
A Historical Review on the Role and Status of Women in India from Ancient Age to the Contemporary Age

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ABSTRACT

The role and status of women in India has evolved significantly from ancient to contemporary times, reflecting broader socio-culture and political changes within the country. In ancient India, women enjoyed considerable rights and social standing, often participating in religious and scholarly pursuits. However, with the advent of the medieval period, their status witnessed a conservative social structure, leading to restricted freedoms and diminished roles. The colonial era introduced a new wave of reform movements that began addressing gender inequality, laying the groundwork for the eventual upliftment of women's rights. Post-independence, India saw legislative reforms aimed at ensuring gender equality, with women increasingly participating in education, politics, and the workforce. Despite these advancements, contemporary Indian women still face challenges such as gender-based violence and socio-economic disparities. This historical review explores the transformation of women's status in India across different ages, examining how traditional values, colonial influence and modern politics have shaped their roles and rights.

Introduction

In the ancient age, specifically when there was a tribal structure of life, women took significant part in domestic life, be it hunting, cooking, agricultural work and on taking decisions. It needed to be

mentioned that during the primitive lives women were the central figure within a tribe and only they had the sole identity as mother and used to be at the centre of things. But as the days went by they started to become a passive figure, in the agricultural days when slaves were used in the fields, women's significant parts in the labour works decreased significantly and they were reduced to care takers of the households. Though, women enjoyed freedom and dignity in the Vedic ages but it ended in the medieval ages, when women were severely subdued by men. However in the modern age there were some developments in the women's rights but even in the contemporary age they struggle to find equality and justice.

In the religious scriptures we could find that women were created by God with a specific purpose, to aid men and balance society and human civilization. We could even very easily apprehend the fact that women had been a crucial part in the growth and development of human civilization because of the obvious fact that they give birth to children without which human civilization would not have existed on the planet earth. But the role and status of women varied significantly in the human history from ages to ages. Back in the pre-civilization days women were treated equal to men and had been respected by their male counterpart. Women used to take part in hunting, gathering foods, cooking and taking care of their men and household matters. But the advent of agricultural living pattern the role of women taking part in the gathering of livelihood decreased significantly and only aided men in minor tasks during the field work. The role of women severely decreased when slaves were started to be used in ploughs and in other agricultural activities.

This paper would highlight women's role in education, religion and politics from the ancient ages to the contemporary age. This paper would raise questions, what was the role and status of women in the male dominated society of the mediaeval Age? Was there any improvement in the role and status of women in the colonial period? How far women achieved equality and justice in the post independence era? How far the women's rights activist and feminism succeeded in giving the women their rights of equality? And even after such protest and acclamation was there any change in the outlook of the patriarchal society towards women? After all that how far women had progressed in the contemporary or present day becomes a question too.

According to A. S. Altekar in his book *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: from Pre-historic times to the Present Day*, writes that, "One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the

position and status of women in it." With time the role of women varied in the history of human civilization. Particularly, if we look at the pre-civilization days or the days of tribal societies, women were very crucial to a tribe or groups. Women gave birth to children, increased the number of members of tribes to make it stronger for survival. Women in those times were the only identified figures. As there was no such system as marriage or monogamy, there was no identity of fathers but the mothers were always identified. Thus we could say that the sole identity made them important enough to a tribe and they had to be conscious about their female members of the group because without them that particular tribe would go extinct. The tribal men were aware of such importance. As a consequence of such awareness women were treated as equal and in several occasions played equal role in hunting, food gathering and rearing children as well as taking care of the households. Thus in primitive culture women enjoyed a high status. There was equal division of labour. Women participated in cattle breeding until the advent of plough. However they also took part in that as well. These factors assure for women a position of importance and respect in society.

