

# INDIAN WOMEN AND THEIR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH AGES – AN OVERVIEW

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## Introduction

Today women look forward to being treated on par with men in all walks of life. She has been empowered to stand on all equal footing with men. But the position of women in India right from the ancient period through medieval to the modern times has witnessed drastic changes which becomes an important area of historical research. This study is undertaken to know the position of women right from the ancient days and their transition to be Modern Women along with the role of philosophies, individuals, organizations and government in empowering that were helped this process of transformation.

### I - Women in Ancient India

It is a known fact that women in ancient India were given a respected place by ancient Indian grammarians such as *Patanjali* and *Katyana* suggest and women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig Vedic verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their bridegrooms. Scriptures such as Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers notably *Cargi* and *Maitreyi*.

Throughout the ancient era of Indian history, Women coexisted treated with great respect. During the Vedic period, equal treatment was given to men and women, and the latter even enjoyed the freedom of choosing their life- partners. They have participated in cultural events, festivals and public functions. The fact that the age of girls to be given in marriage in the Vedic period was sixteen to eighteen indicates that child marriage was not favoured during that period. The Vedic society allowed widows to remarry and treat them well. But, in the later Vedic period, the position of women deteriorated gradually and their status suffered with the advent of Manu's Code. It sanctioned child marriage, denied women education and treated them like *sudras*.<sup>1</sup>

During the Sangam Age, women were inferior to men and had to submit themselves to the dictates of their menfolk in all walks of life. As women were dependent on men, they did not enjoy any status, both in public and family life. *Sangam* literature clearly describes women's status in society. An occasional treatise like *Irayanar Ahapporul*, may refer to women's equality

with men. But "Shyness (*nanam*), holding steadfast to what is taught to one (*madam*), shrinking from the unfamiliar (*achcham*), and a sense of disgust at unaccustomed persons or things (*payirppu*)" were the major traits to be adhered to by women. They were confined to the houses and were watched by the female elders of the house.<sup>2</sup> Owing to the freedom enjoyed by women young people could choose their life partners. The *Sangam* literature refers to the curious customs of *karpū* (Chastity) and *kalavu* (Secret Love). Both the lover and lady-lover were honest people with mutual trust towards each other, normally they did not desert each other, and rarely, they separated themselves. The '*karpū*' became effective the moment, a woman set her heart on a man and from that moment she began to treat him as her lord and wore the *mullai* flower representing future marriage.<sup>3</sup> Elopement was permitted. Notwithstanding this freedom, the foremost idea that emerged in the *Sangam* period is that women played a subordinate role. Widows led a secluded and isolated life.<sup>4</sup>

As it was an extension of the *Sangam* Age, the medieval period also became an unequal society due to the influence of Islam. During this period, the part of women imitated the dictum laid down by Manu, which imposes a number of restrictions on the freedom of women.<sup>5</sup> In patriarchal societies, the mother "had a less active role in the upbringing of children in the family". Their only career in life was to minister to men's physical pleasures and wants.<sup>6</sup> They had no equal status with men and the importance of the wife's role during ceremonies merely allowed the presence of the wife near the husband.<sup>7</sup> Since the recognition of womanhood was getting lost in society.

During the Buddhist time, the role of women witnessed a slight setback. According to Jain tradition, Yayent, a princess remained unmarried and received ordination from Mahavira himself. On the basis of these facts from literature, Altekar, a historian rightly believed that girls in well-do-do families used to get a fair amount of education during the 3rd century B.C.

But there was a great change in the status of women after 300 BC. During this period there was a huge difference in the treatment both at home and the society for the birth of male and women children. As a result, many girls at their early age left their homes and joined the Buddhist monasteries. It is also given scope to believe that one of the reasons for the practice of early marriage of a girl is to prevent them from entering monastic life. Anyhow, there was a great change in the society which took place after 3rd century B.C. that led to lowering of the status of women.

