

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research paper is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in ancient India. In ancient times, the women were considered with respect and dignity. During this period, there were women rishis, and they were held in high esteem. In royal households, women were given respect and they even rendered a significant contribution in the making of decisions and administrative functions. They were made aware in terms of all areas and played an important part in politics as well. Whereas, among the economically weaker sections of the society, birth of girl child was not appreciated and preference was given to male children. The main areas that have been taken into account in this research paper include, women's position in ancient India, position of women in the Hindu dharma, concept of female infanticide and female foeticide in ancient India, male ratio adverse female ratio, ancient women and education, and ancient women and politics.

Keywords: Ancient India, Education, Family, Politics, Society, Women

During ancient India, women were revered and rendered a significant contribution towards leading to welfare of the family and society. The women were given a high status within the society and they felt gratifying and contented. They were provided with the opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. During this period, there were many women rishis. The wealthier classes believed in polygamy, but monogamy was prevalent. The system of sati and child marriage were not prevalent. In the Rig Vedic society, women were revered and appreciated, but they were being discriminated against in the later Vedic period. The discrimination was observed primarily in terms of acquisition of education and other rights and facilities. The position of women, further experienced a decline with the prevalence of child marriage, sati, polygamy and the purdah system. The women were primarily equated with property in the epics and the puranas (Rout, 2016).

During the Mauryan period too, the status of women was in a deteriorated condition. Though the kings employed female bodyguards and spies. The women, belonging to upper castes were supposed to accept the purdah system. During this period, men were polygamous and sati was regarded as an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas upon them, they were not permitted to go to any places without the permission of their husbands and were not allowed to make decisions on their own. During the Gupta period, their status experienced a further decline. They experienced abuse and mistreatment from Smritishastras. Manu dictated that they would be dependent upon their fathers during the childhood stage, on husbands in youth and on sons in old age. Apart from the practices of child marriage and sati, the other aspects that imposed detrimental effects upon the status of women were prostitution and the Devadasi system. These systems became comprehensive (Rout, 2016).

The Indian society like the number of classical societies were patriarchal in nature. The major aspects that were taken into consideration within the patriarchal society were, sexuality, reproduction and social production. The women were given recognition, because their role was considered important in the implementation of these functions. On the other hand, there were formulation of rules and policies that deprived women from practicing certain rights and opportunities and considered them to be subordinates to men. The more subtle expression of patriarchy was through the symbolism that makes provision of messages in terms of the deprived status of women. This was communicated through the legends highlighting self-sacrificing. Self-sacrificing the pure image of the women and through the prevalence of rituals and norms, women were given significance, as they were engaged in the performance of two important roles, i.e. the wife and mother (Status of Women in India, n.d.).

WOMEN'S POSITION IN ANCIENT INDIA

When the Vedic period came to an end, then women were deprived of social and religious rights. They were not allowed to participate in social, religious and cultural functions. Gradually, with the course of time, the position of women declined to such an extent that the birth of the girl child within the family was regarded as a misfortune. It was believed that the birth of girls would prove to be a major hindrance within the course of bringing about welfare of the family and community. Whereas, the male children were regarded as assets. There was prevalence of the viewpoint among the individuals that males would be the assets and enhance the status and promote welfare of their family and the entire community (Mohapatra, 2015).

The role and position of women in ancient India is determined by number of factors, these are, social structure, cultural norms, value system and social expectations. Changes do not come about in the norms, values, principles and standards of the society at the same pace, as the changes that come about within the social structure with the advent of technology, modernization and globalization. Within the Indian society, practices such as, giving away daughters in marriage and sending them to their marital homes after marriage is one of the most common aspects that are related to women. The male members are also regarded as significant as, they are the ones, who maintain the heritage and continue the lineage. The practice of child birth is also regarded as the one that makes them inferior to men in status (Mohapatra, 2015).

