

# Shifts in the Identity of Women in India through the Ages

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## Abstract

The acme of all civilizations is evaluated by the status of women and their involvement in the progress of the society. Though women's life is filled with a lot of constraints from the genesis of mankind, they continue to play a signal role. The nature of Women's history in India is full of shifts. If sometimes the society provided woman a dignitary position, sometimes that society itself treated her as useless. Religion and caste are the two main hindrances on the way of women's development. Actually the golden age of women in the history of India is misnomer. The study of women's changing status leads to the understanding of vicissitudes gender issues in India

**Key Words:** *Women, Religion, Identity, Discrimination, Patriarchy*

From the commencement of the history of civilization, society has been male dominated and the status and position of woman depended on how man perceived her in his relationship with her. In the wandering life, man followed egalitarian concept and there was no scope for patriarchy. But somehow, patriarchy originated in the society with domination, superiority, dissimilarities and gender inequality. Literally speaking, patriarchy is the domination of male in a family. This superiority based concept ill-treats women frequently. The inherent features of mastery and suppression of women differs from one another, because of the dissimilarities in group, social order, faith, area, society and the societal enactments. The nature of Indian patriarchal construct may be different in castes and tribes as each social group or category also varies concerning their spiritual and provincial dissimilarities.

Women enjoyed a high status in the Rig Vedic society surpassing the contemporary civilizations of ancient Greece or Rome ( Anjani Kant, 2008, p.29). During the Vedic period they shared equal status with men in every field such as political, social, economic and

religious. Woman's presence with a man makes him complete and perfect. The 'ardhangini' concept explicates woman as the half of man's body. The Vedic ceremonial practices were considered as invalid without the togetherness of husband and wife. Women had ease of access in *Sabha* and *Samiti*, the political bodies. Rig Vedic literature praises the particular consideration enjoyed by women in those days. The Rig Veda also mentions the wife of a tribal chief Khela named Vishapala confronted in encounters along with her husband ( Mukta Mittal, 2008, p.21).

Among the several gods of the Hindu religion there were many women goddesses - the goddess of wealth, learning, nature etc (Lalithambika Antharjanam, 1975, p.10). In the epic age, Seetha, Savithri and Anasuya became perpetual ideals for all womanhood. Women participated in Yajnam and other religious practices. It is with richness of personality goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Parvathi seem to have blessed the Indian women (Devaki Jain, 1975, p.44).

The prejudices and discrimination against the birth of a female child were totally unknown. The *Atharva Veda* prescribed rituals supposed to ensure the birth of a son, but on the other hand Brihadaranyaka Upanishad provided a ritual supposed to ensure the birth of a scholarly daughter. The Samyuktha Nikaya stated that a talented daughter was of great value than a son. Knowledge itself is personified as Saraswathi a feminine gender. During this period women's education was a routine part developed by *Upanayana* ( *Upanayanam*: sacred thread wearing ceremony of the Brahmin and Namboothiris, after which the education of boys and girls started. This ceremony is one of the most important rituals among the Namboothiris.( from Sathapatha Brahmana) (. The Vedic literatures mention the names of many women who attained eminence as philosophers along with men. Viswawara, in the family of Atri is described as philosopher and well versed in sacred text and authoress of a hymn in Rig Veda, Ghosha, daughter of Kakshivan, Lopamudra, wife of Agastya and Apala

were well versed in sacred texts. Marital concerns were legal during this period. The Rig Veda describes wife as an ornament, the epitome of home and true friend of her husband. She appeared freely at feasts and dances (P Singh, 2012, p.170).

In the extreme patriarchal society of India, women lived with expectations. Women enjoyed esteem status during the period of the Upanishads. Learning was easily accessible to women in those days. For instance, women intellectuals like Gargi and Maithreyi engaged in philosophical debates and deliberations with men in royal courts ( Lalithambika Antharjanam, *op.cit.*, p.10). Women also wallowed in agriculture. Studies reveal the egalitarian mode of early Vedic period. Later, the estimation of women started to be deteriorated with the Smritis. According to Manu, woman is a perpetual minor and has to lead whole of her life under the guardianship of the father, the husband or the son. The woman's salvation lies only in the devoted service to her husband (Maya Majumdar, 2012, p.1). Manu further listed six causes of woman's ruin, the habit of drinking alcohol, keeping company with bad people, separation from husband, roaming abroad, sleeping at day time and living in another house ( Prabhat Mukharjee, 1978, p.12). All these things reveal that women were always liable to men even though they enjoyed high status during the Vedic period.

