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Review Article

## Women's Status in Ancient India: A Multidisciplinary Review

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### Abstract

In ancient India, the status of women was not fixed by any particular standard. In different eras, at different times, the standards and recognition of women have changed. The social and political status of women changed during the rule of the Mauryan, Gupta, Skanda, Sultanate, and Mughal empires. This can be seen from the beginning of human settlement in the Indian subcontinent, from the beginning of civilisation, or in the civilisations of Sindh, Harappan, and Mohenjo-daro. Or the significant rise and fall of the position of women has been observed in different periods from the Vedic era to the post-Vedic era. During this period, women's social rights, economic status, political participation, their place and role in the family, opportunities in the field of education, etc., can be discussed, as in this article.

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### INTRODUCTION

To study the position of women in society at different stages of civilisation, it is known that the status of women has never moved forward in a linear way. Sometimes society has been kind to women, and sometimes society has been indifferent to women. In some societies, women have been worshipped as mothers, while in others, women have been considered only domestic workers. In any society, women have been seen as companions to fulfil the needs of men. A woman is identified with a man. Again, in any society, women have strengthened their position and identity in society through proper education,

economic and social rights, participation in the political system, and achieving social status. Over the course of history, as women have achieved equality in society, they have, in many cases, been criticised solely based on gender. Ancient Indian society, like most other ancient civilisations, was patriarchal in nature. Naturally, in such a social system, the whole way of life, starting from the daily life of women, was controlled by men. The cycle of life is completed from birth to childhood under the father, in youth under the husband, and in old age under the son. Is it important to note that the woman was self-sufficient? Or are women not given the right to self-determination? This

debate is going to continue. But women are forced to depend on men for their livelihood. The so-called division of work based on physical ability between men and women in that primitive period, physical hard work for men and relatively less hard work for women, had an effect that can also be seen in the modern urban civilisations of ancient India. That is to say, in ancient society, women did not receive equal opportunities, respect, and dignity as men. Even the birth of a daughter in the family was considered a curse, and the birth of a son was recognised as a blessing. There were restrictions on the participation of women in various customs and rituals of the society. In this era, women are respected. There is evidence that women can also achieve success in society if they get opportunities and proper training <sup>[1]</sup>. In Puranic texts like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Upanishads, etc., female characters have been presented with due respect. Women are worshipped as goddesses. Archaeological evidence of the respectable and stable position of women can be found in the cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation. These two contrasting religious positions of women in ancient Indian society are the subject of our discussion.

### The Status and Role of Women

In the ancient Indian social system, the influence of religion on every aspect of society is seen in a very important way. It can be said that people's lives were governed according to the rules of religion. The structure of the family and the duties of each of its members are determined by religion. The duties of men, the duties of women, the rules of marriage, social justice, and governance are determined by religion. Archaeological evidence in the cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation shows that the worship of gods and goddesses was prevalent at that time. There, the goddess was worshipped mostly in the form of a woman as a symbol of power <sup>[2]</sup>. They worshipped nature as a woman. They believed that by worshipping this deity, they would be able to live a peaceful and secure life in the family and society with the blessings of the goddess. There is evidence of matrilineal dynasties in many groups of this period. Where all the members of the family, including the male, have lived under the leadership of a female boss. So it can be said that at this time there are no such signs of division between men and women or discrimination against women. Later in the Vedic period (2500 B.C. - 500 B.C.) C.) There are certain characteristics of the position of women in society. To better understand the position of women in this era, this era can generally be divided into two phases. First, the Rig Vedic period (1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C.). C.) Second, the post-Vedic period (1000 B.C. - 600 B.C.) <sup>[3]</sup>. During the Rig Vedic period, women lived in a respectful society. Both men and women had equal rights. Women's quality of life has improved. Women enjoyed a lot of freedom. They have established themselves in the important strata of society. They could participate in educational, cultural, spiritual, psychological, religious, political, and administrative fields without restrictions. The community respected their work. But in the Later-Vedic period, the social status of women declined. At this point, women's freedom is at stake. The tradition of controlling women can be

observed. Women's development is limited to the home environment. Women's participation in society is limited. In the Rig Vedic period, when women used to participate in the then institutions called "sabhas" and "samitis," this practice was stopped at this time. Instead, male dominance is observed in socio-cultural and religious spheres during this period <sup>[4]</sup>. The man was considered a good luck charm in the family and was considered an important asset in the family. On the other hand, women are neglected in the family.

### Women's Position in the Ancient Indian Family System

In this era, women played the role of mother or wife in the family. The marriageable age for women was fixed at 15 to 16. At that time, the father arranged the marriage of his daughter. If the father could not give the daughter in marriage even after reaching this age, the woman would enjoy the right to marry of her own free will. Education, art, skill, etc. <sup>[5]</sup>, were considered qualifications for marriage. Monogamous marriage was common in the community. However, polygamy among the elite has also been observed to a great extent. In many groups of society, especially the girls of the Kshatriya and upper castes, there was freedom to choose a groom for marriage. In many cases, the Swayamvar tradition was held for the marriage of women of the elite class. Where the father who gave the daughter in marriage used to hold this custom at a special place on a special day to choose a suitable husband for the daughter. And invite potential grooms. In this ceremony, the marriage of the daughter was done with the one who was considered suitable. In the Vedic period, there is no evidence of the practice of Sati. But the emphasis was on the purity of women. In the Later-Vedic period, the practice of Sati can be observed to a great extent. The age of marriage of women decreases further; child marriage is observed. A woman's job was to take care of her family and take care of her children. And to take care of her husband as a wife and to fulfil her husband's desires. Evidence of the existence of a joint family is found at this time. Where many small families live under the leadership of one man.

