

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: FROM ANCIENT PERIOD TO MODERN AGE

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Abstract

Since times immemorial women have been worshipped as deities and suppressed as insects at the same time. As time moved on, the status of women changed in all aspects of life. Upto the mediaeval era, women's status had significantly declined. She was viewed as being beneath man. The Muslim reign in India led to a decline in women's position; practises like pardha, sati, child marriage, prohibitions on widow marriage, and the prevalence of the joint family system have all contributed to the mistreatment of women. Though we are independent for since last seventy five years but still this male-dominated society has caught women to put her into the cage of social restrictions. Women participation in the struggle of India's independence is the other face of their courage and bravery. Remember Rani Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi who ushered a new age and bright future for women in India. Today role of woman in Indian society is not so much secondary as before. She has established a revolt against purdah system, sati, child marriage, female infanticide, dowry and permanent ban on the marriage of widows. Now they have started participating freely in the political, economic, social and cultural affairs of the nation. Free India has her woman cabinet ministers, ambassadors, scientists, leaders, engineers, pilots, police and armed forces officers and magistrates as well. In Manusmiriti it has been said, 'God reside where women are respected' while in modern age Napoleon Bonaparte told, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Women, have a decisive influence on the future direction of society because they raise and nurture the next generation. Now woman has proved to be superwoman and strong. She commands and deserves equal respect as men. The paper aims to distinguish between the ancient and contemporary status of women in India.

Keywords: immemorial, deities, contempt, cradle, nurture, superwoman

INTRODUCTION

"The greatest indicator of a society progression is the status of women that holds it up." Jawaharlal Nehru is credited with saying this about women. The status of women reflects a country's social, economic, and mental health. Women have been mentioned in our ancient books, such as the Vedas, for a long time. They have been given significant roles, such as the requirement that women be present for a yajna to be considered complete. They were worshiped as goddesses in the name of Durga, Parvati, Kali, and Sarasvati. In our scriptures, women have been seen as a representation of spirituality and regarded as world's ideal housewives. Nevertheless, women were denied equality and rights in ancient Indian civilization. They have been mistreated and treated unfairly compared to men. Early on, social ills including dowry, the sati-system, child marriage, and female infanticide were very common. Women were previously referred to as the housekeepers. The idea that women are expected to get married, take care of the home and their in-laws, and give up all of their aspirations in order to fulfil those of their husbands and children was widely held and spread among other people. Nobody acknowledged or even considered the hopes and aspirations of women. Everyone believed that men were in charge of the household and governed the world, thus no one was concerned with the advancement or improvement of women. They were prohibited from having ambition or pursuing a career. All of their goals were viewed as being ambiguous. Additionally, the women were excluded from education at the time because families believed that only males should have access to education and the opportunity to follow their aspirations. Women were often married off at a very young age against their will. Only a small number of families defied this custom and ensured that their daughters received the education they needed to lead fulfilling lives. These ladies, who were granted parental permission to pursue an education, ended up paving the way for other women to follow. They were the ones who inspired other women and encouraged them to pursue their goals as well. They effected a transition that improved the position of women in Indian society. The position of women also improved as time passed and attained greater standards. The growth of women knowledge and self-awareness over time has facilitated their advancement. Today women have more power. Women are also making progress and succeeding in every sector. Only when people change their constrictive attitudes and mindsets towards women will there be true female liberation.

WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

Women rishis existed during this time, and they were highly respected. Women were treated with respect in royal homes, and they even played a prominent role in decision-making and administrative tasks. They were educated on all topics and had a significant impact on politics. While the birth of a girl was not valued in the economically disadvantaged areas of the society, where priority was given to male children. Ancient India also had a lot of female foeticide. Most of the time, people want for a male child; as a result, practises of female infanticide and female foeticide have been used.

Position of women during Ancient Indus Valley civilization :-The reverence for mothers is emphasised by the worship of the mother goddess. Women were treated fairly and had complete independence. They were given equal honour in society as men.

Position of women in the Rig Vedic era :-Women continued to live in complete freedom and equality with men. In religious rituals, the role of the wife was elevated above that of the men in the home.

Later Vedic Period:-The rights to marry and education remain the same. Lowering of power in religious rituals was seen. She lost her dominant position in the household as religious ceremonies were increasingly administered by priests. It was during this time that rituals became more significant, and Brahmins gained more significance. During this time, both the rites' and the Brahmins' importance increased. Sons were still desired, but sati was not common. Women's status was lower than it was during the Rig Vedic era. Women were employed to make baskets, embroider, and dye clothes.

