



STATUS OF INDIAN WOMAN THROUGH THE AGES

G. Sathiya Devi

Assistant Professor, M.R. Government Arts College, Mannargudi.

ABSTRACT :

One way to judge the state of a nation is to study the status of its women. In reality the status of women represents the standard of culture of any age. The Social status of the women of a country symbolises the social spirit of the age. ¹ However, to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. It is, therefore, necessary to trace this position in the historical perspective. In the course of Indian history from prehistoric to modern times there were distinct stage of the rise and fall in the status and role of women.



KEYWORDS : Social status , women represents , social spirit.

INTRODUCTION

The recorded evidence found in the same period and in the same province have expressed opposite views about the worth, nature and importance of women. According to one school, a woman is the best gift to God to man.² Sage Agastya Says, Women combine the fickleness of the lightning, the sharpness of a weapon and the swiftness of the eagle, Altekar says that to ascertain the position of women in Hindu Society, one should study their position of women in Hindu Society, One should study their position under different circumstances, like normal (in peace-time) and abnormal (in war time). During wars, the attitude of the society towards women was very unsympathetic, particularly if the women had the misfortune of falling into the hands of the enemies. They found it impossible to re-admitted into their family and society. A study of ancient literature reveals that even during peacetime the position of women was not very satisfactory. The status of women was considered to be equal to that of the Sutras and killing of women was also not considered as a disgraceful act. The information on the traditional status and role of women is derived from historical accounts and classic texts.³ For the purpose of depicting a brief history of the changing position and role of women in India five broad categories are considered:

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| (a) 2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C. | Vedic Period |
| (b) 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C. | Post – Vedic Period |
| (c) 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., | Smriti Period / Pre-Islamic Period |
| (d) 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D. | Islamic Period |
| (e) 1880 A.D. to 1947 A.D.
(Christian Period) | British / Period |
| (f) from 1947 A.D. onwards contemporary Period | |

The term 'role' is defined as a prescription for interpersonal behavior which is associated with particular socially recognized categories of persons. Such categories are referred to as position.⁴

The literature on Indian history abounds with contradictory and conflicting views on the status of women. It can properly be understood within the socio-cultural condition of the society. As Mazumdar has rightly said, "The status of women in India can be more understood in the Indian ethnology than in that of religion or Brahmanism.....⁵ The contradictory views about women's status is because of the emergence of the ideals of womanhood at different times. It appears that originally Hindu society had a flexible social structure. The concept of *ardhangini* suggests that there was equality between men and women; neither of the two being superior to the other ⁶ Later on, barbarous practices developed and women were relegated to a subordinate status. ⁷

Cormack asserts, "Traditional India has always accorded woman a high place and indeed equality. ⁸ Gorwney also observes that, "ideally, women were accepted as a living force in society, the embodiment of Shakti and symbol of purity, religiousness, spirituality and sacrifice. ⁹ In practice, however, they were subjected to suppression, many deprivations and were exploited by men. They were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a sub-ordinate status.

The Vedic Period

Altekar argues that the position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been. He further says that even before the Aryans came to India in about 2000 B.C., there is evidence to believe that Indian women shared a responsible position with men and played an important role in evolving a definite culture and tradition. Their status excelled that of the contemporary civilizations of ancient Greece; Rome and even early Christianity.¹⁰

There is almost a consensus of opinion among great scholars of classical literature that during the age of Vedas (2500-1500 B.C.) a woman's status was equivalent to that of man.

Position of the Daughter

The position of women in Vedic period can be judged by the way in which the birth of girl was received. None of the hymns of Rigveda Considered the birth of a daughter as inauspicious. The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere; here grant a boy",¹¹ The Rigveda praises the father of many daughters. Besides, it was recommended that "Matrika-puja" should take place first; the 'kumari puja' was to be performed at the end of all Vedic rituals.¹² Initiation of girls was common. Girls were educated like boys. Like their brothers, the girls wore the sacred thread (Upavita-Dharna) and used to pass through a period of Brahmacharya. Some of the high-class women were highly educated and they actively participated in intellectual and philosophical discussions. One comes across reference in lady sages like Gosha, Apala, Lopmudra, Indrani, Maitreyi and Gargi. Gargi was one of the greatest Vedic scholars of her time.

