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## STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: FROM ANCIENT TO POST-INDIPENDENCE PERIOD

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**Abstract:** *The status of women represents the standard of culture of any age. The social status of the women of a country symbolizes the social spirit of the age. Women in India do not constitute a minority. A patriarchal society as India is, women have always suffered numerous social deprivations. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reforms, the history of women in India has been eventful. In the course of Indian history from prehistoric to modern times, there were distinct stages of the rise and fall in the status and role of women.*

**Keywords:** Shakti, Gurukul, Vedas, Child marriage, Brahmo Samaj, Prathna Samaj, Arya Samaj.

### INTRODUCTION

Status of Women' is a pretty worn –out theme. Much has been written and much has been spoken on the subject and yet one has to go on happening on the same theme for a simple reason that women has not attained her full status and it is necessary to remind her of it so that she may continue her efforts till the goal is reached. The term 'Status' signifies the sum total of the various culturally ascribed roles one has to play and the rights and duties inherit in a social position. Besides the ascribed status, there is also a 'achieved status' which results from one's efforts and personal achievement. The concept of status is used to indicate the ordering the individual in terms of attributes such as, level of education, occupation, income, perception of one's status within the home and the community, decision making role, number of restrictions imposed on the one's activities, freedom and so on (Vohra & Sen, 1986: 3).

In India, women has enjoyed great freedom and great prestige, but due to unhappy impact of restricted ideologies, inhuman restrictions clamped upon them, they were relegated to a position of servility and insignificance and they were burdened with several taboos and restrictions. (Sood, 1990, xi)

The image of a woman in India is visualized as Shakti (Energy). She is described in all our ancient text as the force underlying creation and divinity. In several words like Jaye, Patni, Mahila, Stree, Ardhangani etc women is exalted to the position of glory and grace. (Janapathy, 2002:40). The position of power, status and disabilities of the daughter, the wife, and the widow went on changing in the course of time. Women enjoyed considerable freedom and privileged in the spheres of family, religion and public life, but as centuries rolled on, the situation went on changing adversely. The position which women occupies in the Hindu society at the

down of civilization during the vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been.

### STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

In ancient times women have not been exclude from religious rites nor relegated to an inferior status. In the early times, mother- right and the matriarchy proceeded patriarchy, in the development of the human society. The status of women in the early agriculturalist societies was comparatively high. Women were considered to be only creators of life, they were also the providers of foods, and the helpmates of men. They were considered to be supreme symbols of fertility itself. Thus there was widespread worship of mother goddess in the form of many powerful duties (Janapathy, 2002:1)

As per R C Majumdar (Ancient India) the women was the pivot in the family. Family life was interwoven with her. Expressions like jay dastan (the women in the house) echo this sentiment. The women were kept on a golden throne so far her status is concerned during the Rig Vedic period. She could exhibit her talent in the public places but had to work within the framework of rules. But a man was Neta (leader) and women Neetha (the lead). The word Dampati, indicates that the wife and the husband constituted one unit. In one context the husband, an idle monger bemoans that, he is responsible for the pitiable condition of his wife.

In the Vedic period woman participated in all fields like men and took active part in every sphere of human life. During that period, women enjoyed a fair amount of freedom. Women studies in Gurukul and enjoyed equality in learning Vedas. For a long time, girls in higher societies were allowed to undergo Upanayan rite. The great women like Ghosa, Apala, Lopamudra, Visvara, Gargi, Atreyi, Indrani,

Yami, and other had distinct qualities of arts, music, dance and even fighting in the battle (Mishra, 2006:3). The condition of girls are married after attaining puberty, they were instance of Swayamwara where the women had the right to choose her husband (Janapathy, 2002:46). If for any reason a daughter remained unmarried, she was expected to live under the protection of her father and after her father's death under the control and protection of her brother (Ram, 2004:19). During this period asceticism was not of great prominence. The main disadvantaged from which the wife suffered in the Vedic age was that she could neither hold nor inherit property. The only property they assimilated was their bride- price at the time of the girls' marriage which was known as Stridhana. The widow of this age was permitted to remarry. These practices seem to have been accepted as normal from the Vedic period onwards. Sati or burning of widow in Rig-Veda was not found. On the other hand, the Vedic hymn refers to remarriage of the widows rather than their self immolation (Altekar, 1983: 188). Widow remarriage by the niyoga form was permitted where by a widow could wed her brother-in-law or the man belonging to her husband's castes. This, however, was more to maintain the family institution, then as a special presence for the sex life for a widow (Khanna & Verghese, 1978:188).

