



GENDER DISCRIMINATION THROUGH AGES IN INDIA

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Abstract

The status of women in ancient times was quite respectable in Indian society with time it underwent unfavorable change due to numerous factors including attitude towards women and social evils. There was a continuous decline in the position of women which was followed by attempts by social reformers to improve the status of women. Thus the condition of women went from high to low and then improved with special efforts. This paper makes an attempt to depict the discrimination against women during different time periods classified as ancient, medieval and modern India.



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Introduction

Any study of civilization is incomplete without the study of the status and position of women in it. Women constituted the key stone in the arch of Indian civilization. One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilization and to realize its limitations is to study the history of position and status of women. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the gender discrimination in Indian history.

Section –I Ancient India

Condition of women during Rigvedic age

Monogamy was the general rule, but among the princes, polygamy was also practiced. However, polyandry was absolutely unknown. Widows were allowed to remarry the marriage of girls was not considered to be essential and there are references to girls remaining unmarried till late age and living with their fathers and brothers.

After marriage the bride was brought to the house of bridegroom and in her new house, she was given place of honor. She was to have authority over her aged father-in-law, mother-in-law and brothers and sisters of her husband. Wife was the partner of the husband at the time of religious ceremonies and no ceremony was considered to be effective without her participation.

Child marriage was unknown. The choice of father counted in selection of bridegroom but girl was also given a measure of independence in that matter. Overall women enjoyed a very honorable and respectable social status in the society of the Aryans. They were accorded a great consideration and reverence in the society. There was no PURDAH. Women wore beautiful clothes and adorned themselves with ornaments to celebrate festivals with great rejoicing. No function was considered complete unless women participated in them. She was considered as ardhangani (better half) of her husband and sahdharmini (co-partner in the performance of all the duties). Women received education also. Many of mantras of Rigveda have been composed by women scholars. Rigveda mention names of 15 women scholars whose hymns are found in Rigveda. Some of the important women scholars are Ghosha, Upala, Lopamudra, Mudgalini, Vishwara, Juhu etc.

Condition of women during later Vedic age

Women's position had deteriorated during this period. Birth of a daughter was not welcomed. At certain occasions instead of ladies, purohits had started taking part in religious ceremonies. Manu says women do not deserve liberty. She was dependent on her father in her childhood, husband after marriage and her son on her becoming a widow. But still some women were well read as Gargi, Maitreya, Vakakanavi. Swayamvar still existed. Child marriage, Sati, and Purdah had not started yet. Widow was allowed to remarry. There was no female infanticide.

Condition of women during epic age

The decline continued. There was polygamy as well as polyandry. Women had lost her important position in religious and social sphere. Her position was replaced by the Brahmin himself. She could not take part in political affairs. Sati was there as Madri (the second wife of Pandu) committed sati. There is no reference to widow remarriage and early marriages started towards the end. Swayamvar for royal families existed. A woman (Draupadi) was given in gambling. Purdah pratha had begun.

Condition of women from sixth century to fourth century BC

Women did not occupy the same position as in Vedic period. Buddha refused to admit women into his sangha. He laid down certain rules which denied equality to Buddhist nuns with Buddhist monks. Buddha was not happy about the admission of women into the sangha as he said; his religion will not last longer. At Taxila, there was a market where girls were sold.

Condition of women during Mauryan age

Condition of women had deteriorated. Of course they were educated, participated in social and religious functions and were also employed as spies and bodyguards but these privileges were restricted only to a minority belonging to upper strata of the society. Purdah had come in vogue. Sati in few places in North West was seen. Monogamy was the rule but males of rich and ruling classes had started keeping many wives. Widow Remarriage and divorce were discouraged. Prostitution was also prevalent.

Condition of women in Post Mauryan times (187 BC to 320 AD)

If wife suffered from any diseases, her husband could marry a second time with her consent. Practice of Niyoga was prevalent during this period. Widow remarriage was not favored. As compared to Mauryan period, the condition of women deteriorated during this period and continued to be so after that.