But the growing agriculture and slave labour made sure that men became masters. The importance of women in domestic work degraded significantly. It needed to be mentioned that between 2000 BC - 700 BC, Aryans civilization was the most significant in India. By that time, Aryans had already developed a patriarchal society system where men dominated the society. The very fact that there were overwhelming numbers of male gods. This indicated the fact that the majority of the authority were taken by men only. Women at this particular civilization reduced to a minimal. The involvement of women in several such activities such as war, politics and even in religion considered as trivial. Women were started to consider unworthy of action. Thus they were sidelined and reduced to some degree. As a consequence of such activity they became passive. At this juncture A. S. Altekar's observation becomes relevant that, "In ancient times all patriarchal societies the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event." Writer Sukhpal Kaur in his article *Women's Rights: A Historical Perspective*, also pointed out the fact that, "At the times of Guru Nanak's birth, the condition of women were undoubtedly depressed. The birth of a female child was regarded a bad omen and was looked upon as disfavour."

However in the later ages, particularly in the Vedic age in India, there had been a notable development of women's role and status in India. In the Vedic scriptures and texts we found mention of co-education. Women were also allowed to participate in religious matters. Women could perform sacrifices independently and they were not regarded as impediments in rituals. Regarding marriage, one of the top most social institutions, women were also given the choice to select their groom. During the

epics it was a kind of practice to do swayambar or in other words brides and grooms were given equal right in selecting their life partners. In Vedic age marriage also meant joint owners of the household. The practice of Upanaya and Brahmacharya ensured that the normal marriage age at that time should have been seventeen or eighteen. There had been several notable women scholars of repute during that age. Scholar ladies of that age were Lopamudra, Vishvavara, Sikata Nivavari, Gosha and so on. As many as twenty women were there among the seers and as the authors of Rig Veda. That kind of practice proved the fact that, women could receive formal education and scholastic training as their own consent.

Marriage was one of the most crucial phenomenons in the human civilization and also in life of two eligible men and women. There were several forms of marriage and according to *Smritis* there was the practice of *Asura Vivaha*. In this particular marriage form brides were sold and bought like commodities. In this particular marriage form, the bridegroom was entitled to pay a suitable bride price often set by the father of the bride. The argument behind such an activity was that by giving their daughter to another family, they lost a suitable working hand and thus it was kind of a loss to a father. It was a kind of a ancient dowry system and the marriage was primarily done by such a socio-economic attitude. Such kind of activity and practice where by giving the daughter in marriage the parents sustained a loss of productive labour in the family and the husband paid the bride price in compensation, such kind of activities would be at once objectionable to the modern eyes. The basic argument behind that would be women or men should not be bought and sold as commodities in social institutions such as marriage. However the practice of *Gandharva Vivaha* was also there in the mix of things. This particular marriage practice allowed men and women choose life partners of their own accord. This showed high level of equality and freedom. But sadly it was restricted only to a specific class of women, specifically kings and nobles. Lower class women were not allowed or given such kinds of preferences. Husbands or fathers had been known as *Grihapati*, in other words the chief of the family. But Survila Jaiswal showed that the grihapati, previously thought to be a head of a family, was in fact the leader of an extended kin-group, and that the transition from a pastoral to a sedentary mode of production led to increased social stratification with the grihapati becoming an archetype of the patriarchal principle.

Although after 300 BC growing advocacy for reduction of age in marriage meant that educational possibilities became limited. During the 400 BC to 100 AD, writers of *Dharmashastras* flourished in India. These writers advised that there should not be a delay in marriage after reaching puberty. And even around the 200 AD, giving marriage before puberty became a common practice. *Yajnavalkya*,

around 200 AD even insisted that girls should be married before the age of puberty; otherwise their guardians would be guilty every month of destruction of an embryo. Such practices of childhood marriage or teen age marriage impacted severely on women's modesty and social honor. Not only that, giving childbirth in such a minimum age also affected the health of women and several girls dies while giving birth. Such was the male dominated patriarchy that they did not even care about the health and opinion of girls and women for their marriage. M. L. Cormack in her book *The Hindu Women* also affirmed the concept that "In India it is honourable and lucky to be pregnant." This particular statement had been relevant in India from the ancient times to the contemporary. But it had also been a fact that pregnancy was of joyful in nature but giving birth to a girl was always considered as unlucky and often proved to be fatal for the mother.