Thus the position of the women during the Vedic period was clearly manifested to be equal. Women as a daughter, sister, wives, and mother had equally honored places in the family, society, and the state alike. Thus, in all aspects they had equal rights with men and were their equal partners, friends and helpers all through. The right of the niyoga shows how a widow was very liberal treated in those days. The legal status of the widow was the same as that of the wife (Ram, 2004:18). During the Post -Vedic period the position of the women was not the same. This was the period of the later Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanishad. These were a gradual decline in the status and education of women. The desire to get a son to provide for the future, become quite intense and daughter came to be looked upon as encumbrances and the marriage age of the girls continued to be around 16. Among the Kshatriyas, Swayamwara was fairly common in practice. The social and familiar status of the daughter deteriorated in the Post Vedic period.

Women were not allowed to participate in performance of sacrificial ceremonies and they lost their importance as comrades of men in public activities, they came to be honored merely as mother (Ram, 2004:23-24). The discontinuance of Upanayan, the neglect of education and lowering the marriage age produced disastrous consequences regarding the position and status of women. Early marriage became hindrance in the education of girls. Women came to be regarded as being of the same status as the Sudra. During this period on the one hand, women were being idealized and on the other she was given a very degrade status (Altekar, 1983:348). The deterioration in the status of the widow commenced from the epic period. Widowhood was considered both undesirable as well as inauspicious. The position of the widows became more pitiable because sutra ordered a widow to avoid, for a duration of a year, the use of money, meat, sprits and liquor as well as and sleep on the ground (Mahabharata,X111,5-7).

The rise of Brahmanism during the Samiti period became detrimental to the status of women. The customs of niyoga was condemned by Samities writers when chastity became the main qualification of marriage. Manu disapproved the customs of niyoga and declared it was fit for cattle only (Altekar,1983:146-149). Thus, widow remarriage was prohibited. The practices of Sati were recommended by many of the later authorities and were well established by the end of the 6th century AD. The law givers forced the widows to lead a life of austerities, fasting and abstinence from pleasure (Ram, 2004:28).

The period of Samiti or pre Islamic period according to Altekar was one of the progressive deterioration in the position of women. In the history of India, these dark and depressing days of the total injustices, intolerances and inequality will remain as the darkest spot for ever. There were varied and many reasons for the deteriorations of fall in the position of women (Altekar, 1983:353). There are contradictory views regarding the position and status of women while some of the earlier authorities have women as abodes of more evil than good, the progressive and liberal thinkers are in favor of two women ( Ram, 2004:28). During this period the age of marriage was fixed at eight. The commentators of the opinion that the parent would be committing sin, if the girl's age exceed eight years. Only in the kshatriya families girls were married at the age of 14 or 15. Gradually, the practice of child widows was stopped. Widow was to lead a strict ascetic life (Ram.2004:28). Thus, the life of women was worse in Smriti period as she was suppressed due to deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs.

#### **STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

The invasion the country by Muslims in the 11th century brought about the position of women in the worse condition, their life became insecure. Restriction on her right and freedom and her resultant hardship were aggravated. Women were forcibly taken away to be slaves or to marry into Muslims homes. The consequent insecurity and instability further narrowed down woman's social liberties ( Mishra, 2006:34). Polygamy and the purdah were two of the most important social institution of the Muslims conquerors of India. Under the purdah system, not only the women required living in apartment of house, but also they had to dress in apparel which completely covered their body excepting the eye (Desai, 1967:23).

Women faced a number of hardship and cruelty due to evil practices like marriages, the purdah system, sati, widow hood, prostitution, and the devadasis system (Ram, 2004:29)

Along with the insecurity and uncertainty which prevailed in the Mughal period, the practice of purdah became rigid and women were forbidden even to visit the holy shrines. Both Hindus and Muslims women lost all their liberal activities and became the property of their male masters. Widow-remarriage was prohibited in general. The practices of tonsuring the widows were prevalent among many high castes and it exists even today in many part of the country. It was common more in the south than in the north of the country. Though the cruel practices are dying out, it is still practice by some orthodox sects of Brahmins in the southern

India. Once widow marriage was prohibited, society desired to make the widow as unattractive as possible so that no man could ever want to marry her. Widows have to follow strict rules and restriction. So they frequently prefer Sati to the tire some life prescribed for them. Most widows voluntarily ascended the funeral pyres of their husbands. (Ram, 2004:30-31). The practice of Jauher was also quite common where women folk immolated themselves 'en- masse' on a burning fire which was very much popular particularly among the Rajputs (Janapathy, 2006;146). Several Muslims emperors discouraged Sati and adopted measures to present it as far as possible, but did not succeed. This era led not only to the degenerations of the women's physical, mental and social life, but her right in educational, social, religious, and economics field also lowered gradually ( Ram,2004:32). The Bhakti movement also played an important role in raising the status of the women. The evil practice of Sati received some setbacks, the movement encouraged religious participation, more and more women participated in the religious congregation and it was not considered disrespectful (Janapathy, 206: 147).

