

Status Of Women In Ancient India

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Abstract

Women make up the majority of the population in India, which means they account for a significant proportion of the modern and ancient parts of our nation's history. In ancient times, Women were honoured and treated with respect. Many elements influence the position and role of women in ancient India. Social structure, cultural norms, value systems and social expectations are a few of them. The cultural, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development of society also mirrored the role of women in ancient times. Women were treated with honour and made substantial contributions to government and politics as well. Yet, considering the current situation, women must be given greater power and integrated into society in this modern India. The value placed on women in ancient cultures should be thoroughly examined and applied to the advancement of women in modern society. The main objective of this study is to obtain an understanding of the status of women in ancient India. Women endowers plays an important role in the strengthening of human civilization and made rapid progress in the globe over the ages

Keywords: Ancient India, society, family, the status of women, education, equality

Date of Submission: 01-04-2025

Date of Acceptance: 11-04-2025

I. Introduction

Social and economic imbalance is an unavoidable feature of every human society. Gender discrimination is one of the important aspects of that. In modern Indian society, gender inequality manifests itself in a variety of ways. Even though women are present in many aspects of society, their status is seeming to be inferior to that of men. In many situations, they are victimized and treated unequally in comparison to men. The evidence from ancient Indian history demonstrates that women were worshipped as mother goddesses [1]. The status of women was reflected in a variety of societal achievements, including those related to culture, aesthetics, morality, and spirituality. In the household, wives were valued and given respect. We can see how essential women were to society both biologically and culturally [2]. But when we come to 21 centuries, there are numerous programmes nationwide that promote women's empowerment. The prevalence of these programmes for women's empowerment highlights how inadequate women's status is today and the need to improve. Planning an effective programme for women's empowerment requires keeping a careful track of how women's status has declined from early times to the present situation and what factors have contributed to this trend. Only through a thorough analysis of women's status from the beginning of history to the current day can one come to a complete knowledge of women's genuine function in society. For a nation to achieve sustainable development, both men and women must actively participate and work together [3]. The current study is conceptualising the status of women in ancient India and the leading factors to the current situation of women.

Ancient India records a significant role for women. Women were honoured and acknowledged in society as well as family. Women's footprint can be seen in many aspects of society, such as spiritual, aesthetic, cultural and many others. They were allowed to enhance their intellectual and spiritual standards. Women were given the option to educate themselves for the duration of their lifetime [4]. The Rigvedic era saw numerous female scholars as well as rishis. Even though it was a patriarchal culture, women lived with dignity and freedom. They were active in the administration of the kingdom as well as fulfilling the responsibility of the household efficiently. The Rigvedic era also witnessed wives accompanying their husbands in spiritual rituals, without the wife's presence the ceremonies were considered to be incomplete. Child marriage was never done, and education is seen as an important criterion for marriage. Brides had the opportunity to select their spouses through the swayamvaram system. But when it comes to the Vedic Period, the life of women was a struggle. The frequency of child marriage, sati, polygamy, and the purdah regime severely weakened the status of women [5].

In the later Vedic period women, the situation for women has succeeded in getting worse. They were restricted from participating in spiritual rituals as well as from their social activities. Child marriage, sati came into prevalence. Women's movements were restricted inside the four walls of the household, consequently, they fell into the inferior part of society. Women were seen as a commodity that could be gambled, traded, or

bought. Female labours for daily wages came into view somewhere. Hindu women are mainly supposed to do marital responsibilities like cooking and childrearing. Widows were not respected. They were ignored in a variety of ways and were not permitted to participate in social, cultural, or religious events. Forced implementation sati system may also be seen in higher casts [5] [6].

Women's status in the prehistoric period

The prehistoric period is also called as stone age; it began 3.3 million years ago and ended between 4,000 BC and 2,000 BC. The Stone Age, whose beginnings are associated with the discovery of the oldest known stone types of equipment. Based on the level of expertise in the discovery and use of tools this period is generally classified into the Palaeolithic Period, Mesolithic Period, and Neolithic Period. Throughout the Stone Age, humans were food gatherers, subsisting on wildlife and bird hunting, fishing, and gathering berries, fruits, and nuts from the wild. The archaeological record of this extraordinarily long period is extremely limited; however, it can be, studied using imperishable objects made of now-extinct tribes' materials like flint, stone, bone, and tusk [7].

The position of women during the Stone Age is uncertain. Both men and women were struggling for survival during this period, and all they wanted was to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. However, evidence suggests that both men and women travel together from one place to another for hunting. In all activities, women accompanied men. There was no gender discrimination [7].