In *Manu Smriti* we could found examples of monogamy and women chastity. It also talked about women dignity and honor. According to *Manu Smriti* monogamy was the acceptable norm of honor in marriage. However we could very easily perceive and found hundreds of examples where Brahmins, kings and nobles exercised polygamy. Thus we could find that there was a conspicuous exception for them in such activities. In this regard the general observation by Engels would be very accurate when he observed in his *Origin of the Family*, that monogamous marriage meant monogamy only for women and not for man. During that phase a woman's business was primarily restricted to tend her husband and worship him as God, even if that God was not efficient enough of the worship. Women were made humble and do all sorts of things which the patriarchal order demanded. They were not allowed to speak against their counterpart or husbands.

During the Buddhist period there was also some inappropriateness in women's rights. Though women were allowed to educate themselves and learn like men but they were restricted and were not given the equal kind of opportunities and freedom the men enjoyed. There were practices of *Niyoga*, this particular practice made the dead man's wife or widow marrying the dead man's brother or next of kin. And such processes were always tumultuous and improper handlings of such situations where there. Very often it was found that the women would be given to men who were treacherous and unworthy men. But women accepted such fate because the widows had no such right on anything, be it property or in the family. Widows were treated like animals and very often were threatened to thrown away by her own family members if she ever raised her voice or insisted on her own opinion. Thus the end of this particular period saw a decline in the rights and freedoms of widows, fall in educational levels of women as well as greater prevalence of child marriage indicate a substantial reduction in women's status. At last

but not the least, the practice of *Sati* or in other words the widow's ordeal was very active in India. The practice of *Sati* had been a heart wrenching phenomenon in the history of human civilization. However Mandakranta Bose put forward the fact that the scriptures regarding the *Sati* practice, in other words the funeral practice had been misinterpreted by men in a severe way. Mandakranta Bose in her book, *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* pointed the fact that, "Vedic scholars had proved that this reading of the hymn is based on an orthographic mistake: the significant word is *agre* (in front), not *agne*(O Agni)." Thus this particular piece of facts revealed that there had been a severe misinterpretation of this ritual by men, which forced women to burn on the funeral pyre of her dead husband.

Throughout the emergence and consolidation of feudalism, women were more and more subjugated and exploited. Muslim invasion of the medieval age did not help the women cause either. Rather it increased the passivity of women and women's rights were also denied. The medieval era in India, mostly dominated by Muslim rulers, specifically the Mughals, they could not elevated women's status and role in India. In fact the Muslim rulers were responsible for bringing and affecting a harsh patriarchy on women. Women were not given opportunity for education and for that reason we could find no such educational institution specifically for women at that time. Historian M. M. Sahgal also confirmed the fact when in her article *Condition of women in India*, stated that, "History does not mention any schools or colleges established by the Mughal emperors for the girls." Not only that, in this medieval era there were several practices and rituals which barred women from exercising their will power. Women, except nobility were not allowed to read and write. They were not allowed to speak up against their male counterparts' oppression. According to Sukhpal Kaur, "Among Rajputs female infanticide was freely practiced. The women did not equal status with men. They were not allowed to move freely." There were several practices and rituals which barred women from taking social participation and social activities.

One such custom was the *Purdah* tradition which debarred women from roaming outside and did not allowed them even the look of another man. They were kept in a cage like animals in the zoo. Women during this particular period were only look down upon as a commodity. Most men during this phase were pleasure seeking men. Hundreds and thousands of evidences and records expounded that there were polygamy and such activities were very common among Muslim men. Women were not allowed to read and educate themselves; in fact the harsh and pitiless patriarchal society kept these women in the dark and never allowed those girls and women to enlighten themselves. The reason of that

probably was their fear of losing such a authority over women. However B. R. Nanda in *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity* observed that women had come a long way, ever since from the tyrannical *Purdah* system to a modern day world with much more freedom in ethnicity.

