



## Cultural Transformation of the Status of Women in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India

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### Abstract

*The status of women has drastically transformed in the contemporary era. In the ancient period women were given due respect, for instance, the practice of 'Gandharava Vivah' is a feature of ancient India that demarcates gender equality on a high note. On the contrary, in modern India, the practice of honour killing in 'Khap Panchayat' reflects the patriarchal mindset prevalent in the contemporary period. The role of women has been confined to the domestic boundaries whereas women have remarkably contributed to traditional warfare practices. The constitutional values are not internalized, in letter and spirit.*

**Keywords:** Status, Gender equality, Ancient, Medieval India, Modern, Women Empowerment.

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### Introduction

*"Man can never be a women's equal in the spirit of selfless service with which nature has endowed her"* -Mahatma Gandhi

In India, women have come a long way from the fair and equal status they enjoyed in the Ancient Vedic period to the strained socioeconomic situation they found themselves in during the Middle Ages. Regrettably, it seems that even today, women

are still making an effort to regain their equal and desirable status, but in vain, at least in some developing economies.

In the Vedic Period, women had prominent positions as compared with those held by men. These dignified responsibilities of women were not limited to those of managers of the household; rather, they played important roles in reviving and conserving human civilization. Later, in ancient India, women were given respectable positions and were viewed as dharma's examiners.

Buddhist thought, which first appeared around 600 BC, emphasized that women might follow their jobs and chances if they so desired and watched and supported the liberal lives of women. The right of women to education had been restricted, and there were more limitations on women's empowerment. Women were excluded from society and denied the same status as men in medieval India as well. Women were increasingly susceptible to exploitation and enslavement because of social taboos including child marriage, Sati, Jauhar, and others.

With the rise of the Bhakti movement, changes in Indian women's social and cultural lives took place, giving them more

independence and rights. However, the economic structure of society was not changed by this movement, and women's lack of power in the economy, politics, and society persisted. Later, during the British Period, which marked the beginning of modernization in India, many social injustices against women started to be outlawed through initiatives against then-current social taboos. (Paranthaman et al., 2019)

In the First War of Independence (1857), women played a persuasive and credible role, and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi remained the movement's pillar and mastermind. Women who were fighting for freedom responded at the start of the 20th century and fought fiercely against the British Empire.

### **Methodology and Materials**

Based on historical documents and manuscripts like the Vedas, previous research on women's status in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India, and others, the researcher has taken the initiative to analyze the status and position that women accessed in the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Indian civilization. The study has used historical accounts of women's status and empowerment to illustrate the social,

economic, and political circumstances existing at various turning points in India's history.

### **Early Vedic or Rig Vedic: Highly Reputable Women**

In both Dravidian and Aryan societies throughout the early Vedic Period or Rig Vedic Period, women were accorded equal status and unassailable dignity. As women had the correct place and space in society and domestic matters, it seems that the topic of women's empowerment had no chance of coming up in any conversation back then. In those times, women had access to every aspect of economic and social life. Women would participate in all pursuits, including learning, riding horses, archery, and so on. (A.Altekar, 1938)

### **Period of Jainism and Buddhism**

Restrictions based on religious caste were somewhat reduced throughout the Jainism and Buddhism eras (BC 600 to BC 200). Buddhist philosophy emphasized that women might follow their careers and chances if they so desired and watched and encouraged the liberal lives of women. Women regained some of their lost independence and position under the compassionate rule of prominent Jain and Buddhist rulers like Chandragupta Maurya, Kanishka, Ashoka, Sri Harsha, and

others because of the generally tolerant Buddhist and Jain ideologies (S.N.Sen, 1988).

### **Women in Medieval India: Status of Exclusion with a few notable exceptions**

The medieval era was when women were at their worst in human history. In general, the time span between ancient and modern India is referred to as Indian history's Middle Ages. In general, throughout this time, religious teachings were mindlessly obeyed throughout the world, therefore independent thinking and individual identities were downplayed and in some ways, suppressed by religion's gullible adherents. Additionally, there is political unrest, and social unrest in many regions of the world, which may have also had an impact on how society views women. In the instance of India, it was clear that women were treated less favorably than men at the time due to the conservative nature of the country's culture. Historians have referred to this period as the Dark Age for women due to the derogatory and discriminatory attitudes toward women that pervaded it. Numerous social ills were prevalent at the time, including child marriage, the prohibition of widow marriage, Sati, and a lack of educational possibilities. They denied women the same status as males

and kept them out of society's mainstream. But at this time, a lot of courageous women rose to prominence and engaged in combat with their enemies. Among them are the Gond queen Durgavathi, Nurjahan, Zebunissa, and the Mughal emperor Raziya Sultana. In conclusion, there has been a significant decline in the liberties and rights of women if we consider the time from the Vedic to the medieval eras. There is a significant disparity in women's status between these two eras, and the most upsetting.