Women's status in Indus valley civilization

For the purpose of agriculture, the man began to travel and settle down in river valleys. Ancient Indus Valley civilisation, India's earliest documented civilization, is thought to have thrived around the 25th century B.C. It is also known as the Harappan Civilization. This constituted one of the most advanced civilizations in ancient times. The Indus Valley Civilization may have had an inhabitant of over five million people at its high point. They are recognised for their baked brick houses, well-developed sewer systems, water supply systems, and clusters of large, and granaries, which are storehouses for grain and other non-residential buildings. The Indus River Valley Civilization made many notable technological advances, such as amazing precision in their devices and instruments for taking measurements and volume. Archaeology and objects have been used to rebuild the lives of women over a lengthy time frame [7][8].

It is challenging to figure out the position of women during the pre-vedic period though since researchers have not been capable of following the events and operations that happened during that period [9]. Historical evidence indicates that during this civilization, people worshipped elements of nature and divine references were almost always feminine. Nature was frequently referred to as a mother. The first deity worshipped by the people of the Indus Valley civilization was Mother Goddess [10]. The peaceful living in which the mother led every family created the mother goddess and elevated her to the position of supremacy. Men are thus dependent on women because she is the main caregiver of their basic amenities, based on the resemblance between seed and earth and male and female. Monogamous partnerships were a later development, and the function of a man as a father of a woman's offspring was not acknowledged. [11]. Whereas the ancient stamps on the toys have not been translated to reveal they are true significance, the large number of feminine pictures which have been discovered indicate the goddesses had an important role. Many symbols indicate a goddess who is connected to vegetarian prosperity [12].



Feminine figure from the Indus valley civilization [13]

Women's status in Vedic period

After the Indus Valley civilization, the Vedic civilization took over as the dominant civilization. This period also known as the Vedic age (c. 1500–c. 500 BCE), is a time in India's history that falls between the late Bronze and early Iron ages. The Vedic period is recognized for the formation and composition of the Vedas,

which are holy texts in Hinduism. There are four major Vedas, Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. The Vedas contain primary sources for a better understanding of that period and contain details of life throughout that time frame which has been interpreted to be the historical record. To make learning easy the Vedic period can be divided into two the Rig Vedic Period (1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C.) and the Later Vedic Period (1000 B.C - 600 B.C). To make learning easy the Vedic period was divided into two, the Rig Vedic Period or early Vedic period (1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C.) and the Later Vedic Period (1000 B.C - 600 B.C) [14].

Rig Vedic Period or early Vedic period

The Rigvedic period is regarded as the oldest and perhaps the most important part of the Vedic age, it contains many religious traditions and practices that continue to have a significant impact on Indian culture as well as the political culture of India. Women's position was high during the Rig Vedic era, and they had the same rights as men [15]. It can be considered the golden age for women in terms of women's position as well as their freedom according to their own choice. They earned to be respect in the family and society. The position of women can be reflected in various aspects of society, including spiritual, aesthetic and administration and many. They were honoured and acknowledged inside the house. There were countries it was ruled by kings or Rajan, and the primary political unit was kula or family. Several households grouped to form a kinship-based society, or grama. Purohita, or priest, and senani, or army commander, assisted the king in his administration. The Sabha and the Samiti were the two administrative bodies. We can observe that women were actively involved in both Sabha and samiti [16][17].

In the Vedic era, women were treated equally, especially in terms of obtaining an education. The scholarly women were categorized into two categories: Brahnavadinis, or women who did not marry and continued to read the Vedas throughout their lives, and women who wedded and continued to study the Vedas until their marriage. Women needed to seek education till 15 to 16 years. These women continued their education until they married at the age of 15 or 16. Women who studied the Vedas were referred to as paninis. Female teachers were referred to as Upadhyaya or upadhyayi. Women originally wrote Vedic dramas and religious texts, as well as they excel in other aspects such as fine arts, music, and painting. It was demonstrated to a large extent that rulers and kings were aware of women's education and had their children educated, regardless of whether they were male or female. [5] [16] [17]. These women not only wrote hymns but also learned to play music and dance. Women from lower strata or castes also were skilled in spinning, weaving, embroidery, and needlework. During this period, there were many female poets and philosophers. As a result, women were given equal chances to learn alongside instructors, to demonstrate their abilities. This was true in education as well as in social traditions and customs[16][18]. Some educators have been hired by privileged backgrounds to educate the children in dance, music, garland-making, painting, patchwork, sewing, magic, writing poetry, and the manufacture of playmates among many other skills. The girls learned information by listening to the lessons that were being taught to younger kids in some of the higher cast residences [18].

