

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Lakshmi G.R

Associate Professor
Department of History, Maharani's Arts College for Women, Mysore

Lingaraja

Associate Professor
Department of History, Maharani's Arts College for Women, Mysore

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a great revolution in the history of women. The evidence is everywhere; the voice of women is increasingly heard in Parliament, courts and in the streets. While women in the West had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights, like the right to vote, the Constitution of India gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately, women in this country are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and the oppressive tradition. Names like Kalpana Chawla: The Indian born, who fought her way up into NASA and was the first women in space, and Indira Gandhi: The Iron Woman of India was the Prime Minister of the Nation, Beauty Queens like Aishwarya Rai and Susmita Sen, and Mother Teresa are not representative of the condition of Indian women. Ancient Indian Women Scholars believe that in ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. However, some others hold contrasting views. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period Rigvedic verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband. Scriptures such as Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi.

Some kingdoms in the ancient India had traditions such as nagarvadhu ("bride of the city"). Women competed to win the coveted title of the nagarvadhu. Amrapali is the most famous example of a nagarvadhu. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C.), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (esp. Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights.

Although reformatory movements such as Jainism allowed women to be admitted to the religious order, by and large, the women in India faced confinement and restrictions. The practice of child marriages is believed to have started from around sixth century.

WOMEN IN THE VEDIC AND THE POST VEDIC PERIODS

The Indian cultural tradition begins with the Vedas. It is generally believed that the Vedic period is spread over from 300 BC to 600 B.C. Some general observations and broad generalization can only be made regarding the status of women during this vast period.

(i) Freedom Enjoyed By Women

The degree of freedom given to women to take part in public activities indicates the nature of the status enjoyed by women during Vedic period. Women never observed "purdah". They enjoyed freedom. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their male partner. They could educate themselves

Widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was however not permissible to them. Even men did not have the right to divorce their wives. Women were given complete freedom in family matters and were treated as “Ardhanginis”.

(ii) Equal Educational opportunities for women

Daughters were never ill-treated although male children were preferred to female children. They also received education like boys and went through the “Brahmaachary” discipline including the “Upanayana” ritual. Women studied the Vedic literature like men and some of them like Lopamudra, Ghosa and Sikata-Nivavari figure among the authors of the vedic hymns. Many girls in well-to-do families used to be given a fair amount of education down to about B.C 300.

(iii) Position of Women in Matters Relating To Marriage and Family Affairs

Marriage in the Vedic period was considered a social and religious duty and united the couple on an equal footing. Women had the right to remain spinsters throughout their life. Marriage was not forcibly imposed on them. Child marriages were unknown. Girls were given in marriage only after puberty that too after completing their education women had the right to select their life-partners.

Often there were also love marriages called “Gandharva vivaha”. Monogamy was the form of marriage during the Vedic days. Re-marriage of widows was allowed. These are a number of references to custom of “Niyoga” where a brother or the nearest relative of a deceased husband could marry the widow with the permission of the elders.

Niyoga was mostly practiced to obtain a child for continuing the family tradition. Rig-Veda recognized the right of a spinster to inherit her father's property. The practice of “Sati” is nowhere mentioned in the Rig-Veda. The practice of taking dowry was there but it was only symbolic. It had not emerged as a social evil.

In family matters, though the custom and tradition invested the husband with greater powers in the management of the household, still in many respects they were regarded as equal of their husbands. Both husband and wife were regarded as the joint heads of the household. The wife was however expected to be obedient to the husband helping him in the performance of his duties including the religious ones.

(iv) Economic Production and occupational Freedom

Vedic women had economic freedom. Some women were engaged in teaching work. Home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes were done at home. Women also helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits.

(v) Property Rights and Inheritance

Women rights were very much limited in inheriting property. A married daughter had no share in her father's property but each spinster was entitled to one-fourth share of patrimony received by her brothers. Women had control over gifts and property etc. received by a woman at the time of marriage but the bulk of the family property was under the control and management of the patriarch.