In the perspective of Manu, women are viewed to merely perform the roles of the wife and mother. As a mother, she is responsible for the implementation of tasks and functions that are necessary for child development. Whereas, as a wife, she is responsible for fulfilling all the tasks and implement all responsibilities. The widows were not revered. They were neglected in number of aspects and were not allowed to render a significant participation in social, cultural or religious functions. It was also believed that the sight of the widow would be a barrier within the course of achievement of goals and objectives. On the other hand, a widower is not subjected to such restrictions. In Islamic religion, women cannot be priests, nor can she perform the duties of the priest, such as, residing prayers. The women are deprived from participating in any religious organizations. In Buddhism also, a male monk is given a higher status, than a nun (Mohapatra, 2015).

POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE HINDU DHARMA

The roots of Hindu religion are in the Aryan society of the patriarchal system. The family unit was regarded as the significant one. In the ancient times, there was prevalence of the joint family system. Joint family system is referred to as the family system in which two or more nuclear families are residing under the common roof. This family system comprises of grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. In the Aryan family, the birth of the son was welcomed to a major extent. The individuals possessed this viewpoint that male children would render an effective contribution in promoting well-being of the family and community. On the other hand, women were provided freedom. In the Hindu Dharma, there is prevalence of the viewpoint that man and woman represent the two aspects of one person. Scriptures say that Lord Shiva consists of the body in two halves, one is of the male and the other is of the female. Woman is considered to be more powerful and are regarded as Goddess of Shakti (power). The society was governed by certain established norms and customs (Chapter 2, n.d).

In ancient India, religion was given major significance. The education also put primary emphasis upon religious scriptures. It was believed that individuals would be able to enrich their lives by inculcating the traits of morality and ethics. Women were given recognition within the society and participated in all activities and functions along with men. In the area of spirituality, women were not considered inferior to men, were not discriminated against and were provided equal opportunities. Yajunvalykyia had imparted divine knowledge to Maitrey and that she had not only been able to comprehend high philosophy but had also acquired divine knowledge. Furthermore, there were number of job duties that women were engaged in. They were even bought into slavery by getting her duties fixed; they were employed as servants in palaces and within the houses of wealthy classes and were also engaged in occupations of ministers. At the same time, women were under the protection of their fathers, before marriage and of their husbands after marriage and sons in old age (Chapter 2, n.d).

The dependence of women upon their fathers, husbands and sons was primarily due to the reason that they did not have the right to property. They were no longer independent and became dependent upon the male-dominated society. In this manner, the social, cultural and religious backbone of the Indian society is based on the patriarchal structure. The patriarchal structure provided secondary status to women. The women were supposed to obey the instructions and follow the rules of the male members of the family. The philosophy of the patriarchal family is based on the principle that the family tree grows up with the male only. This enables him to acquire significance and protection within the family. Another important aspect in this philosophy is marriage, in which women are given a subordinate status. In their subordinate status, women are required to experience number of negativities. They are not allowed to say anything regarding their rights and there have also been prevalence of practices of female foeticide and female infanticide (Chapter 2, n.d).

CONCEPT OF FEMALE INFANTICIDE AND FEMALE FOETICIDE IN ANCIENT INDIA

Family planning was regarded as an important aspect since ancient times. The males and the females primarily married at a young age, even before reaching the age of 18. Hence, there was prevalence of child marriage. As a result of child marriage, women experienced unfavourable effects. They got married and were sent to their marital homes. Within marital homes, their lives were primarily centred upon taking care of needs and requirements of the family members and performing the household responsibilities. In this manner, they remained deprived from the acquisition of education and all kinds of childhood activities. In some cases, girls and women also experienced abuse and mistreatment from their husbands and in-laws. Family planning was regarded as a significant aspect, but the major problem that was experienced was, there was prevalence of the practices of female foeticide and female infanticide.