During this period, widows were subjected to ridicule in society. The widows could not participate in any social ritual. However, there was a provision for the remarriage of widows under special conditions.

### Nature and Scope of Women's Education in Ancient India:

During the Vedic period, there were no restrictions on the participation of women in education. Both sons and daughters had equal rights to education. Before the actual education of the children started in childhood, a program called Upanayan was organised. This event was for both boys and girls. Like men, women also had the opportunity to study Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, Vedic literature, scriptures, ethics, philosophy, etc. She also learned painting, drawing, and music. She also learned different lifestyles and activities such as sewing, cooking, weaving, and so on. Women could receive the same military education as men, with no restrictions. Women were adept in the Vedas, knowledge of science, philosophy, logic, etc. During this period, women who remained unmarried all their lives and

studied the Vedas and became scholars were awarded the honour of Brahnavadinis. And women who practised the Vedas until marriage were recognised with the honour of Sadidvaha. Women could teach as well as men. Unmarried female teachers were known as "Upadhyayas," and married female teachers were known as "Upadhyanis" [6]. The names of some highly educated and important female teachers of this period are known, such as Maitri, Gargi, Bachkanavi, Vishwavara, Lopamudra, Sulava, etc. However, in the post-Vedic period, the right of women to receive education gradually declined. By confining the woman to the four walls of the house, the possibilities of her personality development are restricted. The potential of women's intellectual power is considered weak. A woman is considered to be a man's personal property.

**Socio-Economic Position of Women in Ancient India:** A special aspect of women's rights in the economic sphere is observed in the society of the Vedic period. They enjoyed the freedom to choose their profession according to their own merit. She owned her own property. Women earned money through household chores as well as small jobs such as farming, cooking, gathering forest resources, teaching, etc. They helped men with the family farm. They went hunting and gathering food with the men. A son has the right to inherit property from his father. In some cases, the unmarried daughter of a father was entitled to inherit the property of the father. Married women do not have this right. Women had no right to the property of their husbands. Widows also did not enjoy property rights. However, if a woman received any gift or property in marriage or in any other way, the woman herself enjoyed its ownership [7]. In the social system of this period, there was no economic progress as in modern times, so the economic difference between men and women may not have been apparent.

**Political Participation of Women in Ancient India:** In Vedic India, there is evidence of women's participation in political and administrative systems. Women play an important role in politics. Women used to participate in the 'sabhas' and 'samitis' held in the ancient village societies of this period. In ancient India, the varnasrama tradition was prevalent. According to this tradition, people were divided into four categories on the basis of karma in society: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. In this Varnashrama, above all, is the Brahmana, whose work is mainly to teach, to worship, to participate in administrative work, and to help. Kshatriyas are mainly rulers or those who run the state, protect the society from the attack of external forces, and fight if necessary. Thirdly, the work of the Vaishyas is to increase the prosperity of the country or society through trade and commerce, agriculture, animal husbandry, etc. And below all the Shudras, the work of this community is to maintain cleanliness in society and to serve the upper three classes of people. However, this classification is much criticised nowadays. However, in ancient India, upper-caste women of this class structure, who were highly educated and aware of political administration, participated in the political system [8].

In addition, there is evidence that many brave women educated in military education have participated in the battlefield.

**Understanding Women's Empowerment in Ancient India:** It is known from Indian Vedic literature and various texts that the society placed a lot of emphasis on the empowerment of women in the social field. In many cases, women have been given more respect than men. According to the Vedic Hindu religion, women are worshipped as 'Shakti,' i.e., 'power.' And it has been tried to explain that misbehaving with women brings harm to society or the state. Sage Valmiki, for example, has shown in the Ramayana the tragic consequences of the abduction of Sita by Ravana and his kingdom. Again, in the Mahabharata, Sage Vedavyasa has shown how the entire Kaurava clan had to be destroyed due to the misbehaviour of the Kauravas toward Draupadi publicly in the Raj Sabha [9]. Moreover, the greatness of many great women came to be known later. For example, Rani Ahalya, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, etc., are notable. In many kingdoms of the time, the king's mother, wife, or daughter took over in his absence. The Greek traveler Megasthenes, during his visit to India (305), described in his book Indica that women in ancient India participated in the administrative sphere. Such examples show the power of women.

## CONCLUSION

Analysing various historical data, it can be said that despite the patriarchal nature of the Vedic society of ancient India, women were largely protected and respected in this society. The standard of living of women was much improved during the Vedic period. Women had the right to participate in education, culture, rituals, ceremonies, etc. Women were allowed to work outside the home. Many women have earned their livelihood by working in the arts, agriculture, pottery, etc. Women had the right to education. Women had the right to study the Vedas, which was very significant [10]. However, in the post-Vedic period, the social status of women declined. It should also be mentioned that women have to face social exploitation. Child marriage, polygamy, the practice of sati, etc., are the victims of a bad culture. Women's participation in education is declining. Because of early marriage, there was no provision for women's education after marriage. They had to dedicate themselves completely to the family. Even at this time, it was considered impractical to give birth to a daughter. Information about the murder of the girl child is also available. Such incidents prove the plight of women. Women had to depend on men for their livelihood. However, in modern India, a lot has changed compared to the Vedic era. Today, women have made India proud in the world by contributing to the economic, political, administrative, knowledge, and scientific practices of society, and by getting opportunities in education. In the end, it can be said that by eliminating the atmosphere of discrimination or violence against women in society, one forgets the difference between men and women. Everyone should be given equal opportunity to develop themselves. Because we know that both men and women are equal drivers of society. It is impossible to

achieve the real welfare of society without the exclusion of any one class.

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