As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband's property. However, a forsaken wife was entitled to 1/3rd of her husband's wealth. A widow was expected to lead an ascetic life and had no share in her husband's property. Thus it could be generalized that the social situation was not in favour of women possessing property and yet protection was given to them as daughters and wives.

(vi) Role in the Religious Field

In the religious field, wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed jointly by the husband and the wife. Women even participated actively in religious discourses. There was no bar for women to read or study any of our sacred literature.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

Women could shine as debaters in public assemblies. They usually occupied a prominent place in social gatherings but they were denied entry, into the “Sabhas” because these places besides being used for taking political decisions were also used for gambling, drinking and such others purposes. Women’s participation in public meetings and debates, however, became less and less common in later Vedic period.

It may thus be concluded that in Vedic India, women did not enjoy an inferior status rather they occupied an honourable place. They had ample rights in the social and the religious fields and limited rights in the economic and the political fields. They were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men.

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE EPIC PERIOD

The women of Epic India enjoyed an honorable position at home. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata Epics had given a respectable place for women; women had been called the root of Dharma, prosperity and enjoyment in both the epics. We find vast references of the expression of courage, strong willpower and valour of women like Kaikeye, Sita, Rukmani, Satyabhama, Sabitri, Draupadi and others.

The Ramayana is a glorious illustration for the Hindu ideal womanhood, it glorifies the value of “Pativratty” and idealises womanhood as one of the most venerable aspects of our heritage. The Mahabharata also outlines the duties and the attitude of the wife to the husband.

WOMEN DURING THE PERIOD OF DHARMASHASTRAS AND PURANS

During the period of Dharmashastras and puranas the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The girls were deprived of formal education Daughters were regarded as second class citizens. Freedom of women was curtailed. Sons were given more weightage than daughters Girls were prevented from learning the Vedas and becoming Brahma charinis.

Manu, the law giver of Indian society gave the statement that women have to be under father during childhood, under her husband during youth and under her son during old age”. At no stage shall she deserve freedom. However he balanced this with the statement that a society in which the woman was not honoured would be condemned to damnation.

Due to the various restrictions imposed on the freedom of women some problems started creeping in. In the social fields, pre-puberty marriage came to be practiced, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of God for a woman, education was totally denied to woman, custom of ‘Sati’ became increasingly prevalent, purdah system came into vogue and practice of polygyny came to be tolerated.

In the economic field a woman was totally denied a share in her husband’s property by maintaining that a wife and a slave cannot own property. In the religious field, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers, practise penance and undertake pilgrimages.

FACTORS THAT CAUSED THE DEGRADATION OF WOMEN

Prabhati Mukharjee, the renounced sociologist has identified some reasons for the low status of women in post Vedic period. These reasons are imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society, rigid restrictions imposed by the caste system and the joint family system, lack of educational facilities for women, introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryan house hold and foreign invasions.

WOMEN IN THE BUDDHIST PERIOD

The status of women improved a little during the Buddhist period though there was no tremendous change. Some of the rigidities and restrictions imposed by the caste system were relaxed. Buddha preached equality and he tried to improve the cultural, educational and religious statuses of women. During the benevolent rule of the famous Buddhist kings such as Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Sri Harsha and others, women regained a part of their lost freedom and status due to the relatively broadminded Buddhist philosophy.

Women were not only confined to domestic work but also they could resort to an educational career if they so desired. In the religious field women came to occupy a distinctly superior place. Women were permitted to become "Sanyasis". Many women took a leading role in Buddhist monastic-life, women had their sangha called the Bhikshuni Sangha, which was guided by the same rules and regulations as these of the monks. The sangha opened to them avenues of cultural activities and social service and ample opportunities for public life. Their political and economic status however remained unchanged.

MEDIEVAL INDIAN WOMEN

Medieval India was not women's age it is supposed to be the 'dark age' for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in women's status. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India they brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "harems". In order to protect them Indian women started using 'Purdah', (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education.