In the last phase of the later Vedic period, the position of women began to be deteriorated. There is evidence that Muslim invasion brought about the deterioration of women's' position. Restrictions on her rights and freedom were imposed. The women were considered inferior to men and so began to be ill-treated. During the Maurya period, Kautilya argued widow marriage and was allowed but according to Manu, sacred texts did not allow widow or remarriage ( Anjani Kant, *op.cit.*, p.50) . Sometimes, Manu allowed the virgin widow to remarry. Manu opines that in Prathiloma marriages, when an upper caste woman marries a lower caste man her identity began to deteriorate.

Generally eight forms of marriage prevailed among the Hindus. Brahma, Daiva, Arsha and Prajapatya were approved forms and Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa, and Paisacha were unapproved. In the Brahma form of marriage, a father gives his daughter to a scholarly man. In the Daiva form of marriage woman was treated as a tribute to the priest who performs a sacrifice for the damsel's father. In the Arsha form of marriage father is forced to give his daughter for cows and bulls in return, and that should be used for religious ceremonies. Similar to the terms of Brahma, Prajaptya form of marriage also gave emphasis to religious practices. The nature of marriage shows crude forms of patriarchy over women in the name of religion.

Initially Buddha was reluctant to incorporate women into the Sangha and this attitude resulted in the subsequent neglect of female education by his followers (Maya Majumdar, *op.cit.*,p.14). It was only after the advice from his foster mother Mahaprajapathi Gauthami and his disciple Ananda that Buddha with great reluctance agreed to admit women in to his religion. 'Bhikuni Patimokh' was the Buddhist order formed for woman Sanghas. Several women became disciples of Buddha and were known as 'Theris' (Therigatha was a monumental work in Pali language. Among the authors of Therigatha forty two were women of whom thirty two were unmarried). Among them Mahaprajapathi Gouthami, Khema Patachara and Ambapali were important. The collection of verses in Pali known as 'Therigatha' is believed to have composed Buddha's life line by women who were the first to join monastic order. Perhaps the greatest attraction of becoming a nun was that a woman had the opportunity to study, teach and preach. Buddhism aroused a feeling of self confidence and self respect in women.

Jainism offered best opportunities for the intellectual and aesthetic cultivation of women. They accommodated women and established nunneries. Kalpa Sutra refers that many thousands of Jain nun were great scholars( S Ram Sharma, 1995, p.7). The Digambaras were of the opinion that women were incapable of attaining salvation. So they were did not admit into their order. But the Swethambaras made no distinction between the sexes and freely admitted aspirants of both sexes into their order. Jaina believed that there were very few women who had the strength of mind and body to endure the hard life of an ascetic. The women were considered weak and so unfit to undertake a course of self-mortification and self- effacement. Thus in the spiritual order women had secondary position.

Sikhism advocated equality among all the human beings. The social equality of the women is ungrudgingly recognized. The militant brotherhood of Sikhs, the Khalsa founded by Guru Gobind Singh in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was open to both sexes and all classes. The women were initiated into the Khalsa by taking the name of Kaur and were expected to perform the same duties as men. Since in Sikhism the equality of sexes was recognized, very few restrictions were put on women's education (Sunderlal, 2005, p. 72).

In Christianity, women are considered as the harbinger of evil. Catholics give a high respectful place to Virgin Mary but both the Protestants and Catholics feel that the women brought evil to earth. The position of women in Jewish faith was very low. The Christian saints and priests considered women to be unclean and gave so much importance to the life of celibacy (*ibid*). It is because of this attitude that Christian women were denied

those rights and privileges that the Christian men enjoyed.

In Islam, straight forward directions regarding the status of women have been laid down. Islam gives equality to women in relation to men in many ways. It makes a case for the dignity of women. In Holy Quran it is mentioned that 'women are the twin halves of men' (Afsar Bano, 2003, p. 21). There are also many aspects which present seeds of discrimination between men and women. Islam gives rights of inheritance of property to women as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister and in some cases even to more distantly relate. But when a man has a son and a daughter both, the share of the daughter was half than that of the son.

In the middle ages, the estimation of Indian women again downturned whereas Sati (The word sati means a virginal and chaste woman. It was a system of self immolation by the wife in the funeral pyre of her husband. This custom was strictly followed among the Rajaputs, Jats, and orthodox Hindus of Northern India etc), child marriages and prohibition on widow remarriages was romped in Indian society. Sati was more rampant during the medieval period. Recorded evidences had been obtained from different states of India like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan etc. The Greeks believed that the practice had been instituted to discourage wives from poisoning their old husbands (P Singh, *op.cit.*, p.4). Sati has a slight resemblance to the later tradition of Sepukku in Japan.