Condition of women during Gupta age

Though women did not enjoy the honorable status, yet she enjoyed a high status in the society. The image of Kumara Devi on the coins of Chandargupta (I) hints at this fact. Women were well educated, skillful in music, dancing and singing. Works of Kalidasa tell us that women were beauty conscious and used various types of cosmetics. They were very obedient and sincere to their husbands. Child marriage was there. Women were not free to choose their life partners. Widow Remarriage was prevalent. Chandragupta (II) married Dhruv Devi widow of his brother Ramagupta. Widows led a simple and pious life and wore white clothes and lead a life of austerity. Generally monogamy was the rule but polygamy was prevalent in high families. Fahien does not mention Purdah system but it was there among women of high families. When Shakuntala visited royal court of King Dushyant, she covered her face with a veil. There is no sign of Purdah on paintings of Ajanta and Ellora caves.

Condition of women during Vardhanas

Girls married at an early age. Polygamy was common. Sati was in vogue among royal families. Rajyashri, the sister of Harshvardhana had been married at the age of 12. Harsha's mother Yashomati had burnt herself on funeral pyre. Even Rajyashri was going to burn her but she was luckily saved by Harsha. Rajyashri often used to take part in religious activities.

Section –II Medieval India

Condition of women on the eve of Turkish invasion

Position of women still worsened, considered inferior. Women were regarded as objects of enjoyment and a means to procure children. They were to be subservient to their husbands. Women were denied education. They had no right to study the Vedas. Child marriage was the common practice. Girls were given away in marriage by their parents between the ages of six or eight or between eighth year and attaining puberty. In general, remarriage of widows was not permitted, they were kept in seclusion and their life was regulated by male relations such as father, brother husband and son. Polygamy was practiced and practice of sati among women of higher caste was becoming quiet wide spread.

Condition of women during early medieval India (Sultanate Period)

The position of women in this 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. After marriage, she was under the supervision of her husband and after his death, she was under supervision of her grown up sons. However it was laid down that a husband must honor his wife and provide her with gifts of ornaments and good food. The husband went abroad, he was required to provide for the maintenance of his wife during his absence. Even if a wife was guilty of adultery, she had to be provided for. If a husband ill treated his wife, he was punished by the state. In spite of this the position of women worsened during the Sultanate period. On account of fear from muslims and other kinds of high handedness, new rules were made to enforce early marriage. Girls should be married at the age of seven, ten and at the most twelve years. A marriage at or after the age of puberty was considered a bad marriage and a matter of sin for her parents. Child marriage and purdah brought about the segregation of girls and degradation in the condition of Hindu women during his period. Sati was common but not compulsory. According to Al-biruni, a widow had to choose between two alternatives either remaining a widow all her life or committing sati. Ibn Batuta has given an eye witness account of sati in malwa. The institution of devadasis in principal temples was in existence. Al-biruni confirms large numbers of beautiful maidens were maintained for music and song in important temples in most parts of the country. Women were allowed to possess certain kind of properties besides their Stridhan. Some princesses and queens wielded great political authority e.g. in Kashmir and in South India. Polygamy was permitted though common people were monogamous. Gurunanak Dev Ji recognized the important role of women in the preservation and proper functioning of the

family and society and that raised the status of women in Sikh society and made them true partners of their husbands.

It cannot be said that there was no provision for the education of women at that time. Ibn-Batuta writes that he saw at Hanaur thirteen schools for girls. Birth of a daughter was not liked.

Among Rajputs women committed Jauhar, female infanticide Sati, Purdha, Child marriage e.g : Rani Padmani of Chittaur.

Muslims took pleasure in enslaving Hindu women en masse from the highest to the lowest rank. Many of them were forced to entertain the Muslim court and the nobility with dance and music. Hindu women who were converted to Islam were sent as presents to the emperor of china. They were distributed among the nobility by the king Mohamad Tughlak.

Condition of women during Mughal Period

The upper class women were generally educated and lived a life of luxury though confined to the inmates of the haram and sharing the husband with numerous wives and mistresses. Some of these women played an active part in politics as ruler themselves such as Rani Durgawati, Chand Bibi or exercising political power through their husbands like Nur Jahan. There were others such as Jahanara and Roshnara daughter of Shah Jahan. Many other women such as the vegetable seller Zuhra during the reign of Muhammad Shah or his queen Udham Bai, a former dancing girl played a role in politics during the period of mughal decline.