Sati: The ritual of dying at the funeral pyre of the husband is known as "Sati" or "Sahagaman". According to some of the Hindu scriptures women dying at the funeral pyre of her husband go straight to heaven so it's good to practice this ritual. Initially it was not obligatory for the women but if she practiced such a custom she was highly respected by the society. Sati was considered to be the better option than living as a widow as the plight of widows in Hindu society was even worse. Some of the scriptures like 'Medhatiti' had different views it says that Sati is like committing suicide so one should avoid this.

Jauhar: It is also more or less similar to Sati but it is a mass suicide. Jauhar was prevalent in the Rajput societies. In this custom wives immolated themselves while their husband were still alive. When people of Rajput clan became sure that they were going to die at the hands of their enemy then all the women arrange a large pyre and set themselves afire, while their husband used to fight the last decisive battle known as "Shaka", with the enemy. Thus protecting the sanctity of the women and the whole clan.

Child Marriage: It was a norm in medieval India. Girls were married off at the age of 8-10. They were not allowed access to education and were treated as the material being. The plight of women can be imagined by one of the shloka of Tulsidas where he writes [r1] "Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadan ke adhikari". Meaning that animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating. Thus women were compared with animals and were married off at an early age. The child marriage along with it brought some more problems such as increased birth rate, poor health of women due to repeated child bearing and high mortality rate of women and children.

Restriction on Widow Remarriage: The condition of widows in medieval India was very bad. They were not treated as human beings and were subjected to a lot of restrictions. They were supposed to live pious life after their husband died and were not allowed entry in any celebration. Their presence in any good work was considered to be a bad omen. Sometimes heads of widows were also shaved down. They were not allowed to remarry. Any woman remarrying was looked down by the society. This cruelty on widows was one of the main reasons for the large number of women committing Sati. In medieval India living as a Hindu widow was a sort of a curse.

Purdah System: The veil or the 'Purdah' system was widely prevalent in medieval Indian society. It was used to protect the women folk from the eyes of foreign rulers who invaded India in medieval period. But this system curtailed the freedom of women.

Girl Education: The girls of medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given education related to household chores. But a famous Indian philosopher 'Vatsyayana' wrote that women were supposed to be perfect in sixty four arts which included cooking, spinning, grinding, knowledge of medicine, recitation and many more.

Though these evils were present in medieval Indian society but they were mainly confined to Hindu society. As compared to Hindu society other societies such as Buddhism, Jainism and Christians were a bit lenient. Women in those societies enjoyed far more freedom. They had easy access to education and were more liberal in their approach. According to these religions gender was not the issue in attaining salvation. Any person whether a man or a woman is entitled to get the grace of god. During the time of king Ashoka women took part in religious preaching. According to Hiuen Tsang, the famous traveler of that time, Rajyashri, the sister of Harshavardhana was a distinguished scholar of her time. Another such example is the daughter of king Ashoka, Sanghmitra. She along with her brother Mahendra went to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism.

The status of women in Southern India was better than the North India. While in Northern India there were not many women administrators, in Southern India we can find some names that made women of that time proud. Priyaketaladevi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya ruled three villages. Another women named Jakkiabbe used to rule seventy villages. In South India women had representation in each and every field. Domingo Paes, famous Portuguese traveler testifies to it. He has written in his account that in Vijaynagar kingdom women were present in each and every field. He says that women could wrestle, blow trumpet and handle sword with equal perfection. Nuniz, another famous traveler to the South also agrees to it and says that women were employed in writing accounts of expenses, recording the affairs of kingdom, which shows that they were educated. There is no evidence of any

public school in northern India but according to famous historian Ibn Batuta there were 13 schools for girls and 24 for boys in Honavar. There was one major evil present in South India of medieval time. It was the custom of Devadasis.