## **II - Women as Social Victim in Medieval India**

The Indian Women's position in society further deteriorated during the Medieval period, when *sati*, child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became a part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian sub-continent brought the *Pardah* practice into Indian society. In spite of these conditions, some women did extremely well in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. *Razia Sultana* became the only woman ruler to have ever ruled Delhi. The Hindu queen *Durgadevi* who ruled for fifteen years before she lost life in the battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564 was worshipped as a Goddess by the people. Chand Bibi protected Ahmed Nagar against the powerful Mughal forces of Akbar in 1590. Jehangir's wife Nur Jehan effectively exercised imperial power and was distinguished as the real authority behind the Mughal throne. The Mughal Princess Jahanara and Zebunissa were

well-known poets and also influenced the administration. Shivaji's mother Jiabai was deputed as queen regent for her ability as a warrior as well as an administrator. In the southern part of India, many women were in the administration of villages, towns, divisions and also social and religious institutions.

But the suppression of the womenfolk in Indian society has been continued and the common women in the society became social victims.

During the medieval period, society became unequal on account of the rise of Islam as a religion. The women were reduced to living beings to administer the men's wants and pleasures. No equal status either in the home or in public life. Society came to extent of selling women as slaves to temple service during the Pallava period. It was prominent in the 11th century and they were called Devaradiyar. "Udaankattaierudal" [Sati] was an inhuman practice that was practiced in the royal families.

### **III - Missions for Transformation**

The Bhakthi movements tried to restore women's status and started to question some forms of oppression. Shortly after Bhakthi movement, Guru Nanak, the first guru of Sikh also preached the message of equality between men and women. Many of the great writers have spoken of women in the glowing terms "woman is the builder and molder of a nation's destiny". According to Mahatma Gandhi "Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa". To substantiate the above thought, Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidhyasagar, Dayananda Saraswathi and Keshab Chandra Sen have spread their views to bring a paradigm shift to women in India.

During the British Raj, Marth Mauld nee Mauld and her daughter Eliza Caldwell nee Mauld engaged themselves in imparting education and skill training of girls in the Southern part of India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of Sati practice under Governor-General William Cavendish – Bentick in 1829. Iswar Chandra Vidhyasagar's crusade for the improvement of the position of women in society led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.<sup>8</sup> Many women such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women's upliftment. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the ruler of Jhansi fought in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British. The Begums Hazrat Mahal, the co-ruler of Awadh was another ruler who led the revolt in 1857. She refused to accept the terms with the British and later retreated to Nepal. The *Begums of Bhopal* were also a few of the prominent female rulers during this period. They did not observe *Purdah* and were well trained in war activities.<sup>9</sup>

In the colonial period, women again looked down on social status due to the British adoption of non-interference policy in the societal and religious life of the native individuals initially. So, this kind of attitude towards Indian women perpetuates women in leading a confined life. Philosophically, the female was perceived to be a totally different race and subordinate to a man. It was held in a moment of complete obedience, refused all privileges, and stayed enslaved. They were treated as an appendage of men with a distinct and humbly accepted conception of their family duties and obligations. In the early period of British rule, women were not even aware of their rights.<sup>10</sup>

Christian missionaries have also been leaders in the area of education for women. The women of the early missionaries and independent missionary people, all of whom had been

there, took most of this service. In India in the nineteenth century, the education system wasn't embraced by females of any sort, even less by those of respected societies. In 1834, just 1% of Indian women were recorded to learn how to read.<sup>11</sup> Since the very beginning missionaries had been disturbing the criminal activities in India like the *Sati* (sacrifice of wives on funeral pyres of the married men), the execution of outcasts as well as the sacrificing of girls.

