



## Journey of Indian Women from Ancient to the Modern Period

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In Indian society, the status of women has changed from time to time. We can divide the past into three phases to analyze the status of women. They are ancient, medieval and modern Indian period. During the Vedic period, women were treated with dignity and high respect in all the spheres of life – religious, political, social and economic. In *Rigveda*, the Purusha and Prakruti were considered equally important for creation. We have the concept of ‘Ardhanareshwar’ in the Hindu mythologies, comprising half male and half female. Throughout the Vedic period, woman was given equal status to that of male. She was on an equal footing with man in upholding dharma.

Woman’s education was encouraged. Wives of great rishies took active part in intellectual discussions. They were also permitted to attend important assemblies, religious duties and rituals. In *The History of Civilization in Ancient India* (1972) Romesh Chandra Dutt opines that woman, during the Vedic period, was the greatest symbol of Hindu womanhood. He further describes:

Women were honoured in ancient India, more perhaps than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe. They were considered the intellectual companions of their husbands... affectionate helpmate in journey of life, and ... inseparable partners in their religious duties ( Dutt : 1972, 67 ).

She even could fight wars in the battlefields like Kaikayee and take part in philosophic discussion like Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra.

Gargi, Lopamudra, Bhirwara, Ghosha, Godha, Apala, Vishwavara, Maitreyi, Arundhati etc. were highly learned women while scholars like Sulabhai, Vachakanave, Leelavathi were great Mathematicians. During this period, women were also permitted to learn grammar and fine arts like dancing and painting. They were also interested in some of the vocational courses like spinning and weaving, thread making etc. Women took part in the intellectual and spiritual life of the community. Some of the hymns of *Rigveda* were composed by women.

If we look at the ancient literature, we come across many celebrities who associated their names with names of their mothers and not with their fathers. Such names are Satyakam Jabala – the son of Jabala, Sariputra – the son of the lady Sari, Vainateya – the son of Vanita.

Vedic marriage ceremony considered wife as *ardhangini* – a companion. An unmarried man was considered to be incomplete without wife. All religious ceremonies were performed by the husband alongwith the wife. This shows the importance given to the woman in ancient period. The ideal example of this is Saptapadi ( seven steps ) which establishes the union between the husband and wife. Both the bride and bridegroom take seven steps repeating the following shloka:

Let us pray together  
For life – sap as we take first step  
For power as we take second step  
For wealth as we take third step  
For happiness as we take fourth step  
For offspring as we take fifth step  
For a prolonged life together as we take sixth step  
And be thou now my mate as we take the seventh step.

Girls had the option of choosing their life partners through *swayamvara*. They had also right to choose their husband through *gandharva vivah*. The example of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is a case in point.

After Rig Vedic period, the concept of *Pativrata* developed in the days of *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*. For women, Sita, Savitri and Gandhari were models and following the path of these models, women were taught to be shy, gentle and



dignified, faithful as a wife and loving and selfless as a mother. Women were encouraged to emulate the epic archetypes of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, who were symbolic of absolute fidelity. There was an anxiety to preserve the figure of woman as the epitome of all that was pure and chaste. Shanta Krishnaswami, aptly remarks about the real state of Indian women thus:

...as a child, is sold to strangers for bridal price or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family or who, as a widow in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati Savitri', as an immortal ( Krishnaswami : 1984 , 2 ).

Sita was considered as a paragon of feminine perfections. Sita has been held as an example to be followed by Hindu women down the centuries to the present day. But in fact, Sita's story is the story of pain, misery, suffering and humiliation from Rama and also by the society. So absolute *pativrata* is a myth rather than reality.

Another example is of Draupadi from *the Mahabharata*. Though she was confident of her own strength of mind and will, she became a victim of the patriarchal society. She was openly humiliated in the assembly of Hastinapur by Kauravas in the presence of Pandavas.