In the history of India, the 18th century was a period of all round decline. It was the darkest period so far as women were concerned. Political decay following the description of the Mughal empire and disorder due to the prevent of various Europeans powers, combined with fossilized customs, tradition, superstition, and irrational bigotry, ruined the nation. Under the new condition, women lost their independent identity. They did not enjoy a separate world of their own. They were totally and forced subjugated to male superiority physically and intellectually.

#### STATUS OF WOMEN IN BRITISH PERIOD

Towards the end of the 18th century, social condition in India came to such a low level that neither the ruler nor the people's leaders could control them easily. Some unusual nation crept into the minds of people and took very deep roots. Ideologically women was considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance, no personality, socially she was kept in the state of utter subjection, denied any right, suppressed and oppressed.

#### During this period there were three social evils that changed the very image of the society:

- a. Polygamy became the very common among all sections. Men could easily take a second wife even when the first wife was alive, without any obstacle.
- b. Prostitution became rampant. To arrange melas and nauch parties with dancing girls became a symbol of status. Security never considered the habit to be beneath the dignity women became more things luxury.
- c. Child marriage became very common. Young India in article entitled Evils of Child Marriage dated 26th august 1926 throws more light on this aspect and the society for the prevention of the child marriage. In 1931 it published the following detailed given in the table.

Table - 1.1

Age (Yrs)	Marriages (Percentage)
Below 1	0.8
1-2	1.2
2-3	2.0
3-4	4.2
4-5	6.6
5-10	19.3
10-15	38.0

So, it can be concluded from the table 1.1 that even below 1 years of age, one girl in every 1000 was married. Even for the girls below 15 years the same was the position. When in 1921, there were 9066 married girls before one years by 1931, there number increased to 44082.

As child marriage was favored also became rampant. The number of widows was 759 in 1925 and then strength increased to 1515, within 10 years, which is mentioned in table 1.2.

Table – 1.2  
More Particular About widows

Age (Yrs)	Number
Below 1	1515
1-2	1785
2-3	3485
3-4	9076
4-5	15019
5-10	1,05,482
10-15	1,85,339

On account of the child marriage, women became mother at the very early age and many died during the child birth. As a result, death rate among the women went up. On an average, the number of dead per year was 2 lakhs. To put in others words, 22 died per hours. Sati was another evil that took its toll.

In 1815 - 1828, the number of women who died in Bengal itself is as following table 1.3(Janapathy, 2002:169-170).



Table 1.3

Years	NO. of Dead
1815	378
1816	442
1817	707
1818	839
1819	650
1820	598
1821	654
1822	583
1823	575
1824	572
1825	639
1825	639
1826	518
1827	517
1828	463

However, it is clear that with the increase in the evil customs the status of women was affected in many ways in India particularly due to-

- a. Patriarchal joint family;
- b. Polygamy and sati;
- c. Enforcement widowhood;
- d. Child marriage and Purdah system;

The pitiful and pitiable of the widow who was forced commit Sati attracted the attention of good number of enlightened Indians and the British under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentick. In spite of the strong opposition, historic resolution of great importance was passed on December 14th 1829, by which Sati was made a crime of culpable homicide punishable with fine or both.

The widow was ill treated by her in laws and kinsmen as the virtual destroyer of her husband. She was never allowed to appear cheerful and wear bright clothes or ornaments. She had to drudge along day and night and was the victim of all kinds of insolence by other women of the household including servants. The tragedy became all the more poignant if the widow happened to be a child. Therefore, in order to improve her lot, British passed the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act, 1856. This act was enacted to remove all the legal barriers to remarriage of Hindu Widows (Ram, 2004:34-36). Child marriage Act 111 of the 1872 abolished child marriage and fixed the minimum age for marriage at 14th for girl and 18 for boy, permitted widow remarriage and penalized polygamy among the Brahmo Samaj (Bakshi, 2007:11).

The reform movement of the last century, therefore concentrated on mitigating the hardship and handicap of women and then on elevating their position. The Brahmo Samaj of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Prathna Samaj of Ranade, the Arya Samaj of Daya Nand Saraswati, all aimed at ameliorating the lot of women and shedding the dross that Hinduism has gathered over the ages (Bakshi, 2007:11).