William Carey stayed responsible for passing an act for the first against infanticide in India after his arrival in 1793. In one year, he recorded finding the remains of a baby near Malda, who was first sacrificially given to the deity but instead left for black insects to feed. He also heard, in order to satisfy promises undertaken for responses to the prayers, that kids were cast in the Ganga River.<sup>12</sup> Carey exploited his ties with others in power to lobby for its abolition of this kind of activity. Then presiding officer Lord Wellesley invited him to comment on the subject, which he later proclaimed in 1802 to be an act of cruelty, but which, if found, would be murdered by anyone who carried out those heinous actions.<sup>13</sup>

Carey used his writings to inform the world about humanitarian problems. The Friend of India's first subject recorded a detailed study of a real *Sati*. Eventually, he retained the ritual in front of the public interest as well as tried everything he wanted to see *Sati* eliminated. Ram Mohan Roy by 1814 was part of Carey's *Sati* campaigns. Carey and his fellow Serampre, equipped with details of 439 wife burnings, requested the state to prohibit practices under the rule.<sup>14</sup> Initially, almost no amendment was observed, leading to heavy resistance from high-ranking Hindu politicians. The Christians managed to keep up their momentum, and gradually the people switched against the Orthodox Hindus. The order to ban the practice of Sati on the East India Corporation was eventually signed by Lord William Bentinck in 1829. Programmes have since been set up for mentally unstable and disadvantaged individuals. In 1884, a group of sisters founded the first establishment for the impaired in Bombay. until then, Christians and Protestant Catholics have found a variety of homes across India for the neglected, oppressed, and exploited. The Mukti Mission at Kedegoan, Pune, established by Pandita Ramabai in 1898 for girls left homeless and neglected children, is two of the most remarkable of these centres.<sup>15</sup> The second, the Dohnavur Fellowship, had first been founded by Amy Carmichael in South India in 1901. It aimed to save girls who'd been coerced into temple trafficking.<sup>16</sup>

Over the years, Christians have often become worried regarding the tradition of child marriage, which includes associations of children under five years of age between Hindus. Carey's approach was to encourage women's education. Child marriage was forbidden by the legislation in 1929. Since that day, Christians also made a deliberate attempt to help the remarriage of the woman.

As a result, there was a beginning of the transformation in the very outlook of women due to the access of the tenets of liberal philosophy from the west. The missionaries and the Indian Voluntary Organizations helped a lot to womenfolk to enter into the professional field whereas many legislative measures brought about their protection and emancipation.

### **Legal Security for Women**

Crime can be viewed in a general sense as an unlawful punishable by a state or other authority and hence it is not having a universal definition. These crimes are categorized by the

law of the land. One of such important categories which constituted as a separate section in the National Crime Records Bureau and serious attention of the law of the land in India considering its ancient culture and tradition is "Crime against Women".

Women can be victims of many different kinds of crimes as defined by various legal statutes in their respective countries. The National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB) classifies "Crime against Women" under two broad categories - the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Special Local Laws (SLL). The type of crimes listed in the IPC includes, (1). Rape (Section 375-376) (2). Kidnapping and abduction for specified purposes (Section 363-373) (3) Homicide for dowry and dowry deaths or their attempts (Section 302-304B) (4) Torture or Cruelty –both mental and Physical (Section 498A) (5) Molestation and assault (Section 354) (6) Sexual Harassment (Section 509) and (7) Importation of girls (Section 366 B). There were certain laws passed under SLL in India and they are gender-specific. The crime under SLL include crimes under the (1) Immoral Traffic Act (1956), (2) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (3) Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and (4) Commission of Sati (Prevention Act), 1987.<sup>17</sup>

### **Women in Police**

The rising trend of crimes against females, increasing women's involvement in various crime and the problems of handling juveniles has stressed the need for women police in India. The women police is now an essential part of the police services all over the country. A women's number have joined the Indian police service along with the central police organizations. The Indian police service which had refused to accept any women earlier refused to accept any women earlier, with-draw resistance after a representation from some women conditions.<sup>18</sup>