There were many female scholars during the Vedic period. They are highly knowledgeable about the Vedas and related texts [18]. Their major areas were philosophy and theology. At this time, there are a great many female rishis to be seen. Many capable female scholars such as Apala, Ghosha, and Visvavara practised the specific tasks of composing mantras and rose to the rank of sages or rishis. The most prominent female teacher of this time, Lopamudra, is credited with preaching 179 hymns from the first book of the Rig Veda with the famous philosopher Agasthya. Female scholars like Gargi and Maithreyi are thought to be highly intelligent [19].

Women's status is said to have been recognised and accepted throughout the Rig Vedic era, particularly when it comes to undertaking religious duties. Together with their spouses, women took part in religious rituals and offerings, without her participation, it was believed that no rituals would be successful. Without his wife by his side, a man could not become spiritually complete. Girls and women were supposed to recite the mantras or phrases accurately and efficiently when they received their primary education. One can assert that women were treated with respect in society and that there existed authority. They participated with their husbands in whatever religious, social, or cultural events were organised. Social interactions were upheld with a spirit of cooperation and goodwill, and social morality was of a high calibre [20].

It has a highly organised society. Despite the patriarchal system, women had a comfortable living environment and lived with dignity and pride. The basic rule has been monogamy, but polygamy was also practised among some of the royals. The wedding was regarded as a sacred bond that was incapable of being violated by any human behaviour. Young girls' education was considered an essential qualification for marriage. Girls were married between the ages of 15 and 16, and still that time they continued pursuing education. Child marriage was unheard of at the time [21]. According to passages in Vedic literature, in many communities including the Kshatriya society brides had the sole right to choose their spouses, which is called "Swayamvara". Swayamvara was a marriage method in which a woman chose her husband from a group of suitors. The bride who wishes to marry would choose an auspicious time and location and then announce her willingness. Kings

or the father of the bride would typically send messengers to distant lands or nearby kingdoms to spread the word within the local community. On the designated day, potential candidates would congregate at the location and prove their credentials. The bride would consider placing a garland on the young man of her preference, and the wedding ritual would take place right away [22].



"Swayamvara" system [23]

Bride price(dowry) was unheard of in Rig Vedic society [24]. Nonetheless, it was widely believed that marriage was a present or dharma. Although bigamy was also used, it was only among the aristocratic classes; elsewhere, monogamy was the majority. In her new residence, the wife enjoyed respect. The wife participated in her husband's sacrificial services.. Although the male spouse was not supposed to be as faithful, female morals nevertheless maintained an exceptionally high level. Marriage separation was not a routine trend in this era. Widows could remarry given specific circumstances. In general, Sati was not very common. According to the Rig Veda, the widow had the lawful authority to remarry with her husband's brother. The Rig Veda likewise recognised single daughters' rights to acquire their family's inheritance, but wedded daughters were excluded. A grown woman could select her partner after three years if her parents failed to wed her at the appropriate moment. The women served as the best representations of marital love by giving their partners the ultimate sacrifice throughout their lives. This was the continuing legacy of the women who offered sacrifices to the god during the Vedic period alongside their husbands as equal partners [25].

The Later Vedic periods

The Later Vedic period is defined as 1000 BC to 600 BC. Many Jana or tribes merged to form Janapadas or Rashtras in the later Vedic era. As a result, the royal force increases along with the growth of the country. The king carried out various ceremonies and sacrifices to elevate his rank. The four social divisions, or Varnas, were fully formed during the Later Vedic era as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras [26]. A caste hierarchy was highly prevalent and Brahmins were considered the higher authority. Many employments based sub-castes divisions also formed.

Women did not find it easy during this period. The later Vedic era is not a favourable time for women in most aspects. Gradually, they made their way into the underclass of society. Women's lives began to be restricted to the four walls of their homes. The priests started carrying out religious ceremonies more frequently, which eventually diminished the importance of women in the household and restricted her social activities. They also got restricted to attend Samitis and Sabhas, the governing group of the society. Consequently, their social involvement is reduced [27].

Women were dispossessed of their social and religious rights when the Vedic era ended. They were prohibited from taking part in cultural, religious, and social events [28]. The status of women had deteriorated through time to the point that having a girl child inside the family was seen as a disaster. To ensure the welfare of the family and community, it was thought that the birth of females would appear to be a significant obstacle. The boy child, however, was seen as treasure. Males were seen as resources, status symbols, and advocates for the welfare of their families and the community, according to a common belief throughout people [29].

The birth of a daughter was unwelcome in all patriarchal societies at the time. The boy child was supposed to have a home with his parents, he expected to support the family financially, keep safe the home from threats, as well as upheld the father's surname. Women's positions deteriorated significantly not just in societal structure but also inside the household. The Upanayana, which included the Veda study, was discontinued more over girls' education was restricted or limited to the elementary level [30].