The educated girls had naturally an effective voice in the selection of their life partners. Pre-puberty marriages were unknown as there were swayamvara marriages where women were given the chance of selecting their partners. There were also many instances of love marriage. It can be concluded that both men and women had considerable freedom in selecting their partners their partners though parents often arranged a suitable match. ¹³

Unmarried daughter who stayed on in her father's house and got a share of his property. Married daughters could inherit their father's property only in the absence of brothers.¹⁴ The social or familial status of the daughter was fairly satisfactory in the Rigvedic period.

Position of the Wife

The Vedic Society also was patriarchal and male-dominated. Marriage, in fact, was a religious necessity for both men and women, but neither could reach heaven without being accompanied by his or her duly married spouse.¹⁵ Her position was an honored one in the family. Her social status was not only of loving wife but also of loving mother. The Dharmashastra has raised a chaste wife to the rank

of a Goddess. Out of love and veneration, she has been placed above the father and teacher. The Panchatantra mentions that the maintenance of a home is known by the culture of the wife, without her, a home is like a dreary forest. Rigveda accords high position to woman.

During this period asceticism was not of great prominence. Women had the right of free movement. Polygamy prevailed to some extent among the rich and royal families but ordinarily monogamy was the rule. The recognition of women's property with absolute right (Strichana) was slow.

In the post-Vedic period, women were known to take up teaching career. She was accepted as an Acharya. Some of the lady teachers were specialists in Theology and philosophy, the most obtruse and difficult subjects. Women as daughters, sisters, wives and mother had equally honoured places in the family, society and state alike. Thus, in all aspects they had equal rights with men and were their equal partners, friends, and helpers all through.

Position of the Widow

Though the Hindus of the Vedic period had a patriarchal society, the women in general did not suffer from disabilities which are characteristic of later periods. This is particularly true of widows. Widows of this age were permitted to remarry. This practice seems to have been accepted as normal from the Vedic period onwards.

The use of the word 'Parapurva', a woman who has had a second husband, proves that widows were re-married. The word *Didhisha* used in the Rigveda means the second husband of a woman. Atharva veda refers to a 'Punarbhā', that is, re-married widow. This shows that marriage of widows was not opposed. The custom of a widow marrying the brother of her deceased husband seemed to be common. Hence, the word 'Devara' which means a woman's brother-in-law, literally 'the second husband'.

The custom of widow remarriage as we understand the term today did not exist. But even then we have some references to widow remarriage with the younger brother or with the next kinsman of her deceased husband.

Sati system was not in practice. The right of 'Niyoga' shows how a widow was very liberally treated in those days. The legal status of the widow was the same as that of the wife. The widow, however, did not have the right to hold property. But then, even a married wife did not possess that right.

Post-Vedic Period

The Age of the Later Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads (c. 1500 B.C. to c.500 B.C). During this period there was a gradual decline in women's education. Girls were not allowed to go to the houses of the preceptor or centers of education but were taught only by near relatives like father, brother or the uncle.¹⁶ Therefore, only the girls of rich and cultured families received religious and other training. As a result, there appeared a tendency to curtail the religious rights and privileges of women in general.

According to the Gautama Samhita, a girl should be given in marriage before she attains puberty. He who neglects it, commits sin. Some declare that a girl should be given in marriage before she wears clothes.¹⁷ Vasistha Samhita also says the same thing. There was slight improvement with respect to her property right in her father's separate property. As these slokas make it clear, e.g.

Position of the Wife

There were gradual changes in the position of women in this period. Women were not allowed to participate in the performance of sacrificial ceremonies. They eventually began to lose touch with the Vedas and were pushed back to domestic duties. The study of Vedas became the monopoly of men. Women also ceased to attend public meetings. Having lost their importance as comrades of men in public activities, they came to be honoured, merely as mothers.

According to the Mitakshara law, in the matter of partition, a wife was allowed to get an equal share with her own son or sons when the division took place in the lifetime of her husband.