Female foeticide was also prevalent in ancient India. In most cases, the individuals long for the male child, hence, due to this viewpoint, there were practices of female infanticide and female foeticide. The families adopted different ways of aborting the foetus, this was prevalent among the tribal communities. The woman, who aborted the foetus against her will was subjected to severe punishment. Whereas, the higher caste woman, who performed the abortion with the help of the slave, the slave was also subjected to punishment. During that time, religion and community were the ones, who did not approve abortion. They possessed the viewpoint that individuals, who were involved in abortion should get involved into self-punishment. In ancient times, there were implementation of certain ways to terminate pregnancy. The different ways that were adopted by the individuals include, making use of herbs, creating abdominal pressure or a serious weapon (Chapter 2, n.d).

In the 19th century, the British declared some region as prone to infanticide. In 1805, they found that among the Rajputs of Saurashtra, there was prevalence of female infanticide to a major extent. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, there was a village, where no daughters were found. In 1808, Alexander Walker, the chief authority in Baroda, summoned the heads of all the communities to find out the reason behind the killing of girl children. In 1870, the British government enacted the Prevention of Murder of Female Infants Act. At the initial stage, it was to be enforced only in the north-western provinces of Punjab and Oudh. In 1872, some of the areas were notified as prone to infanticide, after it was indicated by the census figure that women accounted for 40 percent. In 1898, female infanticide was recognized as the crime and the Government order was passed, making it a cognizable offence. However, within eight years, in 1906, the prevention of Female Infanticide Act was abolished as the Government claimed that infanticide was no longer practiced within the communities (Chapter 2, n.d).

The 1901 census indicated that there were only 832 females as compared to 1000 males in Punjab. The act was withdrawn due to some political considerations. In this manner, in ancient times, the system of female foeticide was common. There were not any availability of medical facilities or the medical science was also not much approved in those days. Hence, when the

individuals were to get engaged in these practices, then they were required to make use of traditional methods that were unfavourable and disadvantageous. At the same time, female foeticide was punishable and the doers were subjected to disciplinary action. Therefore, it can be stated that this concept has been embedded within the roots from the forefathers (Chapter 2, n.d).

MALE RATIO ADVERSE FEMALE RATIO

The decline in the ratio of women within the society is associated with the status of women in the ancient period as well as the religion and the cultural influences of the community (Chapter 2, n.d). In the Hindu community, as well as in other communities, the male children were given preference as compared to girls. The viewpoints and perspectives of the individuals are the ones that are responsible for giving more importance to the male children. The girls were mostly considered as liabilities. It was believed that they would only make demands of wealth and financial resources, at the time of their marriage and would not yield any returns on investment. In addition, it was also believed that girls are meant just to perform the household chores and possess less skills and abilities as compared to men. They were discouraged from the acquisition of education or involvement in any form of employment opportunities.

The longing for the male child was strong among the families and communities. The individuals performed rituals, religious ceremonies, offered prayers and worshipped the deities with the main purpose of getting their wish fulfilled of having a male child. The aspiration for the male child was common among both men and women. But because of the issues of prestige of the family, to run the lineage and to enhance the status of the family members, they want male children. With advancements taking place in the medical science, the doctors are making use of ultra sounds machines. Therefore, due to this, it has imposed adverse effects upon the gender of the child (Chapter 2, n.d).

The ancient period is an evidence, which shows that significance of women was recognized. In the same manner, the individuals were also followers of the male dominated society. The individuals were primarily of the viewpoints that the roles of the women were only limited to child birth, to enhance the lineage, and is required to carry out all the major responsibilities of the household. Therefore, due to these roles, they were given recognition within the family and community. It is clear that within the Vedic communities, the practice of female infanticide was not prevalent nor the individuals were the supporters of the women community. Women were regarded as inferior in status as compared to men, and the practice of female foeticide was also considered unlawful (Chapter 2, n.d).

