

Socio Economic Status of Women in Ancient India: A Historical Overview

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Introduction:

Women play a key role in strengthening the dynamism of human civilization. According to Altekhar “one of the best way to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the positions and status of women in it”. Although the ancient Indian texts have focused on women’s visibility in this regard, historians while reconstructing the past, have created certain spaces for women that exist merely within parameters. The main purpose of this research paper is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in ancient India. The women were considered with respect and dignity in ancient Indian period. The royal women were given respect and they were rendered a significant contribution in the making of decisions and administrative functions. They were made aware in terms of all areas and played an important role in politics too. This study has made an attempt to assess women’s status and to highlight the structural framework of gender relations in ancient Indian civilization.

Methodology:

The research method is very important in any research activity. The selection of research method to be used in any research process is utmost important. The proposed study is conducted under the source method. The entire study is based on the secondary data such as different books, journals, magazines, internet and different research papers. Following the chronology of the ancient period in Indian history, the study has been confined to four distinct periods: the early Vedic period (1500 BC-1000 BC), the Epic or Later Vedic period (1000 BC-600 BC), the Jainism and Buddhism period (600 BC- 200 BC) and the age of Dharmasastras, Manusmriti(200 BC-647 AD).

Objectives:

This paper will discuss the socio economic status of women in ancient India. The main objectives of this paper is mentioned below:

1. To know the social status of women in ancient India.
2. To know the economic status of women in Ancient period.
3. To access the availability of education for women.
4. To know the role of women in every aspects of life in ancient Indian Period.

Status of women down the ages:

There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a great revolution in the history of women. The evidence is everywhere. Here we are going to discuss about the evolution of the status of women in ancient Indian history.

Women in Ancient India:

India is a multipurpose society where no generality could apply to the nation’s various regional, religious, social and economic groups. Nevertheless certain broad circumstances in which Indian women lives affect the way they participate in the economy. Every human society is invariably characterized by social differentiations. The gender based differentiation is one. Men had the role of earning and women had the role of reproduction of heirs and homemaking. However, being a patriarchal system, the women were expected to bear sons since the son performed the last rites and continued the lineage. Remarriage of widows was permitted under certain conditions. Female morality

maintained a high standard although the same degree of fidelity was not expected from the husband. In this age there was no practice of divorce. The Rig Veda states that the widow had the right to marry again with her husband's brother. Rig Veda recognised the right of inheritance of unmarried daughters on the property of her father but married daughters were exempted.

Gradually, religious ceremonies were increasingly conducted by the priests resulting in weakening of the women's eminent position in the household. Later, in the Age of the Upanishads, the 'anuloma' system of marriage, i.e., between the male of a higher caste and female of a lower caste prevailed during this period.

Pre-Vedic Period:

The recorded history of India began with the arrival of Aryans in the 15th Century B.C. When Vedic Era began, the patriarchal culture has eliminated the matriarchal culture. It could be considered the beginning of gender discrimination in India.

The historical period marked by Rigveda reveals the predominance of religious concern over the civil life. Vedic culture was widespread until the arrival of the Muslims in the 8th Century. The period that followed the Muslim invasion is considered the medieval history in India which also witnessed the predominance of patriarchal culture.

With regard to patriarchal ordering of the social life, Islamic era did not differ much from that of the Vedic era. What followed the Muslim era is the British Raj in the 18th Century. It was also predominantly patriarchal. Throughout the past centuries, the patriarchy and the patriarchal social organization prevailed – so too the gender discrimination. A survey of Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and Epics reveals the status of women and their struggle for power in ancient India.

The status of women during the pre-Vedic period is not clear. It is believed that pre-historic man who lived in the Paleolithic age was a nomad. Food gathering was the chief occupation. Culture and civilization are the attributes of Neolithic man who became a food producer leaving slowly the style of food gathering. Men began to settle down on river valleys. Indus valley civilization which was the first known civilization in India is said to have flourished in the 25th Century B.C.

During this civilization, historical evidence shows that the people worshipped natural forces and divine references were mostly feminine. Nature was often called mother. Mother goddess was the first worshipped deity of the people of Indus Valley civilization.

From these findings, we may conclude that Indus community was basically matriarchal. Family was headed by mothers. Mother had control over the children. The custom of monogamous marriages was of later origin and the role of a man as a father of the children of a woman was not recognized.

There are reasons to believe that in pre-historic India, gender discrimination was non-existent. Polyandry was common in matriarchal communities of pre-historic India. The role of father in child birth was not known and women were believed to be the masters of home commanding the respect of children and the youth. Many old civilizations of the world were matriarchal for the same reason. Pre-historic communities were not settled permanently at a site and were moving around in search of food which consumed most of their waking hours. Both men and women were engaged in food gathering which was the only economic activity.

Women in Vedic Literature:

Vedic period witnessed the historical development of human civilization from nomadic style to settled style. During the early Vedic era, there is evidence to show that woman was given some respect and opportunities in domestic life. She was considered the creator, protector, and educator of her children. Women were given opportunities to offer sacrifices along with their husbands.