### **Renaissance Times for Women in British India**

Later, during the British era, various societal injustices against women started to be outlawed through initiatives against depraved customs including child marriage, widow marriage bans, Sati, and polygamy. Social reformers in India gave them their support for these resolutions. Western education played a significant role in increasing Indian youth's knowledge of the ideas of equality, fraternity, and freedom during colonial times. Those educated people made compelling arguments and offered support for women's equality and education. With the introduction of Christian missionaries, western education in India improved, and

there were more educated women. Reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made extraordinary efforts in the early 18th century, during the British Raj era, to overcome the taboos and restrictions that existed in India against the empowerment of women. To create a different world for women, they launched numerous social reformation initiatives, focused on education, and pushed for the outlawing of harmful customs like child marriage and Sati. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was enacted by the British administration in India in 1856, and Sati was outlawed in 1859 as a result of several liberal reformation initiatives. The Prevention of Murder of Female Infants Act was passed by the British government in the 1970s in an effort to curb the occurrence of female infanticide in India. (Agrawal, 2003)

The Devadasi system, an evil practice that continued in Hindu temples, was prohibited later in 1925. The Child Marriage Restriction Act went into effect in 1929. After that, in the 1930s, the Hindu Woman's Right to Property Act for widows was approved in 1937. *"There is no chance for the welfare of the world, according to Swami Vivekananda, unless Women's conditions have improved"*. All of these demonstrated how important it is

for women's potential and brilliance to be considered in the collective high-scale development and plans for the country. Beginning in the early 20th century, women who fought for liberation, like Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asif Ali, Suchetha Kripalani, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, coordinated strikes to protest the British Empire's oppressive practices. They included Kasturba Gandhi, Sarla Devi, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Susheela Nair, Kamala Nehru, and Swaroop Rani. The non-cooperation movement was an effort to challenge British imperialism. Later, many women participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India Movement and acts of Civil Disobedience. It may not come as a surprise that the British authorities referred to women specifically as "disciplined soldiers of Indian liberation."

### **Women after Independence**

Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was appointed India's first Minister of Health after the country gained its independence, and the first Indian government was constituted. Only 15 women were able to join the 389 members of the constitutional assembly, nevertheless. The Indian Constitution introduced empowering measures for women and guaranteed freedom and equality to the entire

country. The Constitution encouraged people to free themselves from the bonds of slavery and male chauvinism while also recognizing and trusting women's participation. Additionally, it included specific measures for women and children, including equal pay and access to security and rights. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 made it very explicit when it came to the legal requirements for marriage, monogamy, the mother's guardianship, and when a marriage may be dissolved. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, the Maternity Benefit Act 1961, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, and other laws are also put into action to protect women. (Myneni, S., 2005) Women were empowered and became economically independent thanks to self-employed organizations, microfinance, and governmental institutions working together. They include women like Kiran Bedi, Medha Patkar, Saina Nehwal, Kalpana Chawla, and others who served as role models for younger generations. After the constitution and other legislative measures to protect women's interests went into effect, the actual transformation occurred. Modernization in science, technology, education, and socio-economic

movements has changed how society views women, enhancing their sense of self-assurance, self-reliance, and self-dependence. Through the protection of their rights under the Constitution, India's Constitution ensures equality for women.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution (1993), which guarantee that at least one-third of seats in local bodies are reserved for women, are another significant step in the history of women's empowerment in India. Despite the fact that the Constitution guarantees everyone's equality before the law, crimes against women including rape, molestation, and dowry harassment are all too common in our day-to-day lives. Women are almost invariably the unfortunate victims, whether at home or in public.

Every family in India prefers male offspring to female children, and this still causes fear among affluent castes and highly educated people. This propensity arises from the long-held notion that a son will bring the family luck and money. To address women's complaints and ensure safety and equality, the government and society as a whole should make significant efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Women had a lot of freedom and duties during the early Vedic era. But as time went on, discrimination against women started to occur, and during the Dharmasastra and Manusmriti eras, things only became worse. The Rig Vedic era gave women significant status in society and gave them access to positions of intellectual and spiritual leadership. Although they enjoyed greater rights in the social and religious spheres, their involvement in the political and economic spheres was limited. As time went on, women's standing faced difficulties and they were denied equality with males. Women's responsibilities were confined to just taking care of the family starting in the medieval era, and frequently, they were left out of social celebrations. Women had a lot of freedom and duties during the early Vedic era. But as time went on, discrimination against women started to occur, and during the Dharmasastra and Manusmriti eras, things only became worse. The Rig Vedic era gave women significant status in society and gave them access to positions of intellectual and spiritual leadership. Although they enjoyed greater rights in the social and religious spheres, their involvement in the political and economic spheres was limited. As time went on,

women's standing faced difficulties and they were denied equality with males. Women's responsibilities were confined to just taking care of the family starting in the medieval era, and frequently, they were left out of social celebrations. Indian culture later saw a revival during the British colonial era, and educated Indians were familiar with the French Revolution's principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Young educated generations grew increasingly conscious of the freedom and equality of women. The British government passed a number of laws and rules to protect women's freedom and rights, and the majority of them were put into effect with the help of social reformers. Following independence, our Constitution provided that men and women had equal freedoms and rights, and subsequent administrations have developed a number of laws and programs to support the advancement and security of women. Even though the country has improved the position of women in society, gender equality is still a problem in our country. 12 million female fetuses are thought to have been aborted in India over the past three decades. Poverty, gender bias, emotional trauma, physical and mental abuse, and other barriers hindered female people from reaching their full potential. Parents frequently fail to protect

their daughters from rape and violence, even from close relatives, and the frequency of these crimes is alarmingly on the rise. Several laws have been passed in India to outlaw the dowry system and give women a portion of the family's assets, but they are all only on paper, and the rituals persist (Reddy, 2009). Here, the state must create thorough and systematic planning in order to enhance the social and economic position of women who are caught in this vicious cycle.

The government has implemented numerous programs and procedures over the past 70 years but in vain. Although women are present and hold roles in India's administrative centres, political parties, and corporate sector, their numbers are quite small, and the majority of women continue to live in appalling conditions. So, a key tactic to ensuring gender equality, justice, and social welfare is the construction of a powerful, consistent, and lasting vision.

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