Devadasis: It was a custom prevalent in Southern India. In this system girls were dedicated to temples in the name of gods and goddesses. The girls were then onwards known as 'Devadasis' meaning servant of god. These Devadasis were supposed to live the life of celibacy. All the requirements of Devadasis were fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temple they used to spend their time in worship of god and by singing and dancing for the god. Some kings used to invite temple dancers to perform at their court for the pleasure of courtiers and thus some Devadasis converted to Rajadasis (palace dancers) prevalent in some tribes of South India like Yellamma cult. The plight of women in medieval India and at the starting of modern India can be summed up in the words of great poet Rabindranath Tagore: "O Lord Why have you not given woman the right to conquer her destiny? Why does she have to wait head bowed, By the roadside, Waiting with tired patience, Hoping for a miracle in the morrow?"

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AND REFORMS

Though women of India are not at par with her counterpart in Western world but she is struggling hard to make her mark in men's world. We can count on certain names from the British India where women put the example of extraordinary bravery which even men might not be able to show. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi was the one such woman. She was the one who put even British rulers to shame with her extraordinary feats in battle. She fought for her kingdom, which Dalhousie, British Governor General, had unlawfully annexed. She was in a true sense the leader of uprising of 1857. There are certain men who took the cause of women in India. There have been social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayananda Saraswati who have helped women gain their previous status in society.

RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY

Born on 22nd may 1772 he was the torchbearer of social reforms for the women. He was strictly against the evils prevalent in society in his time. He is the one who has done women a great favor by abolishing Sati lawfully. It was due to his efforts that Lord William Bentinck banned the custom of Sati in 1829. Though this law was not a great deterrent but it changed mindset of people to some extent. Ram Mohan Roy also did great work in the field of women education. He was against child marriage and favored widow remarriage. He himself married a widow thus setting the example for the whole society. Along with 'Dwarkanath Tagore' he founded "Brahmo Samaj" for the reform of Indian society and emancipation of women.

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was popularly known as Vidyasager, which means sea of knowledge. Testifying to his name he was truly the sea of knowledge. He was a pillar of social reform movement of Bengal in 19th century. He widely read ancient Hindu scriptures and came to know that the gender divide which was prevalent in Bengal was not encoded in our ancient texts instead it is the politics to keep women subordinate to men. He strongly supported women education in Bengal and went door to door to persuade people to send their girl child to school. He also did a lot in the field of widow remarriage. He opened many schools for girls.

MAHATMA JYOTIRAO PHULE

Born on April 11, 1827, Pune, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was a real philanthropist. He was the one to open first girl school in India. He is also credited with opening first home for widows of the upper caste and a home for newborn girl children so that they can be saved from female infanticide.

SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATI

He was the founder of Arya Samaj and gave a cry, "back to Vedas". He translated Vedas from Sanskrit to Hindi so that a common man can read it and understand that the Vedic Hindu scriptures gave utmost importance to women. He emphasized for the equal rights for women in every field. He tried to change the mindset of people with his Vedic teachings.

MAHATMA GANDHI

The social reformers of 19th century laid down the stage for the emancipation of women but it was Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi under whose influence these reforms reached masses[r10]. He was the one who liberated Indian women from the clutches of 'Purdah' and other social evils. He brought them from their confinement and asked them to participate in the struggle for independence. According to him women should be liberated from the slavery of kitchen only then their true potential could be realized. He said that responsibility of household is important for women but it should not be the only one. In fact she should come forward to share the responsibilities of nation.

When Gandhiji came to the stage of Indian struggle for independence then the average life span of Indian women was 27 years and only 2% women were educated this shows what a Herculean task it was to bring the women of India who was not getting her basic rights to fight for the cause of the nation. But it was due to his efforts that so many women like Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur came forward. He spread the message of equality of the gender to the masses and criticized the desire of Indian people to have male child instead of a female. Gandhiji was strictly against the child marriage and favored widow remarriage. He urged the youth to come forward and accept young widows as their life partner. He said that the girls are also capable of everything boys can do but the need of the time is to give them opportunities so that they can prove themselves. It was mainly due to his efforts that when India got independence 'right to vote' came naturally to Indian women whereas in other developed nations like England and America women got this right very late and that too after lot of protest.