Role of women in giving moral and cultural tone to society from behind the curtain was very important. They influenced royal taste and patronage and themselves extended to singer, artists etc. some of them have many literary works to their credit. Harmful social practices like child marriage, forced marriage, denial of share in parental property etc. continued in medieval times. Akbar tried to fix the age of marriage for boys and girls, give freedom to girls to marry on their own and not under paternal pressure. But these were largely disregarded. there was a little attempt on mughal attempt to regulate sati because all the important rajpur rajas continued to practice it. When Maharaja Maan Singh died, four rani's committed sati along with him and another five at Amber.

Divorce was not favored by the Muslims nobles, though there are few instances of it. There are no references to share the property being given to daughters of nobles. For women belonging to the common fold, life was hard. In the paintings also, women could be seen working in building activities, along with their infants. Working women received wages which were lower than those given to men. In Kota, according to official figures, women

working in the fields received lower wages than men. Spinning was widely practiced by women. The fine thread from which the famous muslin of Dacca was woven was prepared by women. The chicken work for which Awadh was famous was also a specialty of women. However, it is clear that all such women worked under the tight control of a merchant, or a master craftsman.

Section-III Modern India

Condition of women during British Rule

During the British rule several changes were made in the socio-economic structure of our society. During this period, some substantial progress was made in eliminating inequalities between men and women in matters of education, employment, social and political rights. Industrialization, urbanization, spread of education and social movements were some of the important aspects of change which affected the status of women in various ways.

Due to industrialization and urbanization, development in the field of transport and communication not only new roles have emerged but also new social norms and values have emerged. Education, which has been identified as the major instrument for raising the status of women was started during British period. The Christian missionaries took interest in the education of girls. A girl's school was started for the first time in Bombay in 1824. The hunter commission emphasized the need for female education in 1881. The Calcutta, Madras and Bombay Universities allowed girls to go for higher education in 1882.

During British period there were two major movements which affected the position of women. These include social reform movements of 19th century and nationalist movement of 20th century.

Social reform movements

The social reformers believed in the principle of individual liberty, freedom, and equality of all human beings irrespective of sex, color, race, caste, or religion. They attacked a number of traditional, authoritarian, and hierarchical social institutions and launched social reform movements to liberate the Indian women from their shackles.

There are two distinct groups of progressive movements aimed at emancipation of Indian women. Both groups recognized the restrictive and coercive nature of the social customs and institutions. One group opposed these customs and institutions as they contradicted the democratic principles of liberty and freedom. These group was called the Reformers.

The other group demanded the democratization of social relations and removal of harmful practices on the basis of revival of the Vedic society in modern India, which according to them, was democratic. This group came to be known as the Revivalists.

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Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one of the greatest social reformers of India. He was concerned about a number of evil customs plaguing the Indian society. These included “saha marana” or Sati, female infanticide, polygamy, infant marriages, purdah, absence of education among women, and the Devadasi system. Raja Ram Mohan Roy led a crusade against the evil and inhuman practice of Sati, in which a widow was forced to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Sati was in practice in many parts of India.

It was accepted and condoned on the grounds that it would secure “Moksha” for widows. It was also felt that a woman could be led astray if she continued to live after the death of her husband. This feeling was disproved by Raja, who felt that a woman could be led astray even during her husband’s lifetime.

Raja’s arguments and anti-Sati activities led Lord William Bentinck to legislate for the prohibition of Sati, which resulted in the passing of the Prohibition of Sati Act in 1829.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was another great social reformer who sought to improve the condition of widows by legalizing widow remarriages.

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade was instrumental in laying down the foundation of an all Indian organization to carry on the struggle for social reform—the Indian National Social Conference.

He took up the problems of widow remarriages and was an active member of a society, which worked for widow remarriages. Ranade worked toward educating women. He and his wife started a school for girls in 1884.