A man could not become a spiritual whole unless he was accompanied by his wife. The gods were thought not to accept the materials offered by a bachelor. Sati did not exist in this period. Widowed mothers were protected by their sons. Rigveda the first Vedic script brings to light the culture and civilization of early invaders to India who were predominantly nomadic.

The society had not yet settled down with farming. They were mainly food gatherers. Society in the Rig-Vedic period was prominently pastoral and it did not produce surplus to allow any section to be completely subordinated or withdrawn from the process of production. Both the men and women were engaged in food gathering and partook equally the struggle for survival.

Each family was a single economic unit without any specialization or gender based division of labour. Both men and women could participate equally in all the political, economic and religious affairs, which were very simple in terms of organization and functioning. This perhaps explains the comparatively better situation of women in the Vedic period in terms of access to education, religious rights, freedom of movements etc.

Gradually a transition from matriarchal to patriarchal order of the society is seen. Vedic texts including Brahmanas and Upanishads prescribed the limits of her social, political and religious freedoms. Women were supposed to live the life as prescribed by these religious codes. Upanishads gave the foundation for the earliest Hindu culture and tradition that governed the lives of Indian women till the middle age.

Upanishads had an important role in framing a pretty stereotype of Indian woman. In Brhadarranyaka Upanishad, Yajnavalkya says that women should be honoured with ornaments, clothes and food by their husbands, brother-in-law and maternal relations. For a woman, her husband should be everything. Through devotion and love for him, she fulfills her duty and develops her highest personality. The noblest duty of a woman is the arduous task of motherhood.

Brahmanas and Upanishads were annexures to Vedas and reflect the life of later Vedic age. Brahmanas reflect a transitional development in the status of woman limiting her role in the social life except in the performance of religious sacrifices. Her social and political freedom was curtailed.

The lives of women began to be confined to the four walls of their household. We find passages in Aitereya Brahmana and Maitrayani Samhita which show that women were forbidden to go to the assemblies. Sati was known during Vedic period. Sati became popular during the later Vedic period where the widows either chose for themselves or were forced to jump into the pyre of their husbands so that they may not be spoiled afterward by others. Gradually it became an acceptable custom to safeguard the purity of the tribe. The birth of daughter, which was not a source of anxiety during the Vedic period, became a source of disaster for the father during the post-Vedic phase. Thus it was said that the birth of a son is bliss incarnate, while that of a daughter is root of family's misery.

Sutras are contemporary to the Upanishads. The Sutra literature developed during the period from 500 to 200 B.C. It has contributed very much in the formation of the traditional image of Indian woman. Dharma Sutra, an extension of the Grihya Sutras, states that marriage was solemnized before Agni which is represented as the 'supreme reality'.

'Woman's existence merged with that of a man through the performance of the couple to carry this supreme witness along with them and cherish it in their home with ardent devotion all through their lives; and at death the body was to be consumed by this sacred fire'.

We cannot ignore the contrasting image of womanhood presented in the same Vedic texts of ancient India. The double standard regarding the status of women is made clear when we read other texts in Vedic literature. Woman, according to Manu, should be protected and honoured at all stages of her life. Manu starts with the fundamental principle that women must be kept all day and night in control by the males of their families. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for living independently.

He says that the creator implanted in them carnal passions, love for ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct. Manu gives the circumstances under which a woman is likely to go astray. Drinking,

associating with immoral people, separation from her husband, roaming around, sleeping late and dwelling with othermen is the six causes of her ruin.

Manu further states that a vicious husband must be worshipped, but a bad wife may at any time be superseded by another wife. Even though the husband is of bad character seeking pleasure elsewhere he must be constantly worshipped as god by a faithful wife.

A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year; she, whose all children die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome, without delay. 'A wife, who, being superseded, in the anger departs from her husband's house, must either be instantly confined or cast off in the presence of the family'. ons to believe that both men and women had equal participation in the economic life.

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 polygene 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, practice penance and undertake pilgrimages.

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 buy 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.

Conclusion: In ancient India, women were given reorganization and significance and also constraints were also imposed upon them. The women belonging to upper castes and wealthy families rendered a significant contribution in improving the well being of the family and community. They were provided with educational opportunities; they were engaged in

teaching professionals and also developed their skills and abilities in carrying out the administrative and political functions. One of the major causes of decline in the number of girls was prevalence of the practices were regarded as criminal practices and measures and programs were formulated that would prevent them from taking place. Women experienced number of factors that imposed detrimental effects upon their well being. These included illiteracy, purdah system, forced child marriages, polygamy and sati. They were not permitted to make any decisions on their own and were dependent upon the male members of the family.

The status of women in ancient India experienced positive as well as negative effects. They were provided with opportunities as well as experienced discriminatory treatment. There was a connection between the status of women and their economic position. This in turn is dependent upon rights and opportunities for rendering an effective contribution in economic activities. Majority of the population of India was employed in agricultural sector. In addition, men and women were engaged in jobs such as weaving, craftsmanship, pottery making and so forth. Hence, women were normally married off at an early age, they were deprived of acquiring education, they were meant to implement the household responsibilities and take care of the need and requirements of the family members. Women usually remained within the house, as they primarily dedicated themselves towards the management of the households. Apart from these, they were engaged in manufacturing and production process to supplement family income.

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