INDEPENDENT INDIA

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favours to women. These can be found in three articles of the Constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or the equal protection of the laws. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women. Moreover, the government can pass special laws in favour of women. Article 16 guarantees that no citizen shall be discriminated against in matters of public employment on the grounds of

sex. Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the Constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A) (e) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

MODERN INDIAN WOMEN

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001, which is much below the world average of 990 females. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate.

THE MAIN PROBLEMS OF INDIAN WOMEN INCLUDES

- Malnutrition
- Poor Health
- Maternal Mortality
- Lack of education
- Mistreatment
Lack of power
- Marriage
- Dowry
Female infanticide/foeticide
- Divorce
- Crimes against women
- Sexual harassment
- Dowry
- Child marriage
- Female infanticides and sex selective abortions
- Domestic violence
- Trafficking

CONCLUSION

The informal sector includes jobs such as domestic servant, small trader, artisan, or field laborer on a family farm. Most of these jobs are unskilled and low paying and do not provide benefits to the worker. More importantly, however, cultural practices vary from region to region. Though it is a broad generalization, North India tends to be more patriarchal and feudal than South India. Women in northern India have more restrictions placed on their behavior, thereby restricting their access to work. Southern India tends to be more egalitarian, women have relatively more freedom, and women have a

more prominent presence in society. Cultural restrictions however are changing, and women are freer to participate in the formal economy, though the shortage of jobs throughout the country contributes to low female employment. But in the recent years, conditions of working women in India have improved considerably. More and more women find themselves in positions of respect and prestige, more and more workplaces are now populated with women who work on equal terms as men. Working is no longer an adjustment, a mere necessity; but a means to self worth and growth. At the end we can conclude that although the changes are occurring slowly but there is an advent of social reforms and strengthening of women in India in late 20th century and hence being at the beginning of 21st century we can hope for the bright future of women in India whereby they can claim to be really equal to the men in every field of life.

REFERENCES

1. Extensive excerpts from str Idharmapaddhati at <http://www.cse.iitk.ac.in/~amit/books/tryambakayajvan-1989-perfect-wife-stridharmapaddhati.html>
2. Mishra, R. C. (2006). Towards Gender Equality. Authorspress. ISBN 81-7273-306-2
<https://www.vedamsbooks.com/no43902.html>
3. Pruthi, Raj Kumar; Rameshwari Devi and Romila Pruthi (2001). Status and Position of Women: In Ancient, Medieval and Modern India. Vedam books. ISBN 81-7594078-6
4. <https://www.vedamsbooks.com/no21831.html>
5. "Vedic Women: Loving, Learned, Lucky!". <http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/aa031601c.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
6. "Info Change women: Background & Perspective". <http://www.infochangeindia.org/WomenIbp.jsp>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
7. "Women in History". National Resource Center for Women. <http://nrcw.nic.in/index2.asp?sublinkid=450>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
8. Jyotsana Kamat (2006-1). "Status of Women in Medieval Karnataka". <http://www.kamat.com/jyotsna/women.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
9. Vimla Dang (1998-06-19). "Feudal mindset still dogs women's struggle". The Tribune. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/50yrs/women.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
10. "The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987". <http://www.wcd.nic.in/commissionofsatiprevention.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
11. K. L. Kamat (2006-12-19). "The Yellamma Cult". <http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/people/yellamma/yellamma.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-25.
12. Jyotsna Kamat (2006-12-19). "Gandhi and Status of Women". <http://www.kamat.com/mmgandhi/gwomen.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.
13. Kalyani Menon-Sen, A. K. Shiva Kumar (2001). "Women in India: How Free? How Equal?". United Nations. <http://www.un.org.in/wii.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-24.