However the situation worsened with time and the medieval age became a dark age in the history of civilization. But the advent of the colonial government and the reformers of the nineteenth century helped in tremendously in elevating the women's cause. Several reform movements talked about women's cause and for their betterment in the society. Mahadeb Govind Ranade, Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was the key men behind women's rights movements. Along with the support of several others and a positive response from the British government also helped several movements to succeed. The inauguration of the Indian National Science conference in 1887 was another significant step in the fight for women's rights.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar established schools specifically for women and the poor. Vidyasagar also helped women achieve freedom of thought. Vidyasagar also observed that in several places of India there was a practice of *Satidaho* or in other terms burning alive the surviving wife in the funeral pyre of the husband. This particular practice was known as *Sati* and such a kind of activity was not only disturbing but also monstrous outcome of the blind patriarchy. Burning the living women along with the dead husband would prick the consciousness of any living men but the harsh truth of reality was that nobody really protested such activity. It was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who stepped in this cause of women and helped them save their lives. Vidyasagar introduced *Bidhaba Vivaha*, the remarriage of a widow. Such a kind step towards the betterment of the life of that widow opened a new window in the Indian society and changed the perception of men.

In 1929 legislation was passed, fixing fourteen year as the minimum age for marriage for girls. Vidyasagar was again the chief activist and reformer who opposed the social institution of child marriage. But at that time child marriage was prevalent in India. In 1937 women's property rights act was passed by the legislation. Before that women had no rights over the property of their father or of their husbands. The rights of the property were always given to men, their brothers or to a male candidate of the family. Women were never chosen as the heir of a family, women were not allowed to inherit property or own a piece of land. Woman had no sense of right and no belongings of their own. But the 1937 women's property rights act gave the widows the right to husband's property inheritance. This was done keeping with the view that after the death of a particular women's husband, that women

becomes a pray to the society and family members also. To sustain their dignity and honor so that the women did not face such difficulties after the death of her husband, the property rights were started to be given to the wife of the dead man.

The colonial period of the British government was of tremendous importance in the upliftment of women in the Indian society. The west's attitude towards women were also changed during the later part of the nineteenth century and as a consequence of such opening the British government also showed a open minded approach towards women's salvation from harsh patriarchy. The open minded nature of the Britishers towards women paved the way for women to get a prolific way to open their gate of freedom. However it needed to be mentioned that several woman leader, freedom fighters, reformers and activist came out during this age. As a consequence of the awareness for equality women writers and scholars started to come forward in the colonial period across India. Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan in their article *Status of Women in India: a Historical Perspective* pointed out the fact that, "... British Indian legislation helped forward the cause of women's property rights. It was the British rulers who legalized the right of a brotherlesse daughter to be considered to be absolute heir to her father's property."

Several feminist activists took up the cause of women's rights and freedom in India even after the independence in 1947. It was observed that even though equal opportunity and rights were given to women but it was not applied thoroughly in India. The Constitution, however, allowed them equality and equity. Women were still given marriage at their teenage, in several places across India women had been deprived of getting a formal school education. In several places across India women were not allowed in the working sectors and even if they were allowed, their salary would vary with that of their male counterpart. Working women in the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties were considered as women of ill repute and were considerably look down upon by men. As a consequence of such malaise women often found them as the most depressed lot of human beings alongside the poor and disabled. Women were still handicapped by men. The application of laws even could not stop child marriages and dowry system. Thus several feminist movements in the second half of the twentieth century helped tremendously in getting the women their proper share of rights. In short the Marxist theory was in preview and according to Sukhpal Kaur, "Marxist theory links the solution of the question of women's rights with the class struggle of the working class for revolutionary transformations and socialism."

It has been precisely pointed out that by the 20th century, women had become increasingly active in the Indian Independence Movement, led by figures such as Sarojini Naidu and Kasturba Gandhi. However, education for women gained traction during this period, with institutions like Bethune College in Calcutta and others offering higher education. Though colonial rule imposed new societal norms; it also inadvertently catalyzed feminist movements that would significantly impact women's roles in post-independence India.

