



A Comparative Study of the Status of Indian Woman during the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Period

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ABSTRACT

The fight is not for woman's status but for human worth. The claim is not to end in equality of woman but to restore universal justice. The bid is not for loaves and fishes for the forsaken gender but for cosmic harmony. Which never comes till woman comes.

INTRODUCTION:

As we all are very well aware from the fact that, all over the world 50% of population is constituted by women. But in our country only, there is decreasing ratio of woman on the basis of sex selection abortion. The situation of decreasing sex ratio of male to female is the reason of unequal social status of woman with men. On the other hand, in western countries women in reality are equal with men. But in India the situation is not so in fact it is just on paper that we provide equal status to women in our country also. It is evident from our culture that at one side we treat women as goddess in form of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga and very next movement all the heinous and illegal offences being committed against them like rape, sexual exploitation, kidnapping and most importantly nowadays 'Female feticide'. On the other hand, we can say that everybody treats them like a slave who work without any wages. -By Dr. Birpal Singh, National Law Institute University, Bhopal, India Today as per our constitution we provide equal status to woman on the basis of equality principle. But to achieve or gain this equality Indian woman have to struggle for a long time. Our ancient era is the witness of this inequality, for example Draupadi, wife of five Pandavas was, used by them on the dice like goods. Women were also used for



dance to please the kings and other male members of kingship, Women was also not having right to speak loudly in home or public places, these are some instances which shows that in ancient period also women were not being treated equally with men. Even she was not having right to participate freely in economic, social, political and personal activities. But in rise of 20th century Mahatma Gandhi has started national movement for liberalization of women. During that time only Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and many other social workers started a movement for education of woman prevention of sati system [1], restrain of polygamy marriage etc. The result of this was that, Parliament enacted laws for sati Prevention, Restrain of child marriages, Dowry prohibition, Equal rights of woman [2] in property and Remarriages of widow [3] etc. After the independence of India, Parliament had made sufficient effort to give equal status to women with men by removing inequality for fulfilment of this purpose they have also created a firm by making enactment for Hindu marriages which define the age for marriage, prevent polygamy and make monogamy marriages mandatory. They have also enacted adoption laws so that any men or women competent to adopt the child children, parents etc. [8]. In this way the Government on their level makes sufficient efforts to remove inequality of woman with men by providing equal status. Till today situation is as it is or we can say they, it becomes worse by committing crime of 'female foeticide' which results in to decreasing rate of woman in society. The occurrence of offences of 'female foeticide' and Infanticide is rooted in long back culture which results into death on the basis of sex selection. The most important things is that, the crime rate of commission of these offences is in the two largest countries in universe much high, i.e. India another is China and it's very disgraceful our society. It is vicious and harsh demonstration against woman by the patriarchal supportive society. In this way status of women has been changed from ancient time to modern age. But still 'female foeticide' and infanticide are committed frequently in India and other countries. Therefore, researcher in this research has discussed the position of woman from primitive society to modern society which will help to find out reasons of 'female foeticide'. It has been discussed as follows.

Position of women in ancient period

a. Women in Pre-Vedic Period

Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000B.C.) surpassing contemporary civilization in ancient Greece and Rome. The Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded women as useful and productive members of society. The condition of Vedic women was good women also enjoyed religious status like that of men. Especially in Vedic initiation and studies. The Rigveda provides ample



evidence to prove the concept of equality women with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge.

The Rigveda had rendered the highest social status to qualified women of those days. But status of women fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. They were not at all treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal rights and privileges as compared to men. Though the women participated in each family ceremony with men but they only played a role as a silent observer not an active participant as per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority over their wives. Child marriages, polygamy and sati were prevalent at that time still out of all these things women at that time were respected by the society. However, changes into the status of women introduced in 15th century. Saints and supporters of bhakti movement were expounded and spoken about equality of woman with men [9]. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Artha shastra imposed more stigmas on women as kautily dismissed women's liberation. They were not free even to go elsewhere without husband's permission. They become worse off in the Gupta period. But in Vedic period position of women was not worse as that of today. Our history shows that woman in Vedic period was also on strong footage as compare to men and therefore they were not subjected to 'female foeticide' and Infanticide of people never think about that. Though the Overall position of women was lower than men, yet on the whole the position of women was good. In the post Vedic period, women started being discriminated on the ground of education and other rights. The 'Child Marriage', emphasis on physical chastity of women and their unquestioned obedience to husband leads to progressive deterioration of their position. In the smriti sastras as well as in Manu, it has been mentioned in strongest terms that women should be honoured. But then again Manu has given absolute rights to men to inflict corporeal punishment on her and discard her if she said anything disgraceful to him. Thus, a contradiction in the rules of treatment to women was there. Manu's system continued for long after the Mauryan period in the Indian society. However, the upper-class women enjoyed freedom and were respected in society. Besides these women, a vast majority worked in the fields and homes. Their condition worsened in the 20th century [10]