The familial, social and legal position of the Hindu

women was greatly improved during the British period as compared to the Muslim period. Although a small section of women took advantages of these measures and privileged given, their initiation was indeed significant. During the India's struggle for independence thousand of women took part under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, and Kasturba Gandhi were some of the unique women personalities. Gill has rightly observed about the achievement with regards to the status of women during the British period (Gill, 1986:38)

### STATUS OF WOMEN IN POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

After India became independence, the status of women changed altogether. The laws in force were different in different provinces before 1947. Under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, B.N. Rao committee was formed to work out the necessary changes in society. The member of the committee toured the four corners of the country and obtained the opinion of the people and based on their recommendations in 1955, some important acts were passed. The Special Marriage Act, Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Act of Maintenance was passed by the parliament and Hindu adoption Act were also passed in 1956. Inequality was removed in all aspects. The women were given equal status in all respects (Saikia, 2008: 13). Thus, a legal frame work within which women right can be protected in India. Human rights jurisprudence has constitutional status and a great deal of religious laws was codified soon after India achieved independence. Parliament has also passed a numbers of acts which inter alia, specially protected women's right. These Acts includes:

1. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.
2. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956.
3. The Immoral Traffick Prevention Act, 1956.
4. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
5. The Medical Termination and Pregnancy Act, 1971.
6. The Indecent Representation of Women Prohibition Act, 1986.
7. The Commission of Sati Prevention Act, 1987.
8. The National Commission of Women Act, 1990.
9. The Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Massive) Act, 1994 (Mittra & Kumar, 2004:313).

In spite of all these laws even today women are ill treated and are in sub ordinate position. The law, in itself in nothing more than an instrument of social changes. As said by Jawahar Lal Nehru, "Legislation cannot by itself normally solve deep -rooted social problem. One has to approach them in other ways too, but legislation is necessary and essential, so that it may give that push and have those educative factors as well as the legal sanctions behind it which help public opinion to be given a certain shape (Saikia, 2008:15)

Apart from these so many legislation passed for women, even today the birth of girl in an average Indian family is not considered to be rejoicing event, as the birth of boy. Crime against women has increased, over 4,000 cases of

rape were reported in 1979. Dowry death, and molestation, eve teasing etc. have increased considerably. Most of the post independence social reforms like the dowry abolition and the laws against child marriage have proved ineffective. Social welfare is on papers where it is acted upon seriously, there is corruption and mismanagement. (Janapathy, 200: 218-219).

With the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the century, exploitation of women in recent years has been a serious menace to our society. with the multiplication of legislation on the various fields, with a view to improve the social, political and social condition and status of women, even the ancient forms of victimization, child marriage and premature consummation resulting in early and dangerous pregnancies, sati, female infanticides, illegal abortion, dowry death and rape, eve teasing and various other forms of molestation of women still continue. In fact, since the passing of the dowry prohibition act and even after several amendments of the I.P.C., Cr. PC. and the Evidence Act, dowry death are increase. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 securing the women the right to divorce and property have not automatically even women rights. Traditionally, girls have been considered a liability and the requirement to provide to them with a dowry on marriage, is big burden. Thus with this new technology, female foetus are aborted in large numbers (Mishra, 200:466).

Women's health is given consideration only in terms of maternity, leaving women beyond the reproductive age, young unmarried girls and widow outside health and nutrition schemes. The government's family planning program has a very gender bias (Saikia, 2008: 15). The condition of elderly women is also not satisfactory especially those of widows. She has to earn as also run the house and raised her children, if she does earn her condition is even worse. If widow has no issues, she has to work hard as a maid servant in her husband's joint family. She has neither economic security nor a say in decision concerning her and her children. Families still believe that once a daughter is given away in marriage, she cannot be given away again to another person. Hence, widow remarriage, though sanctioned by Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1986 seldom takes place and is discouraged (Ghose, 1989: 19).

## CONCLUSION

The condition of Indian women is very much shocking. The life of the women in India is still surrounded by violence neglected and exploitation. This is happening everywhere in our country and the number is increasing alarming. Even the educated urban and well informed women are exposed to such events. Large section of the women has suffered a decline of economic status. Even after the promulgation of these laws (legal measures) , the protection enjoyed by the larges masse of women from exploitation and injustice is negligible, though women do not numerically constitute in minority, they are being to acquired the feature of minority community by the recognized dimension of inequality of class, economic situation, status (social position) and political power. The chasm between the values of a new social order proclaimed by the constitution and the realities of contemporary Indian society as far as

women right are concerned remains as great as at the time of independence. It is clear that the status of the women in India society has changes through many phases from ancient times to modern times. Though they have received very honorable place in society during ancient times, as the time passed their status was not same. Women have gone through many tortures and ill-treatment throughout their lives. Even in modern times, in spite of man legislation for their protection they are still in inferior position.

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