

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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HIGHS AND LOWS OF INDIAN WOMEN'S LIFE: A STUDY FROM PAST TO PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

The condition of women in India has never been static; in fact it has been subject to constant change and modification. In the long journey of our civilization women have played a key role in shaping up the destiny of our nation, through their shakti (force) from which emanates male strength. From the days of the ancient Indus Valley civilization to the India of today our women have come a long way; their story is of failure and successes, resilience and robustness, vulnerability and resistance. From Sita to Kannagi and Razia to Laxmibai Indian annals are replete with numerous such instances where women chose to stand up for themselves against societal prejudices to fight for their rights. But what baffles our mind is that whether our country of Devi worshippers really extols its women or is it just religious symbolism that often defies the ground reality? The present paper attempts to demonstrate the factors and stages involved in the evolution of women's question in India from past to present.

KEY WORDS- Hinduism, Vedas, Upanayan, Purdah, Sati, Muslims, Reform movement, Freedom struggle.

INTRODUCTION

India is the birthplace and home of many religions. Textually all religions consider men and women to be equal. The Hindus believe their Gods to have both male and female elements. God is portrayed as 'ardhanariishvara' or 'God who is half woman'. Islam recognizes both men and women as equal and both being created from *nafs wahidah* (a single soul). Sikhism too considers women as equals to men. Christian, Buddhist and Jain faith also give a high place to women, but the theological status of women is often not in consonance with their actual position in society-both at home and in public, across all religions perhaps because religious lore is often considered to be a male bastion with negligible number of female interpreters.

Hinduism is not based on a single religious text; it has as its source a large number of ancient texts varying in content and authority. Vedas are considered to be the oldest and most reliable source of information vis-à-vis ancient period of our history, which speak of the high status governed by women while other texts such as *Smritis*, *Grihya* and *Srauta Sutras*, are often unfavorable to them.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA:

The position of women in ancient India itself was subject to constant change; broadly it can be studied under two heads: Early Vedic and Later Vedic period.

Early Vedic Age (2500 B.C.-1500 B.C.):

Both girls as well as boys were initiated into the Vedic studies and were entitled for a rite of passage called *upnayan* ceremony. The *Harita Dharmasutra* familiarizes us with two kinds of women: *sadhyavadhu* who marry, and the *brahmavaadini* who are religious, wear the sacred thread and read the Vedas. (Leslie,1995) In fact some women from higher class were not only highly educated but took active part in intellectual discourses. Though in general practice the Hindu family did not extend much authority to its daughters. In the literary field also women made valuable contribution. They were encouraged to learn fine arts like dance, music and painting. The Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers like, *Apala*, *Maitreyi*, *Lopamudra*, *Ghosha Gargi* etc. (Basham,179) Thus we can say that women enjoyed restricted freedom in this period. However their primary duty remained to bear and raise children.

Later Vedic Age (1500 B.C.-1800 B.C.):

From about 1500 B.C. onwards the status of women began changing, chiefly due to denial of education to them. In her monograph on women in ancient India, Clarisse Bader writes that still during this period, a woman was 'judged capable of not just receiving, and still more of understanding the knowledge imparted to her.'

However the later Brahminical texts seem to curtail women's rights; the conflicting opinions of ancient lawgiver Manu (first century B.C.), on condition of women seem to summarize the contemporary attitude towards them. While in one of his dictums, he says- '*It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world, for that reason the wise never remain unguarded in the company of female*' in another he says that a woman should be subservient in all stages of her life- '*in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and to the son when widowed*' however at another place the same author says that '*gods dwell where women are worshipped*.' Thus we can conclude that women, who were hailed in their roles as mothers and wives, exercised very limited choice, role and power otherwise. (Chaudhry,1938)

POSITION OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA:

The Muslim invasion during the medieval age is often blamed for the low status of women; in reality it only aggravated the already decadent situation. In north India, customs differed widely between upper and lower caste Hindus. While in the lower castes widow remarriage and bride price prevailed, handsome dowries were given to grooms in the upper castes with strict restriction on widow remarriage, practices like sati (widow immolation), child marriage and *purdah* system became an inherent part of medieval Hindu society. Though in South India, many women administered villages and towns and the *Bhakti* movement tried to restore women's status by equating them with men.

Practices like *purdah* and widow remarriages were quiet common among all classes of Muslims. Marriage contracts fixed the amount of dowry (*mahr*) to be paid to the wife. Though practices like unilateral divorce and polygamy by men weakened Muslim women's position. They remained largely excluded from education, only the affluent ones could afford private tuitions. However Muslim law permitted women to own property; they not only managed lands but engaged in trade also. (Lal, 1988) In fact few prominent ladies both Muslim and Hindu made their mark in this period. Razia Sultan was the first and only Muslim woman to have ascended to the throne of Hindustan. While Nurjahan became the de facto ruler during the Mughal period. (Findly,3) Among Hindus women like Rani Karmavati, Tara Bai, Rani Durgawati, Mira Bai etc carved a niche for themselves (Srivastava,1952). However all these women came from Royal families hence the general condition of women remained grim.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA:

The 19th century saw the birth of social reform movement that stressed on upliftment of women through spread and propagation of education, widow remarriage, abolition of *purdah* and opposition of child marriage. During the colonial rule, many reformers fought relentlessly for women's cause.

'When Gandhiji assumed India's leadership the average life span of an Indian woman was only 27 years.

Only 2% of the women had any kind of education and they did not have an identity of their own'. Gandhiji being a great advocate of women's emancipation, said, "*Intellectually, mentally, and spiritually, woman is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity.*" (Kamat, 1998)

The freedom struggle produced many female stalwarts like *Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asaf Ali* among many others who singularly contributed towards the freedom struggle in varying capacities. However male guardianship for women who came out of their homes for the national cause was peculiar to the Indian Freedom movement.

Position of women in Post Independence India:

The Indian constitution guarantees equality to all women (Article 14), there shall be no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work is also guaranteed. In spite of favorable laws, the rate of crimes against women in India is very high. As per The National Crime Records Bureau, every three minutes a crime against a woman is committed. (Velkoff & Adlakha, 1998). Lack of education and economic independence often cause to hinder women's progress. Evil practices like *Sati, Devadasi, Child Marriages, Dowry, Female feticide* etc have long been banned still stray incidents keep occurring to shake our consciousness, increasing cases of molestation, eve-teasing, sex-selective abortions etc keep highlighting the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure irrespective of religious boundaries.

CONCLUSION

A careful perusal of religious texts, social customs and laws make it abundantly clear that all religions have accorded a very high status to women. Firstly, it is the misinterpretation of religion, born out of interpretative diversity that often undermines their status and secondly non-revisionist and non-reformist approach towards religion that resists modification as per the needs of changing times, often leads to marginalization of women. In fact Women are oppressed not so much by religion as by society. Patriarchal society has formulated roles for women over a period of time and any infringement of them is anathema to it. For instance women revolutionaries during the freedom struggle were hailed for their heroic acts but were not regarded as "respectable" by everyone, even Gandhi chose to call them "unsexed", need of the hour lies in giving our women their rightful place in the society, considering them as human beings, considering them as equals.

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