In the last decades of twentieth century, women could find themselves at a very preferable position. They were now involved in each and every sphere of life. At this particular juncture we saw women taking lead roles in movies; the projection of women differed significantly from the movies of the eighties. Women were taking part in all sorts of activities without only limiting themselves to household works, giving birth and rearing children. Women were now significant part of the society and contributed towards the development of the society. At that moment there were women scientists of repute, women doctors, engineers and scholars. Even though, this kind of freedom and liberty were only limited to few educated women, girls in towns and cities. Women in villages still suffered the same fate as there was a lack of infrastructure to protect women from malicious patriarchal society. Even after the liberty and freedom there were several such occasions when women's rights were denied and in most of houses in the India women suffered from patriarchal biasness. Marriage system had been also dominated by the patriarchy in the contemporary modern day world. M. L. Cormack in this regard stated that, "marriages with the advice and consent of the parents, especially of the father, are still the pattern of my country."

Even in the twenty first century women could find themselves at a disadvantage at the hand of their brothers and fathers. Women are still raped and abused in the society. There had been much increase in the marital rape cases in India. Cases of abuse received in the educational field, working field and even in their own society had been severe on women. Multiple numbers of cases of abuse occur every day in India. Women face severe difficulties in trying to break the chain of patriarchy in India. In several places in India women are still not allowed to exercise their own will and they are barred from several activities. Many a rules has been implemented in India against such activities but the patriarchal biasness or the male dominated society is so deep rooted that all those legal liberty and protecting laws are not sufficient enough to provide the modern day women their rights. Girls in India still had to compromise and adjust in terms of education, domestic activities. But there was a rapid development of feminine identity and consciousness of women around 1970's in India. According to Mandakranta Bose in her

book, *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, commented that, "... women's movement in India, which began in the 1970s. This movement is truly feminist because, for the first time, women themselves have come forward with demands that arise out of a sense of being denied their full potential."

The Constitution of India guaranteed equal rights to all citizens, regardless of gender, providing a legal foundation for women's equality. The state took of an active role in promoting women's education, health and employment through policies aimed at improving their socio economic considerations. However the Hindu Code Bill (1955-1956) reformed laws related to marriage, inheritance and adoption, promoting gender equality in twentieth century India. Moreover, in the 1970s and 1980s feminist movements focused on the issues such as dowry deaths, domestic violence and workplace discrimination, leading to landmark legislation like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and amendments to criminal laws on domestic violence and rap. In fact, the reservation of seats for women in local governance, through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), significantly empowered women at the grassroots level.

The role and status of women in India have evolved significantly over the centuries, shifting from relatively egalitarian norms in early societies to a highly patriarchal structure in medieval time, then to the complex dynastic to today. While legal and social reforms in contemporary India have made strides in empowering women, challenges remain, especially in bridging gaps between urban and rural areas, traditional customs and modern values. Thus we could comment that the role and status of women had been a very topsy-turvy journey. In the pre-Vedic age women were treated equal because of their ability to work and collaborated men in all sorts of things and women were the sole bearer of identity as a mother. However the development of plough system and the introduction of slaves decreased the value of women in the ploughs. However in the Vedic ages, honor and dignity was assigned with women as the fairer sex according to the scriptures and religious texts. The value of women as a mother was of top most importance and in terms of marriage and education women received several privileges. But the post Vedic era and the appearance of Aryan civilization women status and role degraded significantly as this civilization was very patriarchal in nature. And in the medieval age women were restricted much further, they were barred from all sorts of activities. They were only confined to their own homes and several customs and practices reduced them in their activities and education. But the advent of colonial period helped in reviving women's rights to some degree. It was only after the post independence India women enjoyed equal rights and were constitutionally accepted as equal to men. However it had been

observed that even after constitutional rights women had been continuing to be mastered by men. It had been an accepted fact that only proper education and self-consciousness will free women from the patriarchal grasp. The role of women changed drastically and still developing but the status of women had been hampering in India.

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