Child marriage was highly prevalent at that time. There was a huge movement to lower the age at which girls can marry, with girls marrying before or soon after puberty to preserve their purity. Significantly reducing the minimum age of marriage harmed their education and way of life. Girls from rich backgrounds, on

the other hand, had ample possibilities for furthering their education. The wedding between people of the same caste has been better suited but forbidden in certain degrees of relationship [31].

Setting the age of marriage of girls throughout this period was one of the underlying causes of the tragic progression. The primary objective of this venture is to maintain physical pureness. It grew to be like, they did not live the life of learners since they were deemed unable to engage in or carry out religious duties due to their lack of scholastic understanding. Women start to rely on men. The wedding eventually lost its worth on its own. In the upper cast, a modified version of the Swayamvara system was visible. To marry the bride, the groom must succeed at some physical challenges set by the bride's father. Even in this, the girl has no choice regarding her future spouse [32]. Hindu women are expected to perform conjugal duties, which usually involve cooking and having children. She was only given salvation through marriage, which is how daughters are welcomed into society. The dowry system was not widely used at that period.

According to Manusmriti, one of the legal texts and constitution of Hinduism, the "Manava-Dharmastra", polygamous marriages and child brides were allowed. Women are unclearly compared with Shudras in Dharma Shastra. Although the Bhagavad Gita explains women's lives as unpleasant, the structure of early marriage has had a significant impact on women's status. Girls who marry at a young age have very few opportunities to further their learning well beyond the elementary level [33].

Remarrying a widow was frowned upon, as widows were thought to be unlucky because they had lost their husband, their protector, the shielded male companion in the higher cast, 'sati' system was there. The practice of a widow throwing herself on her spouse's funeral pyre and burning alive to death was initially considered a courageous and heroic sacrifice for her husband, but it later became a forced practice. The decline in women's position is seen in several Epic times. They do would be regarded as unfavourable as well as unfortunate [34][35].



"Sati system" [36]

Women were viewed during this time as property that might be held on the bet, traded, or acquired. And even though, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana both present us with rather opposing viewpoints. Ganikas in early India: Its genesis and dimensions. Social Scientist, 2-17.) Additionally, there is proof that women participated in paid labour in addition to other communal commercial sectors including working as courtesans, performers in temples, and court attendants. In the initial years of this era, highly educated women held respectable positions within the community and the home [37].

According to Manusmriti,

"Pitah Rakshathi Koumare, Pati Rakshathi Youvanne,
Puthro Rakshathi Vardaykye, Na sthree swathanthram arhati"

Explains, The father protects the woman while her virginity time such as adolescence, the spouse protects her throughout her young age, and the sons protect her in her old age, so that woman is never equipped for freedom. This accurately portrays the situation of women in the later Vedic era [38].

In both mediaeval and modern India, the subsequent arrival of Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, Mugal monarchs, and British colonisation made the situation of women much worse [39] [40].

II. Discussion And Conclusion

According to ancient Hindu tradition divinity is always elevated through femininity. Most Indian spiritual concepts are symbolised through female characters, such as power and strength come from Shakti, and all male power comes from feminine. Without their feminine counterparts, the "trimurti" concepts of Brahma Vishnu Shiva are all rendered ineffective. In the ancient Rigvedic period the status of women was high, women were respected and acknowledged in every aspect of society. women were educated and enjoyed esteemed positions in spiritual ceremonies. When it comes to the later Vedic era women were discriminated against and banned from their social activities. Child marriage, sati, the patriarchal system, illiteracy, and polygamy system

all made women pushed into the inferior side of society. Women were considered unequipped for freedom and to be ruled by the male gender. Later came Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, Mughal kings, and British colonialism rendered the condition of women even more miserable.

Even though from the historic period women are associated with divinity in Hinduism, in the present era Women, it is often assumed, have been subjected to discrimination and other sorts of exploitation from the dawn of time, and have even been denied access to basic freedoms like as property ownership and literacy. When we investigate the history of the early period, women were educated well and education was a qualifying criterion for marriage, but when it comes to the later Vedic period for physical purity marital age of girls was reduced to before puberty i.e, child marriage came into prevalence. This is restricted or they must stop their education before the elementary level. This made them unfit to perform religious duties as well they were too young to make their life decisions. Consequently, women became dependent on men for their living. The study suggests that providing effective education is the key element for uplifting women and making them responsible for their life.

The fight for the freedom of women has reached several landmarks in the contemporary age, and society has advanced significantly. Despite their many years of hardship, they have been able to effectively establish their own identity. The nation itself shows proper concern for the empowerment of women through different women-supporting plans and programs across the country, which include the activities of social and political life. Above all, a woman's strong sense of self-determination leads her to achievement regardless of what obstacles she faces.

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