During the subsequent periods, there has been a gradual decline in the status of women. During the Atharvaveda period, people were seen displaying a strong preference for boys. The birth of a son was welcomed because it was a common belief that the son would save his father from the hell called "Punnama Narkam". There was not a single word used for the daughter. A wife was also asked to be the mother of sons and not of the mother of daughters. The blessings were also given as "Shat Putra Bhavati". It was said that a wife is a comrade, a daughter a misery and a son a light in the highest heaven.

During this period, the father was the head of the family. Because of the patriarchal ideology, the birth of a son became a celebration while the birth of a daughter was looked upon with disfavour. Thus, the freedom which women enjoyed during the Vedic period was steadily but increasingly declined.

The deterioration in the position of women began with the Pauranic and Dharma Shastra period because strict laws for the women were established by so called Dharmagurus. They established that women were just the shadow of men. King Manu, the creator of the law in the Indian society, did not advocate equality between men and women. But Manu was not a woman hater or did not intend to give the secondary position to women in the society. He said:

"Yatra Naryastu Pujayante, Ramante Tatra Devata"

This means –

"Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards". Manu regarded woman as more emotional and sensitive and less rational than man.

The only aim of her life was to obey and follow the command of man in various forms. It was believed that the husband was God for the woman and the devotion to him was equivalent to man's devotion to God. This enslavement of her to man was by brutal irony of life glorified as *Pativrata*. The father's will or the husband's will is the will of God. As Manu said:

Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be worshipped as God ( Manu : 1983 , 38 ).

The woman was excluded from Vedantic learning during this period and had no right to own wealth. The evil of child marriage, the prohibition of the remarriage for the widow and sati tradition were very prominent in those days. The creator of laws like Marichi and Atri warned the parents against the marriage of a mature daughter as they thought that *kanyadan* of an immature girl child would bring them to the heaven. As Marichi remarked:

The father, mother, the eldest brother of a maiden seeing her in menstrual course go to the hell ( Thomas : 1964 , 225 ).

Afraid of this religious code, the people of upper caste gave their daughters in marriage before ten. Thus, pre – puberty marriages became quite popular and prevalent.

The second evil given by these law creators was the prohibition of the remarriage of the widows. The life of a widow was an ordeal of fire. Her status in the family was that of an unfortunate woman and she was kept out from some auspicious ceremonies since she was considered inauspicious by the law givers.

Some of the law creators like Angira favoured sati tradition and it was considered to be a holy act for a woman to burn herself alive after the death of her husband. As Angira wrote:



Sati takes out her husband from Hell and enjoys heaven with him for three and a half crores of years ( Thomas : 1964 , 231 ).

The double standard of morality set up by Manu and other law makers worsened the position of women in the society because people did not understand their real intention in presenting women. The position of women became worse, child marriage became rampant, girls' education tended to be absolutely nil.

But during the Buddhist era, there was equal status of women to men because it allowed women to be educated, to travel as missionaries and even to remain unmarried. Buddha's respect and compassion for human beings gave respect to women also. In this way, there was the upliftment in the position of women in the society. Child marriage, sati and bride price were discarded. As Buddha believed in individual's independence and ultimate liberation, women became truly unshackled. Jainism also followed it and gave respect to women. The monastic life of the Jains offered their women the best opportunities for intellectual and aesthetic cultivation.

Entry of Islam into India made the position of women even more precarious, deteriorating and marginalized. Lack of education and increasing number of child marriage during this period worsened the position of women. It was one of the darkest periods for women in the history of India. Women were carried away as "commodities" by the invaders. The purdah system came into existence which prevented women from participating in public affairs. Their work was only confined to the four walls of the house. A feeling of insecurity pervaded among them. They were expected to be devoted, submissive and docile.

At the time of the arrival of British, women's position had reached the nadir. Women were considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no importance, no personality. Socially, they were kept in the state of utter subjugation, denied every right, suppressed and oppressed. Custom of polygamy, property structure, the purdah, state of permanent widowhood were rampant.

They were considered as shudra, polluted, untouchable and marginalized. They were also abused, beaten, expelled and sometimes even raped and still they had to be silent. They had no dreams of their own. They had no separate status as the member of the family. Their existence was taken for granted. Their desires, opinions, likes and dislikes were never to be considered.