ANCIENT WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Religious environment was regarded as the potent mode of influencing education in ancient India. Indian education can primarily be regarded as the product of the Aryan mind. Furthermore, the aesthetic and vocational aspects were primarily stimulated by the emotional and the material nature of the Dravidians. The education of women and girls during the ancient period, recognized a change from the Vedic (2000 B.C to 1000 B.C.) to post-Vedic (1000 B.C. to

200 B.C.) periods. During the Vedic period, the status of women was high. During the ancient period, education was regarded as an aspect that would render a significant contribution in sustaining ones living conditions better. The individuals primarily possessed this viewpoint that education would enable the individuals to achieve the desired objectives of living an enriched life (Roy, 2017). In order to enhance ones living conditions, it is vital for the individuals to generate awareness in terms of number of aspects, these include, morality, ethics, academic concepts, culture, religion, norms, values, standards and principles.

Women were encouraged towards attainment of education, the reason being, they were the ones, who were merely responsible for the well-being of the family and community. They rendered a significant contribution in terms of areas such as, implementation of household responsibilities, health care, child development, taking care of the needs and requirements of the elderly family members, preservation of the environment and so forth. The women were vested with the responsibility of making provision of knowledge in terms of morals and ethics to the individuals. Hence, in order to carry out all these tasks and functions in a well-organized manner, it is vital for women to acquire knowledge and upgrade their skills and abilities. The acquisition of education enabled women to live a life of dignity and respect. Learned and knowledgeable women were given respect and appreciation within the society. With the acquisition of education, women developed self-confidence among themselves and as a result, they were able to protect themselves against any form of abuse or mistreatment.

The status and conditions of women were much better in the Vedic period than any other period. If any women wanted to acquire education and did not depict their consent in getting married, then too, they were permitted, without any restrictions. Most of the girls, belonging to well-to-do families had the privilege of acquiring education. The Upanayana or the initiation ceremony was organized for both, girls and boys. During the Aryan period, which is also called the poetical period, it can be stated rightly that education of women were being given recognition. There was not any prejudice regarding the education of women. The individuals were concerned regarding the righteousness of women within the social order. Through the Vedas, it has been noticed that the whole Aryan race was co-operatively aware in terms of promulgating codes and laws and in uplifting the conditions of women. It contributed to a major extent towards the collective creative forces of the general mass. Aryans were not merely aware in terms of gender power politics and conflicts at their time. The reason being, during that time, the society was still in a developing stage (Roy, 2017).

The Vedic period has witnessed many women scholars. They possessed adequate knowledge regarding the Vedas and texts. These women not only composed hymns but also learnt music and dancing. The women, belonging to lower strata or caste also mastered the skills of spinning, weaving, embroidery and needlework. There were many women poets and philosophers during the Vedic period. The Vedic period, witnessed many capable women like Apala, Ghosha and Visvavara, who performed the job duties of composing the mantras and rose to the rank of the sages or rishis. Lopamudra is one of the female teachers of this period, and is believed to have preached 179 hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda, along with sage Agasthya. Therefore, it

can be stated that women were given equal opportunities in education, along with the male teachers to prove their capabilities. This applied in the field of education, as well as in social customs and rituals (Roy, 2017).

In pre-Vedic times, women took part in religious ceremonies and sacrifices, along with their husbands. When formal education was given to girls and women, they were required to recite the mantras or the verses with clarity and efficiency. Many women scholars during the Vedic period overcame many constraints. In the Vedic period, they were provided equal opportunities, particularly regarding the acquisition of education. Some of the prominent women scholars of this period are, Apala, Atreyiand and Ghosha. In the wealthier families, some of the teachers have been employed to provide training to the students regarding dancing, music, garland-making, painting, patching, sewing, magic, composing poems and preparation of playthings along with other arts. In some of the well-educated households, the girls also acquired information by listening to the lessons, which were taught to young students. Hence, it can be stated that there was authority and women were given reverence within society. When there were organization of any religious, social or cultural functions, they participated along with their husbands. Social morality was of high standard and social relations were maintained with mutual spirit and cordiality (Roy, 2017).