The Indian police service acquired its first women police officer in 1976 and within a year it had seven police officers. The function of women police at the first instance was to handle women suspects, accused and victims of crime. While in the case of women suspects/criminals, women police are used mainly to protect the honour of women and to save them from molestation. In 1973, the "first All-Women Police Station" had been set up in a conservative Muslim subjugated in Kerala's Calicut district way back by the "Idea of making the traditional women come out of her cocoon and give up her feminine reserve in approaching the police".<sup>19</sup>

The need for women police had been accepted around the world both in the established as well as developing nations in perspective of special necessities as well as needs of females. Working women now show a strong internal commitment to work. The effort, for a variety of reasons, includes the necessity to feel important and useful. However, they work primarily to make money that does not need. But in India, the majority of females pursue outside jobs to a great level because of financial needs, women's financial empowerment is important for improving their status in society.

### **Conclusion**

Women enjoyed reasonable respect in Tamil society during the ancient period. During the Vedic period, they enjoyed treatment with men and enjoyed equal even the right of choosing their life partners. They also have attended cultural events, festivals and functions along with men. It is also known from the sources that child marriage was not favoured and also allowed the widows to remarry. But they became victims of men's domination with the advent of the Manu

Code and also during the Sangam age. Child marriage began to be encouraged and women's education was denied. They also began to lose many of their rights when Chastity was given importance in society.

The European rulers introduced new viewpoint on women's role and their capabilities and these ideas impressed the enlightened Indians. Until now, the progress of women is marching towards modernity after a long period of stagnation and decline. The revival of womenfolk was possible in the pretext of European forms of governance, technology and values.

The role of Christian Missionaries and Indian Philosophers was immense in this direction. The Christian Missionaries were the first to introduce Education for women when only one out of a hundred Indian Females can read and write in 1834. The role of Carley in abolishing infanticide in India is still remembered in India. Along with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Carey campaigned against Sati and finally, Lord William Bentinck abolished Sati. Regarding the Indian penal code, it can be derived with an idea that women have moved from being objects of legislation to initiators as rightly observed by Geraldine Forbes, distinguished Teaching Professor of History and the Director of Women's Studies at the State University of New York, It is also precise to endorse his view that the family no longer exercises total control over their destinies for many women in India and general awakening has begun and it cannot be permanently suppressed.

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<sup>1</sup>P.S Joshi, Cultural History of Ancient India (Ancient Indian Social and Political Institution), Chand & Company, New Delhi, 1978, p.29.

<sup>2</sup> *Kuruntogai*; 159.

<sup>3</sup> N.Subrahmaniam, *Sangam Polity The Administration and Social Life after Sangam Tamils*, Madras, 1966, p.285

<sup>4</sup> *Narrinai*: 353: 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Max-Muller (Ed). *The Laws of Manu*, Vol.XXV, 1886, pp.327-328.

<sup>6</sup> Abbe.J.A.Dubois, Hindu manners, Customs, and Ceremonies, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1992, p.324.

<sup>7</sup> R.Rajalakshmi, Tamil Polity, Ennes Publications, Madurai 1983, p.181.

<sup>8</sup> *Social and Religious Reform Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Institute of Historical Studies, Siba Pada Sen, 181

<sup>9</sup> Arvind Sharma, Ajit Ray, Alaka Hejib (1988). *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ. p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Rekha Pandey, Women in India past and present, CHUGH Publications, Allahabad, 1990, p.42

<sup>11</sup> Doniger, Wendy (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin Books. p. 611

<sup>12</sup> Kumar, Raj (2003). Essays on Indian Renaissance. Discovery Publishing House. p. 173

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 176

<sup>15</sup> Arvind Sharma, Ajit Ray, Alaka Hejib (1988). *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ. p. 41

<sup>16</sup> P. Banerjee (2016). *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 82–83.

<sup>17</sup> N.Prabha Unnithan, “Crime and Justice in India”, (ed.), Sage Publications India., 2013, p254

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.255

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,