Most of the Indian women were not conscious of their low status and those who were aware of it were mostly helpless because of social structure and cultural values. Most of the legislations remained on paper and out of the reach of common women. So, women were in the sorry state. The Vedic liberties enjoyed by women were forgotten now.

The birth of two movements during the colonial rule in India created awareness of the need for improvement in women's condition. These movements were the Social Reform Movement and the Nationalist Movement. These movements brought about a change in the status of women.

Some of the social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotiba Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Maharshi Karve etc. raised their voice against the social evils regarding pathetic situation of women. These pioneers preached against the sati, pleaded for the remarriage of the widows, worked for the removal of caste barriers and for the eradication of untouchability. In the words of Indira Kulashreshtha:

After centuries of social stagnation, the Indian woman was now encouraged to come back to the main stream of social life and resume her rightful place ( Kulashreshtha : 1999 , 5 ).

With the growth of educational and vocational opportunities, educated women became conscious of their rights. They became conscious of the fact that they too were humans first of all and therefore deserved equal rights. More and more educational opportunities were provided to them. There was a drastic change in the position and attitude towards women with the exposure of reformist movements, economic independence and also the influence of various western feminist movements. Now, women began to voice their desires and feelings without hesitation. As Meena Shirwadkar observes:

As women received education, they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with their tradition bound surrounding resentment of male dominated ideas of morality and behaviour problems at home and at place of work or in society – all came up in a welter of projection ( Shirwadker : 1979 ,201 ).

The Indian women began to stir out of their placid stoicism. Their political and social consciousness brought them out into the open protest, marching against discrimination and evils like rape, exploitation and dowry deaths.

During the period of Renaissance in India, the Indian society was under the impact of the west. The nationalist spirit was kindled. There was more emphasis on humanitarianism and women began to voice freely their feelings and experiences. Feminism in Indian English literature is a by – product of the western feminist movement but the western feminist theory should



not lead us because cultural contexts must be considered first. We have a different history, ethos, forms of social stratification and patriarchal domination. The western individualism may prove to be impractical in the Indian context. In an interview, Shashi Deshpande told Lakshmi Holmstrom:

It is difficult to apply Kate Millett or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. ... They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences ( Deshpande : 1998 , 26 ).

Free India provided her female population the constitutional right to equality of opportunity and status before law, right to receive education, right to property, reservation of seats in legislative bodies at various levels, right to choice in marriage, participate in public and political life and numerous other rights and privileges. According to Vimla Patil:

Women in India have changed at a faster rate than women anywhere else in the world and their 'attitude' has changed the very face of our society ( Patil : 2002 , 25 ).

Now the position of women is equal to that of men socially, economically, politically and legally. Today a woman is not a doll in the hands of man. She is being seen establishing her identity in almost every walk of life. She can seek employment anywhere and remains not a domestic slave. Now woman begins to voice her feelings.

However, such women are a few in numbers while the majority of them still conform to the tradition bound concept of womanhood mainly for the fear of ostracism. She is in the age of alienation. The deep rooted and age – old customs and taboos force women to fit into the fixed structures created by male ideology. The deep rooted myths about women have not allowed them to lead an authentically free life. The average Indian woman remains relatively unchanged, shackled by the superstitions and customs that are perpetuated in the name of tradition.

Despite equal opportunities of education and economic independence, women remain a victim of domestic injustice within the family and other legal rights outside. The women have been working indoors and outdoors, but their services remain unrecognized. Although the lot of women in the family and society have changed with the times for the better, but remained invariably inferior to those of men.

Still the number of women enjoying considerable freedom is very meager. For the majority of women, subordination to men and misery are synonymous. From the centuries, the fight for emancipation of women was taken over by a few educated women and they turned writers. The motive was to voice their own bitter experiences as women with a view to influencing the society and affecting social reforms. Prof. John B. Alphonso Karkala in his book *Indo – English Literature of the Nineteenth*

*Century* writes:

They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers, both in India and abroad ( Karakala : 1970,78 ).

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