

Status of women in India: From Ancient to modern age

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Abstract

Since ages status of Indian women has been subjected to many changes. From equal status with men in ancient times, through degradation in medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, The Prime Minister, Speaker etc. Women are no longer lifeless, inanimate objects. They have struggled hard to establish an identity of their own. The women are in no way, today inferior to men. Women in contemporary India are doing the same what a male can do. The paper tries to delineate the status of women in India - from ancient to modern age. The purpose is to make the people aware about the strengths of women, whether in home or in office or in workplace.

Keywords: Status of women, Ancient age, modern age, Ancient Women, Women Education.

Introduction

Many historians claim that women enjoyed an equal status with men in ancient India. It is said that women were educated, had a say in family matters, took important decisions of life and were free to choose their own husbands. The ancient system of "Swayamvara" is mentioned in holy scriptures and also in many epics. A woman in ancient India was respected and was given due importance in the society. Child marriage was unheard of and many women were also famous sages like Gargi, Maitreyi,

The women observed high standard of morality. The wives were expected to follow the path adopted by her husband, even if it meant the path of death. Even after the death of her husband a widow did not remarry and led a very pure and chaste life. The women were permitted to have personal property in the form of jewelry and clothing. The Arthashastra permits women to have money up to 2000 silver panas. The amounts in excess of this limit were held by the husband as a trust on behalf of the wife. The property of women could be used by the husband only in case of dire necessity. He could also exercise check on his wife if she wanted only to give away her property. After the death of a woman the property passed to the daughters (not to the husband or the sons). When there were no sons, the widow inherited the property of the husband.

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, dharmasalas not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives.

The wife assisted the husband not only in his secular duties. The husband and wife together were supposed to keep the household fire burning so that the daily offering of the

angophora could be carried on. No religious rites and rituals could be performed without the wife. The women were to be well fed and cared for and provided with all possible luxuries according to the means of the husband. The wives were not to be beaten or maltreated for the God did not accept the sacrifice of a man who beats his wife.

Ancient Women and Education: There are some bright exceptions in this dismal picture. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. There were two types of scholarly women - the Brahnavadinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy.

Ancient Women in Politics: Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration. The Satavahana queen, "Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. So did Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. A little after the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra. In ancient India, women occupied a very important position with, in fact a superior position to, man. Valmiki's Ramayana teaches us that Ravana and his entire clan was wiped out because he abducted Sita. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. To instill such high ideals in humankind, Indian ancestors created a plethora of goddesses who enjoyed equal status with their husbands. The concept of Ardhanareeshwarar, where God is depicted as half-man and half-woman, is a concrete example to support this argument.

Social Activities

In addition to an important position in the family the women actively participated in the various social activities. This is

confirmed by the ancient Indian sculptures in which women was shown with their husbands in a number of religious and secular functions. Unlike, the medieval and modern times women were-encouraged to learn singing, dancing and other arts like painting and garland- making. Dancing was not merely the profession of the low-caste women and prostitutes, but ladies from respectable families also took keen interest in it. The Rig-Veda tells us that young men and unmarried girls mixed freely and we do not find any instances of unnecessary restrictions on the married women. In the Tamil literature also we get a number of references to show that girls of good class and marriageable age visited temples and took part in the festivals without guardians. In short we can say that though the freedom of the women was considerably restricted, it was not completely denied to them.

Women in medieval age

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. Though In the vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time, yet upto the medieval period, the status of women went down considerably. She was considered to be inferior to man. Decline in the status of women in Indian society begins with the Muslim rule in India: customs of pardha, sati, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage and prevalence of joint family system have been the factors responsible for the injustice meted out to women.

Women in modern India:

The position of women in modern India has changed considerably. Her position in modern India is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. Her sufferings from Sati, Child Marriage, Institution of temple prostitution do no longer exist. Today women have the right to receive education, inherit and own property and participate in public life. She has become economically independent. She can seek employment anywhere and remains a free individual. She enjoys the equal status with man in all. Several factors like women's education, reform movements, women's participation in politics and many social legislations are responsible for the changes in the day-to-day life of women in today's India.

But still, a reasonable percentage of females in India are unaware of their rights. In papers she is the strongest but in practice, she is the weakest. After independence the constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality before the law in all matters of life and a woman can go to the court if her rights are violated. Some of the important statutory legislations to improve the position of women are:

- 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

Even laws are passed protecting women from domestic violence and trafficking etc.

Prejudices against women are fast disappearing. In the present chaotic world, only women can handle the situation. The

education level of women must be upgraded. We can no longer afford to dismiss remarks coming for a woman as" Oh! She is just a women!"

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