The Upanishads era:- During this time, it was common for men from higher castes to marry women from lower castes. The rules of Panini regarding Abhi vadana (salutation as a sign of respect to elderly people in the house) demonstrate how the presence of wives from lower castes in homes and their interactions with women from higher castes degraded the status of women and lowered the level of womanly culture in general.

Throughout the Sutras and Epics:-The bride is older, around 15 or 16. The complex procedures show that marriage was a spiritual tie rather than a legal agreement. The Grihya sutras provide specific guidelines for the right seasons for marriage and the requirements for the bride and the groom. The women were given permission to sing, dance, and have fun.

In general, Sati was not very common. Remarriage of a widow was permitted in specific situations.

Evidence from Epics: The Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana :-

The Puranas, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana together make up India's epic literature. A woman was viewed during this time as a live commodity that might be kept on the betting board, sold, or bought. The Pandavas' attempt for Droupathi is an example. But the Ramayana and the Mahabharata also present us with quite opposing viewpoints. According to Bhishma, women were valued at this time. The Mahabharata has mentions that show women used to advise males on matters of religion and society.

During Maurya Empire:-The crucial piece of written evidence is Arthashastra, written by Chandragupta Maurya's brahman prime minister Kautilya explains that women had ownership rights over the stridhan, which was a gift given to a lady by her parents at the time of her marriage and afterwards increased by her husband. Stridhan typically took the form of jewellery, which was popular among many cultural groups as a practical means to transport extra money but might also contain specific rights to real estate. The institution of marriage was both secular and sacred. A widow may get remarried. In doing so, they sacrificed whatever inheritance rights they could have had from their spouses who had passed away.

During Gupta Dynasty:- Due to the Gupta Empire's achievements in literature and the arts, it is regarded as the classical era of Indian civilization. The Kama Sutra, a book about the numerous methods to experience pleasure, which is a respectable objective for Hindu males in the householder, or second stage, of their life, contains some information about the roles for aristocratic women. Women were supposed to have an education, engage in sexual activity, and be devoted wives.

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL AGE

As time moved on, the status of women changed in all aspects of life. Though Women were denied the political right to participate in assemblies throughout the Vedic era. Additionally, child marriages started to occur. In spite of the fact that the Vedic ideals of equality and unity started to wane over time, women's standing continued to decline significantly up to the medieval era. She was viewed as being beneath man. Beginning with the Muslim era, norms such as pardha, sati, child marriage, prohibitions on widow marriage, and the prevalence of the joint family system have led to a decline in women's standing in Indian society.

WOMEN IN MODERN AGE

The current Indian society, driven by ideas of equality and liberty and affected by globalisation, appears to have accepted a more elevated place for women. The position of modern women in India has changed significantly. Indian women now have significantly more personal and social independence as well as more social, political, and legal rights. They can speak up passionately and courageously, which makes it easier for them to engage in

public affairs. It is indisputable that they are still exploited, subjected to prejudice, and constrained to the absurd idea of being domestic goddesses. In addition to ensuring women equality, the Indian Constitution also grants the State the power to implement positive discrimination in their favour in order to make up for the cumulative social, educational, and political disadvantages that women experience. Among the significant statutory laws to advance women rights and improve women's position are :-

- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (PREVENTION, PROHIBITION and REDRESSAL) Act, 2013
- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- The Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act-1856
- The Hindu Women Right to Property Act-1937
- The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961
- The Indecent Representation of Women Act-1987
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987
- The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013

The reform and upliftment programmes that led to a significant shift in women's status in modern India have had a big impact on women. The government has implemented a number of public programmes, reservations, and commissions to improve the status of women in India. The following are a few of the schemes:-

- Nirbhaya
- UJJWALA
- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao
- Nari Shakti Puraskar
- SWADHAR Greh
- Mahila Shakti Kendras (MSK)
- Mahila Police Volunteers
- Women Helpline Scheme
- One stop center scheme

In conclusion, women have been significantly contributing to Indian society today in a variety of fields, such as politics, education, business, social services, arts and culture, sports, aerospace, journalism and media, science and technology, literature, entertainment, philanthropy, spiritual and religious. Infact, the woman of "now" has totally changed. It is rightly said by an English writer, a woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.

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