her husband when he contracted a second marriage in her absence. At the intervention of the Buddha, she was adopted by a King, who in turn married her to a nobleman.

Kautilya is more liberal to women in matters of marriage, contract and divorce. A woman can remarry when her husband was abroad for a long time (ten months), if he suffered from incredible elements or was sterile, if he had become an outcast, if he was bad in character, or was guilty of high treason, or was dangerous to her life. A husband could divorce his wife the cause of her infertility or if she failed to give birth to sons. Divorce on the ground of ill-feeling was also possible by mutual consent but not of the will of one party alone. Thus, Kautilya places the husband and wife almost on equal footing in this respect.

Manu's injunctions regarding a wife are painful reading and clearly show how Orthodox Brahmanical view was deliberately aiming to regulate her to a position of inferiority.

Narada and Prasastra are overall more liberal and considerate towards women. They recommended that the wife could repudiate her husband if he is found to be impotent.

## PROSTITUTION

Ancient India, one class of more women who mixed freely with men and who are free from restraints, called as ganikas (courtesans) or Vesyas as prostitutes in the literature prostitute is depicted as a "beautiful accomplished and wealthy woman enjoying a position of fame and honour". The ganikas or the courtesans enjoyed the great social standing and they had nothing in common with such woman in modern industrial cities. They were particularly proficient in Fine Arts like music and dancing and were honoured by the people for their expertise.

Ancient in the society which attends a high state of culture fail to reflect the finer aspects of life in the treatment of windows a cultured society regarded videos as almost known entireties humiliated them and considered their very look as inauspicious. 1<sup>st</sup> reference of Sati pratha 510 A.D. during Gupta period in era inscription Madhya Pradesh. Thus, the Sati system was not there in Vedic times it started as 'Johar' to self-dignity and respect from foreign invaders. As foreign invasions increase, women conditions also deteriorate after killing soldiers their wives taken as hostages were sent to Yemen and other Arab countries as slaves. To same themselves from this humiliation they did Johar or become Sati by burning themselves on the pyre of their husband. The practice was confined to the ruling class. Few Brahmin families start following in 1000 A.D.

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