Though a woman had her own property called Stridhana, she was given only limited ownership. It seems the spirit of the Hindu law was not to allow women independence as regards the disposing of property, but had the right of possession and right of enjoyment.¹⁸ It can be said that the social status of the wife was not satisfactory. However, her status was improved in the sphere of proprietary right.

Position of the widow

The deterioration in the status of widows commenced from the epic period. Widowhood was considered both undesirable as well as inauspicious. The position of widows became more pitiable because the Sutras ordered a widow to avoid, for the duration of a year, the use of honey, meat, spirits and liquor as well as salt and to sleep on the ground. At the expiry of six months, she could, with the permission of her Guru, bear a son by her brother-in-law in case she had no son. The custom of Niyoga came into existence during this period. The Mahabharata says, a child widow can remarry, and her sons by the second marriage can offer oblations to the manes.¹⁹ The children by the second marriage of a widow were given a social as well as religious status. Child widows, therefore, married without fear of social ostracism. During this period Niyoga was preferred to widow re-marriage.

Widow marriage was prohibited. The practice of 'sati' was recommended by many of the later authorities and was well-established by the end of 6th Century A.D. The practice prevailed as early as Alexander's invasion about 325 B.C. Travellers like Strabo, Megasthenes, and Diodorus who accompanied Alexander, allude to this practice.

Unjust, archaic social customs like child marriage, 'Sati' and polygamy reduced the status of women to the level of mere goods or a chattel. They were regarded as 'nari-sudras'. The status of widows was still more inferior.

Smriti Period / Pre-Islamic Period

Altekar says that the period between 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D. was one of the progressive deterioration in the position of women. In the history of India, these dark and depressing days of total injustice, intolerance and inequality will remain as the darkest spot for ever. There were varied and many reasons for the deterioration or fall in the position of women. The only good thing that developed during this period was the recognition of certain proprietary rights for women.²⁰

In Manu Smriti we find two contradictory statements:

1. Where women are honored, there gods dwell
2. A woman is to be protected and sheltered all through her life by her male relatives – by the father during her childhood, the husband when a housewife and the son during her widowhood.²¹

The age of marriage was fixed at eight. The Upanayana ceremony of girls was completely discontinued. Only in Kshatriya families girls were married at the age of 14 or 15. Girls of rich families, however, still received education and a few of them distinguished themselves as poetesses and critics. The ignorance of most girls created a tendency among men to treat them lightly and pass cynical remarks about their weakness and worthlessness.²² Consequently, the practice of Sati or Jauhar became quite common and popular particularly in North India.²³

By 1200 A.D. the widow's right to inherit the share of her husband's property came to be recognised all over the country. The recognition of the right of inheritance was thus a blessing to the poor widows.

Islamic Period

In the Muslim period, i.e. in the 11th century onwards, the position of women further deteriorated. Women faced a number of hardships and cruelty due to evil practices like child marriages, the purdah system, sati, widowhood, prostitution and the Devadasi system. As Hate mentions, the advent of the Muslims arrested the progress of Hindu civilisation and an era of blind faith and perpetuation of old customs followed.²⁴

Several Muslim emperors discouraged 'sati' and adopted measures to prevent it as far as possible, but didn't succeed. This era led not only to the degeneration of women's physical, mental and social life, but her rights in educational, social, religious and economic fields were also lowered gradually.

From time to time, protestant movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Veerashaivism and Sikhism made sincere efforts to improve the status of women. In the 12th Century Verashaivism Permitted their women the right to divorce and re-marriage. The Bhakti movement also played an important role in raising the status of women by allowing them to seek spiritual solace independently. The little but powerful orthodox forces in the society erased the good effects brought about by these revolutions.