b. Position of woman in Vedic age

As we have studied position of woman in pre rig Vedic period was very high. In later Vedic period, the position enjoyed by woman in the early Vedic society, was not retained. In Vedic society participation of wives was required in many rituals, woman could select their husband in an assembly called Loaj [11]. But in most cases the women had to lead on unhappy married life. This was simply because their



husbands were allowed to have more than one wives and this was especially quite common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society. A widow was expected burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. This would make her 'sati' [12]. Manu assigns to the woman of Vedic age, a position of dependence, not of subordination. In the work called Amarkosh written in the Gupta era names of the teachers and Professors are there and they belonged to female sex. They were the authors of Vedic scripts and 'mantras' [13].

C. Position of Woman in Hindu Dharma

The roots of the Hindu religion lie in the Aryan society, which followed a patriarchal social structure. The family unit was generally large, often extending over three generations, with all male offspring living together under one roof. In ancient times, women were regarded as powerful beings and were revered as the goddesses of Shakti. Society functioned according to certain established norms approved by Dharma shastras. The supreme goals of human life in ancient Indian thought were four: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha.

D. Woman's Education in Ancient India

In the golden age of Aryans where in the men were free, Brave, Vigorous, fearless themselves civilized and civilizing others, Noble and deeply spiritual and the woman were learned. Additionally, woman represented the best example of conjugal love, offering the supreme sacrifice of their lives as a demonstration of their feeling for their partners in the brief journey of life. Woman did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts. It clearly shows that our kings were aware of woman education their children without the discrimination of male or female.

E. Position of Women in Mughal Period

Unlike in the ancient Indian period, the position and status of woman in the Mughal period was not quite high. Purdah and child marriage had become common. Except those of the lower classes, Women in Mughal period did not move out of their houses. The Muslims woman observed purdah much more strictly than the Hindus. Through, the overall position of woman in Mughal period was low, there were many Hindu and Muslim woman of outstanding ability, whose fame is still relevant today like, not ably Rani Durgabati of gondawana, Rani Karmawati, Mira Bai, Tara Bai etc.



Status of Woman in Medieval Period

The position of women became worse during the medieval period, instead of improving or developing positively. During this period, the practices of purdah and jauhar came into existence, mainly among the Muslim and Rajput communities, respectively.

Firstly, purdah refers to the custom in which women, especially in Muslim society, were required to cover their entire body with clothing in order to remain unseen by men outside their family.

Secondly, Jauhar refers to the practice in which Rajput women, with their own consent, immolated themselves in order to protect their honour, body, and dignity from enemies during times of war. If they belonged to the families of defeated warriors, they resorted to this act to avoid capture and dishonour.

Both these practices restricted the liberty of women and severely curtailed their freedom of movement.

The Bhakti Movement, however, played a significant role in improving the social and spiritual status of women. Through devotional teachings, poets and saints promoted equality, gave women space in spiritual practices, and raised their voice against the rigid customs that suppressed women.

Status of Women in the Modern Period

As India moved towards the path of independence, the status of women began to change gradually. During the 1860s and 1870s, women were largely confined to household work. They were deprived of equal dignity, education, and opportunities. However, with the passage of time, India witnessed urbanization and industrialization, which contributed significantly to the improvement of women's status in many fields.

In modern times, women have come to occupy an equal position in almost every sector of society. Numerous examples reflect that women today are empowered, capable, and competent to contribute meaningfully to social, economic, political, and cultural development. Their active participation in education, employment, administration, politics, science, technology, business, and various other areas is evidence of their growing potential and equality.

There are few examples

♣ Meera Chadha Borwankar

♣ Ritu Karidhal



♣ Sumitra Mahajan

♣ Arundhati Bhattacharya

♣ Hima Das

♣ Anu Kumari etc.

Are examples of women empowerment that are boosting our proud to ward Country. Woman today occupy high ranking posts like I.A.S., I.P.S. also in our defence services. The modern Indian woman participate in various sports and games like football, hockey, cricket, table tennis, lawn tennis and also in athletics namely Saniya Mirza, Sayana Nehawal etc.

Status of Woman in Contemporary

Time The contemporary Indian woman serve as M.P., M.L.A., Governors and Ministers. Woman of recent time like mother Teresa, Soniya Gandhi, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, M.S. Subhalakshmi, Lata Mangeskar and our Ex-president of India Pratibha Tai Patil have achieved international fame. Women have also achieved high fame in the areas of literature, Music and acting's. Moreover, woman is joining the field of science and technology also. In Fact, there is no sphere of activity in which women are unsuitable or incompetent.

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