

Role of Women in the Past and Present

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ABSTRACT

In the Rig Vedic period, the society had certainly left behind the state of food gathering and hunting and women held a position of honour. No study on ancient Indian Society is complete without tracing the history of deposition of women as they constituted the keystone in the arch of Indian civilization. According to A.S. Altekar "One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilization and to appreciate its excellence and to realize its limitation is to study the history of woman position". The educational opportunities thrown open women would show that the predominantly patriarchal character of ancient Indian society did not deny them the right to education. The freedom they enjoyed and their participation in public life demonstrates the state of justice and fair play developed in a community. The laws of marriage as well as the customs serve as guides to evaluate to what extent the husband considered his wife as a partner. It would be inappropriate to say that their role have changed, but instead they have taken new roles along with the role they used to play earlier. Women earlier had the role of home maker alone, now they are the bread earner and home maker together. Women in the past and present are not too different. They have been improving themselves in order to live a better life. As time passes, women learn from their mistakes the generalizations have many more exceptions in today's world.

"If you educate a man you educate an individual, however if you educated a woman you educate a whole family. Woman empower advancement in education means mother India empowered"

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru

I. INTRODUCTION

No study on ancient Indian Society is complete without tracing the history of deposition of women as they constituted the keystone in the arch of Indian civilization. According to A.S. Altekar "One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilization and to appreciate its excellence and to realize its limitation is to study the history of woman position". The educational opportunities thrown open women would show that the predominantly patriarchal character of ancient Indian society did not deny them the right to education. The freedom they enjoyed and their participation in public life demonstrates the state of justice and fair play developed in a community. The laws of marriage as well as the customs serve as guides to evaluate to what extent the husband considered his wife as a partner, whose cooperation was necessary for the happiness and success of the family¹. The rules pertaining to sex morality would not only provide us a better insight of the ethical tone of the society prevailing at that time, but also to ascertain how far men were prepared to be themselves judged by the standard they had set for women. The extent to which women were given freedom to choose their partner in life and the management of their household as also the recognition of their proprietary

rights indicates man's capacity to control the natural self-power and possession, which is so deeply implanted in the hearts of all human beings.

II. WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD

In the Rig Vedic period, the society had certainly left behind the state of food gathering and hunting and women held a position of honour as her participation was found to be necessary in the production process. In the Rig Veda, the husband and wife are called '*Dampati*'.²

2.1 Women in Later Vedic Period

During the period of the later '*Samhitas*', the position of women was on the whole satisfactory. One who is unmarried is not competent to offer the ritual, prayers and sacrifice. The deterioration in the status and position of women began from 3000BC onwards. They came to be characterized as fickle minded, who could be easily won over by one who is handsome and can sing and dance well.³

The account of the status and position of women in Ancient India makes the reading painful in the extreme. The equality in status and position with her opposite sex which she enjoyed in the Rig Vedic period was short lived and from then onwards she began to be treated as a second class citizen. Society was unsympathetic towards her and the small mercies that were shown to her from time to time.⁴

In the later Vedic period, in the Satavahana polity, an important and original feature was the association of queens in public life. Queen Naganika acted as regent on behalf of her son, Vedasri. Queen Balasri, mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni, jointly issued orders to a district officer to institute a charitable endowment.⁵

2.2 Women in Sultanate Period

The position of women in the Sultanate period was not as high as it used to be in ancient India. No women were allowed to enjoy an independent status. Before marriage, she was under the strict supervision of her father.⁶

After marriage, she was under the supervision of her husband and after his death under the supervision of her sons. On account of fear from Muslims and other kinds of high handedness new rules were made to enforce early marriage.

The seclusion of Hindu women came in the wake of the Muslims conquest of northern India. Child marriage and *pardah* brought about the segregation of girls and the degradation in the condition of Hindu women during Medieval India.

The institution of *Devdasis* in principal temples was in existence. A large number of beautiful maidens were maintained for music and song in important temples in most parts of the country.

Al-Beruni writes that 'while the priests were opposed to the institution of *Devdasis* the king maintained them for the sake of revenues

2.3 Women in the Mughal Period

In the Mughal period, the Muslim women position varied according to the country. The Turks gave their women a good measure of freedom and the Persian women were improving their position as compared with their Indian sisters. In India, the Muslims followed the older tradition of ancient Persians, which gave women an inferior position. The Muslim women had to observe *Purdah* more strictly. They commanded respect. Most of them led a life of dignity and respect. They lived devoted lives. The welfare of the family depends upon their care and dedication. Polygamy was very common among the Muslims. *Sati* system was common among the Hindus.

Razia Sultana demonstrates how men were not prepared to reconcile to the rule of women. The rule of Chand Biwi, Begums of Bhopal and mughals princesses like Jahanara and Roshanara who played an active part in politics from behind the purdah were great exceptions to the rule. They were also distinguished and cultured women in the mughal royal household like Gulbadan Begum, daughter of Babur, who wrote Humayunnama, Jahnara, daughter of Shah Jahan and Zeib-Un-Nisa, daughter of Aurangzeb who were poets, This shows about the position of Muslim women.⁷

Islam though a democratic religion, in practice treated women as second class citizens with the imposition of *purdah* and sanctioning polygamy. The Muslim women had to observe *purdah* more strictly.

2.4 Women in the Present

Women in the present are anyhow different from the past. Women in 21st era are different. They have vision and mission. They stopped serving as equal to slaves but serve themselves more now.

Women now are more brave. They are entitled with proper education. By having education, women don't doubt themselves and become confident. Women are no longer swallowed by shadows of men. They voice out their point of view. Nevertheless, they are an important asset in our society.

It would be inappropriate to say that their role have changed, but instead they have taken new roles along with the role they used to play earlier. Women earlier had the role of home maker alone, now they are the bread earner and home maker together.