In ancient India, women acquired education and the extent of knowledge and information was high among them. The scholarly women were classified into two categories: the Brahnavadinis or the women, who did not marry and acquired knowledge of the Vedas throughout their lives. Brahnavadinis were the life-long students of philosophy and theology. The other category were the Sadyodvahas, who studied the Vedas, till they married. These women prosecuted their studies, until they got married by the age of 15 or 16 years. The women, who studied the Vedas were known as paninis. The female teachers were called upadhyaya or upadhyayi. The Buddhist nuns composed the hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses and also excelled in terms of other areas, including fine arts, music and painting. It was shown to a major extent that rulers and kings were aware of education of women and got their children educated, irrespective of being either male or female (Rout, 2016).

ANCIENT WOMEN AND POLITICS

In politics, women played a prominent role. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women carrying out the administrative functions. Ancient India spans a vast period, 2500 B.C. to 250 B.C. Archaeology, ancient texts and artefacts are being used to reconstruct the lives of women. The earliest materials that were found by the archaeological excavations focus upon the worship of goddesses. The earliest recorded religious texts (1500 B.C.) call on the life-giving power of the goddesses to give life and to nurture and sustain it in an efficient manner. After the Aryan invasion, and the development of Hinduism and then Buddhism, India's extant written texts add to the knowledge of the individuals to a major extent. Women belonging to the aristocratic classes were provided with the opportunities to hone their educational skills and abilities and took pleasure in number of other aspects. But the common women, were the ones, who experienced deprivation, ignominy and impediments (Rout, 2016).

Centred on the Indus valley, the oldest known civilization in India, ranged from 2500-1500 B.C. In the present existence, most of these cities of archaeological interest are now in Pakistan due to independence and partition that took place in 1947. Although the ancient city state of Lothal is located in Gujarat. Extensive remains at Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Lothal show a well-organized, and a prosperous society. Agriculture was the main occupation of the individuals. The individuals were involved in trading with the other organizations in the near east. The most famous ancient artefact is that of a young slender girl, who is posing confidently. Numerous toys that were found conveyed that society recognized the significance of family life to a major extent. While their inscribed seals have not been deciphered to determine the actual meanings. Extensive female images have been found to suggest that goddesses play a central role. The goddesses, who render a significant contribution in enhancing productivity are known as fertility goddesses (Rout, 2016).

Apparently, this civilization underwent natural disasters that led to changes in the course of the river Indus. It was thought that the invading Aryans conquered the indigenous people, but the Indus civilization was already in the state of decline. Particularly, when the nomads came from the Hindu Kush. These Aryans enslaved the natives over the period of time and exercised control upon them that led to the emergence of caste system (Rout, 2016). The caste system has been prevalent in ancient India. The top-most castes were the Brahmins, they were primarily engaged in jobs as teachers and priests, second were the Kshatriyas, these were the rulers and warriors, third were the Vaishyas, they were the traders and merchants and fourth were the Shudras, they were the cleaners and sweepers. The women, belonging to ruling classes, primarily were engaged in political and administrative functions of the state. They possessed adequate knowledge and even participated in the decision making processes.

With the main purpose of estimating the role of women in politics and their position in the ancient society, a brief reference through the satisfactory system was expressed through the varna and the caste system. The varna principle of categorisation of society is into four groups, i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Brahmins occupied the top position of power and authority, ritually and ideologically. The principle of stratification acquired normative significance, thus legitimizing the over-lordship of the Brahmins. The varna scheme was empirically expressed through various caste groups. These groups indicate the adjustment of the system to the needs of the society. A good deal of controversy in terms of the caste system centres around its origin. Scholars are divided in their perspectives and viewpoints with regards to the emergence of the system of social stratification. This system has been influential upon both the religious and secular activities that have been an integral part of the Indian society. The most popular and the comprehensively prevalent theory refers to the origin to the Aryan invasion in India and forms a link to the process by which the invaders could subordinate the indigenous inhabitants and integrate them as peasants and slaves within the stratified society. Thus, the twice-born castes are regarded as descendants from the non-Aryans (Status of Women in India, n.d.).