British Period (Christian Period)

In the latter half of the 18th Century, when the British came to India, women's status had dropped to the lowest level. It was the worst period in the history of the country because of child-marriages and sati system, etc. A.L. De'Souza says, 'women were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a subordinate status. The marriage ideals, power and authority exercise by the joint-family and caste system, combined with illiteracy, age-old traditions, seclusion within the four walls of the house, made it difficult for them to seek fuller personality development. They had scant personal identity and few rights.'²⁵

The reasons that are responsible for the deterioration of the status of women in India were (1) patriarchal joint family system, (2) polygamy and the sati system, (3) enforcement of widowhood, denial of the right to divorce and right to remarry after widowhood, (4) child marriage and the purdah system. Both child marriage and the purdah custom led to low literacy rate among women. Their entry to social, political, and religious functions was prohibited.²⁶

During this period one finds exceptional women like Chand Bibi, Jhansi Laxmibai, Kittur Rani Channamma and Rani Abbakka who made the remarkable impact in the field of administration.²⁷

The position of girls, women and widows improved during the British period. They introduced female education in India. But the system of child-marriage came in the way of the spread of female education. Hence in 1929 they passed the Child-Marriage Restraint Act. (this Act was also amended by the Acts VIII and XIX 1938, and in 1978). This Act not only prohibited the solemnisation of child-marriage but also raised the minimum age for marriage of girls to 14. Under Section 5 of the 1929 Act, the marriage of girls below 14 years and boys below 18 years of age was to be penalized. This 1929 child Marriage Restraint Act was also known as the Sarda Act.

The Hindu Women's Right of Separate Residence and Maintenance Act of 1946 enabled Hindu wives to claim maintenance even without having judicial separation under certain circumstances. Women acquired a new social status because of new social legislation called the Civil Indian Marriage Act III of 1872. Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1856. This Act was enacted to remove all the legal barriers to re-marriage of Hindu Widows.

To improve the economic condition of the women the Hindu women's Right to Property Act of 1937 was passed. Great personalities like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahmo Samaj, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, as the founder of Arya Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati, Keshub Chandra Sen, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekanand, Byramji Malabari, Pandita Ramabai and others tried to bring about unprecedented awakening, among women, who were down-trodden and had been oppressed for centuries.

During India's struggle for independence, thousands of women took part under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit and Kasturba Gandhi were some of the unique women personalities.

Contemporary Modern Period

Due to the Principles of democracy based on liberty, a woman's role began to change toward greater emancipation from man's domination. It was the 20th century that brought about dynamic

changes and new concepts which affected the status of women giving them fresh dignity and importance. The Constitution of the Indian Republic has incorporated in its objectives the principle of equality and has ushered the Indian womenfolk into a new era. It has also proclaimed the equality of men and women in all domains of life.²⁸ In Article 15 of the Constitution it is mentioned that, the state shall not discriminate against any citizen only on the ground of religion, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

Under Articles 325 and 326 women are only given voting rights but also the right to stand for elections. Article 39 provides 'equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex. The modern Indian legislations have stabilized the position of the woman by offering her the same rights, opportunities, and openings which men have.

The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 has statutorily recognized the right to property of the Hindu daughter. Dowry system, an abominable social evil, which makes young women's life miserable, has been curbed by the enactment of the Dowry prohibition Act of 1961.

Under the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 both husband and wife can claim divorce. Widow remarriage is legalized. Section 14 of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 has made her the absolute owner of the property. Hindu minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, recognizes her as the natural and legal guardian of her minor children after their father.

These legislations have promoted emancipation of women to a very large extent. Besides these legislations, under the provision of the Directive principles of state Policy each state has undertaken women's welfare programmes.

The United National by declaring 1975 as Women's year and the next decade as Women's Decade called upon its member states to develop new measures for emancipation of women and to ensure equal opportunities and equal respect and recognition in all fields. Their steps have also influenced the status of women in India.

In a nutshell, it can be said that education and women's participation in all fields of economy, science and culture will help them in achieving the real equality. The future will help women to emerge as socially and economically independent beings.

CONCLUSION

Women's role began to change towards greater emancipation from the domination of man with the advent of the British rule, democracy and liberalism all over the world in the eighteenth century.

With the efforts of a number of social reformers of the 19th century and the legislations passed after independence, women were brought out of their homes and helped in achieving equality with men.

These changes have caused profound influence on different dimensions of the family system and women's status.

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