Maharishi Karve showed great concern for the plight of widows and the problem of widow remarriages. He revived the Widow Remarriage Association and started the Hindu Widow’s Home. Karve also made efforts to improve the education levels of girls as well as widows.

He created the Kane Women’s University. His efforts in the movement to liberate the Indian women are of great significance, and the extensive and successful work brought about a change in the attitudes of people towards widows.

The institutions established during this period are as follows:

The Gujarat Vernacular Society:

This social institute was established in 1848. The aim of this institute was to decrease the large-scale illiteracy and superstitious beliefs that was a feature of the Gujarati society. It was associated with all social reform activities concerning women in Gujarat.

The society worked for the cause of women through education. It started a number of co-educational schools. It published literature on women's issues in the vernacular press. It tried to organize elocution competitions and provide a platform for women to talk about their issues and problems.

The Deccan Education Society:

This society was formed in 1884. The society started girls' schools and encouraged education of women in Maharashtra.

The Ramakrishna Mission:

The Ramakrishna Mission was established in 1897. It set up homes for widows and schools for girls. It also gave refuge to invalid and destitute women, ante- and post-natal care for women, and provided training for women to become midwives.

The Arya Samaj:

women's education in home science and domestic affairs, Fine arts provided shelter to distressed women in times of difficulty.

The Hingne Women's Education Institute:

In 1896 to meet the demand of women, whether married, unmarried or widowed, it tried to prevent early marriages. It tried to impart skills and education to married women to enable them to carry on domestic life efficiently and economically. It also gave training to widows to make them economically independent.

S.N.D.T. Women's University:

This university was established to meet the needs for higher education for women in such a manner that women's requirements were satisfied. It provided education in the mother tongue. It was established exclusively for the education of women.

The Seva Sadan:

Seva Sadan was started in 1908, with a view to bringing together enlightened women of different communities who desired to work for the upliftment of backward women. Its main activity was to provide social and medical aid to women and children of the poor classes,

irrespective of their caste or creed. It also established a home for destitute and distressed women and children.

It also provided training to poor women in domestic crafts to enable them to earn a livelihood. The Seva Sadan in Poona was established to educate women in religious, literary, medical, and industrial subjects. It also emphasized on all-round development of a woman's personality. It stressed on economic self-sufficiency of women.

All India Women's Conference:

The primary focus of this organization was women's education as well as social reforms. Its aim was to work actively for the general progress and welfare of women and children. It passed various resolutions in different sessions in order to elevate the status of women.

It also dealt with the evils of early marriages, polygamy, and prohibition of divorce. It advocated complete equality for women in property matters. It sought to improve working conditions for women. It also agitated against immoral traffic in women and children, and against the inhuman custom of Devadas.

Nationalist movement

During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Claiming Indian superiority became the tool of cultural revivalism resulting in an essentialising model of Indian womanhood similar to that of Victorian womanhood: special yet separated from public space. Gandhi legitimised and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and carved a niche for those in the public arena. Peasant women played an important role in the rural satyagrahas of Borsad and Bardoli. Women-only organisations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with issues relating to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

The 1920s was a new era for Indian women and is defined as 'feminism' that was responsible for the creation of localised women's associations. These associations emphasised women's education issues, developed livelihood strategies for working class women, and also organised national level women's associations such as the All India Women's Conference. AIWC was closely affiliated with the Indian National Congress. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, it worked within the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movements. This made the mass mobilisation of women an integral part of Indian nationalism. Women therefore were a very important part of various nationalist and anti-colonial efforts, including the civil disobedience movements in the 1930s.

Many women came to the forefront like Annie Basant, Sarojini Naidu, Usha Mehta, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur.

The position of women in the Indian society through out the ages has been a great debate. Women in India has been treated both as Goddesses and also root cause of all the evils. They enjoyed and equal status in the tribal and pastoral phases but with the emergence of concept of property and age of continuous wars their position starts declining. From the Ancient period the path for women has been uneven with some pleasant turns but most of the time , women have been subjects of exploitation , subjugation and deprived of their fundamental rights.

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