Things have changed a great deal over the last three hundred year ever since women won the right to vote near the beginning of the twentieth century.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS TO INDIAN WOMEN

The constitution of India 1950 has certain provision relating to women, The Preamble is the key to constitution and it does not discriminate between men and women. The framers of the constitution were well aware of unequal treatment metted to them. Thus their were the provisions of the upliftment and development of the status of women.⁸

Articles 14 of the constitution provides equality before law, It provides that "The State shall not deny to any person equality before Law or the equal protection of the Laws within the territory of India".

Articles 15 specially prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex. It states that "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, Race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

Article 15(3) permits the state to positively discriminate in favour of women to make special provisions for their social, economic and political condition. It is to be noted that the constitution of India guarantees all the rights to women which are given to men.

Article 19 to 22 of the constitution deal with the right to freedom. It includes right to freedom of speech, protection in respect of conviction for offences, protection of life and personal liberty.

Article 32 to 35 deal with the right to constitutional remedies.

1. A women should not denied a job merely because she is women.

IV. DIRECTIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE STATE POLICY

Fundamental rights cater to individual rights while the directive principles of state policy cater to social needs. These provisions are contained in part IV of the constitution.

Article 39(a) directs the state to direct its policy towards securing that citizens, men and women, equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.

Article 39(d) directs the state to secure equal pay for equal work for both men and women. The state passed the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 to give effect to the provision.

Article 39(e) directs the state not to abuse the health and strength of workers, men and women.

Article 42 of the constitution incorporates a very important provision for the benefits of women. It directs the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

V. ACTS FOR WOMEN

Many acts have been passed to improve the status of women and children:

- 1) The Special Marriage Act 1954 : provides for a Civil marriage without any Religious significance .
- 2) The Foreign Marriage Act 1969 :this Act makes provisions relating to marriages of Indian Citizens outside India.
- 3) The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 :under this act both the giving and receiving of Dowry are prohibited.
- 4) The Maternity Benefit Act 1961:this act provides that every woman shall be entitled to and her employer shall be liable for, the payment of maternity benefit at the rate of average daily wage for the period of her actual absence.
- 5) Equal Remuneration Act.1976 :provides for no discrimination on any condition of service subsequent to recruitment such as promotion, training or transfer.
- 6) National Commission For Women Act.1990 :this act provides that the central government shall constitute a body to be known as the National Commission for women to exercise the powers conferred on, and to perform the function assigned to it.

The state has implemented this directive by incorporating health provision in the Factories Act, Maternity Benefit Act, Beedi and Cigar workers (conditions of employment) Act etc.⁹

History has stood witness to the brilliance of women in politics, time and again. From Marie Antoinette to Queen Elizabeth, women across the world have often held the political scepter firmly in their hands whenever needed. India has also seen such influential female political figures from time to time.

Sonia Gandhi's tenure as the Congress president has been the longest in its century-old history. She is also the chairperson of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

Seven times Member of Parliament and three times Member of the Legislative Assembly, Sushma Swaraj, the BJP leader, is now the Union Minister Of External Affairs of India.

Sheila Dikshit was the Chief Minister of Delhi from 1998 to 2013. She is a senior member of the Congress party. Dikshit has led the national party to three consecutive electoral triumphs in the capital. She became the governor of Kerala on 11 March 2014, however, she resigned from the post on 25 August 2014.

The first woman Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, popularly known as Mamata didi, dethroned the 34-year-old left front government in the state. She was also the first woman railway minister of the country. In 1997, she launched Trinamool Congress, an anti-leftist party, to consolidate her position in West Bengal.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram is also the general secretary of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). She joined politics in 1982. In 1984, she became a Rajya Sabha MP.

At present, Mayawati is the most powerful dalit leader in India. Four times chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, she belongs to the Jatav caste, which is at the upper end of the scheduled castes and communities. Her powerful influence over UP's political spectrum has been revered by all the political leaders of the country and the general public.

Rajasthan's first woman Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia is one of the most powerful female politicians in India. Vasundhara Raje was introduced to active politics by her mother Vijayraje Scindia, who was a prominent BJP leader. Vasundhara was elected to the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly in 1985.

VI. CONCLUSION

Society is in a continuous process of evolution. It will take several decades for these imbalances to be rectified. Education of both men and women will lead to change in attitudes and perceptions. It is not easy to eradicate deep-seated cultural value, or alter tradition that perpetuates discrimination. Law can only be an instrument of change that must be effectively used. The absence of effective law enforcement, results in low rates of conviction, which in turn emboldens the feeling that the accused can get away. It is necessary that deterrent punishments are provided in the statute, and are strictly enforced. A beginning has certainly been made in urban areas. Working women continue to remain primarily responsible for taking care of home and child rearing, in addition to their careers. Increased stress has made them more prone to heart and other stress related diseases. Hence, it is necessary to improve the Support System for working women. Women empowerment envelops developing and building capacities of individuals, communities to make them part of the main stream society. Education is the only mean by which societies grow out of oppression to democratic participation and involvement. It is a powerful tool for empowerment of individual. Today, the main criteria for selecting a girl as life partner are her education and her employability. This is an age of earning couples. The girls have now taken up challenge. Professionally, they have practically left no field where boys could claim exclusively. The modern middle class women have greater privacy, more opportunities, freedom of action and equal rights. They have broken away from many shackles and unfairly restrictive practices. Women have indeed arrived and got their place in society

Women in the past and present are not too different. They have been improving themselves in order to live a better life. As time passes, women learn from their mistakes the generalizations have many more exceptions in today's world.

Women in the future would be ruling the nation instead of helping men side by side. That's the vision of women in future. To create better life than present. Now is never enough.

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