The political functions can be put into operation in a well-organized manner, by possessing the essential information in terms of number of aspects. These include, decision

making, leadership skills, managing, controlling, organizing and co-ordinating. Women, belonging to wealthy castes and princely states were the ones, who were held in high esteem. The wives and mothers of the rulers were given reverence to a major extent. In the implementation of politics and carrying out the administrative functions appropriately, men were the ones, who played a prominent role. But their wives and mothers could give them ideas and suggestions. For instance, in case of making of major decisions or when one has to put into practice the strategies and approaches, women also contributed significantly. They were not only allowed to give their ideas and suggestions, but also implemented the methods. In some cases, it was believed that women were more skilled and wise as compared to men in the implementation of managerial and political functions.

Much of the ideal role of women can be ascertained from the images of a maiden and bride in the Rig Veda. The daughters and the maidens were given appreciation for the characteristics of radiance and the appealing adornment. This description suggests the interest in feminine sensuality, and the child bearing capacity of the young child. At the organization of events and festivals, young virgins meet the eligible men. Then eventually, there were organization of marriage ceremonies with the approval of their parents. When the women got married, then they were given guidance by their parents that within their marital homes, they need to depict the traits of morality and ethics and not get angry at anybody (Rout, 2016). Hence, in the implementation of political functions, it was vital on the part of women that they rendered a significant contribution towards promoting welfare of the community and nation, by making the right decisions and carrying out the administrative functions in an appropriate manner.

The economic contributions of women were regarded important in ancient India. During the ancient times, agriculture was regarded as the major occupation of the individuals. In carrying out the seasonal activities, women assisted the menfolk. The involvement of women in various occupations and their contribution in the generation of income is regarded as one of the important aspects in the sustenance of their livelihoods. As in the present existence, it has been stated that more than 70 percent of the individuals within the country are residing in rural communities. The family was regarded as the basic unit and apart from getting involved in occupations or political activities, child development and well-being of the family was regarded as the indispensable job responsibilities of women. In order to carry out the job responsibilities in terms of all areas and activities, the women need to possess the necessary skills and abilities. It was crucial for them to possess adequate knowledge and information in terms of various aspects, which include, leadership skills, decision making skills, managerial functions of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling, health care, preservation of the environment, management of household responsibilities, child development and taking care of the needs and requirements of other members of the family, particularly the elderly.

CONCLUSION

In ancient India, women were given recognition and significance and also constraints were imposed upon them. The women belonging to upper castes and wealthy families rendered a significant contribution in improving the well-being of the family and community. They were

provided with educational opportunities, they were engaged in teaching professions and also developed their skills and abilities in carrying out the administrative and political functions. One of the major causes of decline in the number of girls was prevalence of the practices of female infanticide and female foeticide. Within the course of time, these practices were regarded as criminal practices and measures and programs were formulated that would prevent them from taking place. Women experienced number of factors that imposed detrimental effects upon their well-being. These include, illiteracy, purdah system, forced child marriage, polygamy and sati. They were not permitted to make any decisions on their own and were dependent upon the male members of the family.

The status of women in ancient India experienced positive as well as negative effects. They were provided with opportunities as well as experienced discriminatory treatment. There was a connection between the status of women and their economic position. This in turn is dependent upon the rights and opportunities for rendering an effective contribution in economic activities. Majority of the population of India was employed in the agricultural sector. In addition, men and women were engaged in jobs, such as weaving, craftsmanship, pottery making and so forth. Hence, women were normally married off at an early age, they were deprived of acquiring education, they were meant to implement the household responsibilities and take care of the needs and requirements of the family members. Women usually remained within the house, as they primarily dedicated themselves towards the management of the household. Apart from these, they were engaged in the manufacturing and production processes to supplement family income.

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