During the Gupta period, the stratum of women was generally inferior to that of men. But when Katyayana approved women's right to property, a slight shift occurred in women's status. Women of the concerned period like Prabhavati Gupta showed great courage to make a regency administration in the Vakataka Empire.

The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the Purdah practice in the Indian society. The Rajputs of Rajasthan practiced Jauhar. The *devadasis*, women servants of God, were erotically exploited. When powerful Muslims showed interest in marrying the Hindu girls compulsorily, the Hindus obliged to confine the liberty of their women. The destiny of widows under severe ethical sanction became predominantly deplorable (Prathima Asthana, 1974, p.3). Polygamy was extensively followed.

Yet, some women shimmered in political affairs, writing, teaching and faith. The solitary woman sovereign who has ever ruled Delhi was Raziya Sulthana. Durgavati defeated the Mughals and ruled the kingdom of Gondwana for fifteen years (B S Chandrababu & Thilagavati, 2009, p.148). In 1564, while fighting gallantly against Akbar's General Asaf Khan, she departed from her life. Chand Bibi, the administrator of

Ahmed Nagar, chivalrously combated against the potent Mughal armed forces of Akbar in 1590. As Jahangir was inefficacious in administrative affairs, Nurjahan methodically wielded the power and manifested her stuff in administration. Jahanara and Zebunnissa, Mughal princesses, manifested their propensities in writing. By diagnosing the valor and potentials of Jijabhai, Shivaj's mother, she was delegated as queen regent of Maratta.

The Bhakti movement tried to restore women's status and questioned some of the forms of oppression (Sarojkumar Singh, 2017, p.14). Mira Bhai, a female saint poet was one of the most important Bhakti movement figures. Akka Mahadevi, Rami Janabai and Lal Ded were some other female saint poets of this period. Mahanubhav, Varkari were principle movements of Bhakti sects within Hinduism which openly advocated social justice and equality between men and women. But, Tukaram declares: Give me not the company of women, for, by them I forget God's worship and my mind goes beyond my control (S Madana Venkata, 2016, p.331). Kabir called woman a hellish well (Neelam Upadhyaya & Rekha Pandey, 1990, p.20). Sankaracharya treated woman as a gateway to hell.

In short, medieval period can be regarded as unpleasant one as far as the status of women was concerned. They were deprived of all social and economic rights except those of the mother and the sister. They lost all the opportunities for securing even basic education. Economically she was basically poor and dependent on her father, husband and son. The fact remains that there was deterioration in the position of women from 200 BCE to 1800 CE.

On the eve of British advent in India, women's position was subjugated one and they were considered as dump drives cattle. The most common evil was female infanticide which prevailed in the country especially in Rajasthan, Punjab, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Girls were usually married before they attained puberty and if by any chance parents failed to find a suitable match within the age limitation of six to ten years they suffered religious and social disgrace (Swarna Lata, 1993, p.25). And it was the custom of infanticide through which parents could maintain their respect in the society. The best method to kill the girls was either by strangulation or by smearing opium on the breast of the mother before she feed the baby. In Bengal, the condition of women was sadder in comparison to other states due to strange notion held about the educated women. It was commonly believed that a girl taught to read and write would become a widow (R C Majumdar, 1960, p.1).

Traditionalism, ritualism and blind faith governed the socio-religious life of women during this period. By denying the benefits of education, brought up in an authoritarian atmosphere having no opportunities to

develop their natural capacities and facilities women became helpless, illiterate, narrow minded and peevish. The theory of perpetual tutelage of women became more and more deep rooted in society (Swami Madhavananda & R C Majumdar, 1953, p. 44). In another way, it can be said that the literacy, individuality, health, social status, freedom of movement and economic independence of women reached its lowest ebb at the advent of the British rule (Margarat Cousin, 1963, p.120).

After colonial penetration, the British savants, missionaries and bureaucrats had cast off European techniques and procedures in valuing women's position in the society. They noticed that the Hindu women were conventionally encircled and spiritually submissive. Furthermore, they settled in a restricted and repressive situation. The Europeans damned the traditional compacts of Hindu society correlated with women. The ideology of anti-colonialism and anti feudalism was a dynamic force in shaping this total transformation of an agrarian society and its traditional value system (Bipan Chandra, 1989 p.4). The movement has been responsible to introduce a new value system, social change and individual freedom.

Colonial modernity has changed a lot in the living standard of women. But even today women's position in a family, community or society, it is determined by man. Even though the welfare of a family is mostly depends upon the woman of the family, she must be liable to the men. Gender equality is the exclusive solution for making Indian women more and freer. The secondary position of women is concreted and cemented by men in all walks of life. In order to make an equivalent gender system the reconstruction must be started from the grass root level of human life.

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