

## The Position of Women in the Ancient and Medieval Period

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### **Abstract**

*The position of women in India has been subject to many changes over the span of recorded Indian history. Their position in society deteriorated early in India's ancient period, especially in the Indo-Aryan Speaking regions, and their subordination continued to be reified well into India's early modern period. Practises such as female infanticide, dowry, child marriage, sati and the taboo on widow remarriage, have had a long duration in India, and have proved difficult to root out, especially in caste Hindu society in northern India.*

**Keywords:** Ardhangini, chattle, purdah, patriarchy, Vedic period.

According to Historian Romilla Thapper- *“Within the Indian sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to culture malice, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals.”*

### **Introduction:**

The position of women in the ancient India has been a very complicated one because of the paradoxical statements in different religious scriptures and sometimes in the same text at different places. Some has described their status equal to men while others have held not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred. The cultural history of India reveals that in Indian theoretically women enjoyed the status of a Devi as described in many religious texts of Hindus, the majority community in India. Though they enjoyed the theoretical importance which these texts outline for the wife who was defined ardhangini, but in practice she had a subservient position than a man. She was regarded as a chattle (a corporal moveable property) with no rights.



It was generally seen and believed that they had lower status with reference to power and influence than men in all spheres of life-family, community, religion, and politics. Till recently, it was held that up to marriage, she is protected by her parents, during married life by her husband and after the death of the husband she used to spend remaining years under the roof of her children without any will or desire and rights in the family. She had no personality of her own. Some scholars' have explained this inferior status as a result of patriarchal code of living. The rigid codes of behavior as outlined for her in Brahmanical texts were also responsible for her low status. Women once enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion, and public life, but as the centuries rolled on, the situation went on changing adversely.

### **Position of Women During Ancient Period:**

The position of women **in the Vedic period** was far from being analogous to what it usually is in early uncivilized societies. They were divorced, abandoned, sold, or killed at the mere whim of men. They had to carry about children and also serve as beasts of burden, when the tribe moves from one place to another. The muscle being the indispensable element of success and possessed by men, so he had the authority to defend her and feed her. It was taken for granted everywhere that women as such can have no rights and privileges. They were inherently inferior to men and therefore must be always subordinate to them. There are a few indications that brides were sold in marriages or even carried away with force. Some gamblers would also stake their wives to their opponents. But social conscience had already started disapproving of some of the practices. On the whole the position in the Vedic age was fairly satisfactory. Ordinarily girls were less welcomed into a family. But special religious rituals for the good luck of getting learned and capable daughters were also performed. Girls were educated like boys and had to pass a period of brahmacharya. Many became distinguished poetesses and their poems have been included in the canonical literature. The normal age for marriages was 16-17 years for a girl. Educated girls had a voice in the selection of their husbands. Very often there were love marriages, which were later on blessed by their families. They used to move freely in the society and often in the company of their lovers. In social and religious gatherings' they held prominent position and could perform sacrifices independently and got regarded as an impediment in religious pursuits. Marriage was a religious necessity without which one could not

reach heaven. The position of a wife was honored in the family but she was a subordinate partner. Polygamy prevailed in the society and a widow could remarry. The main disability the women suffered was that she could not inherit or hold any property. A few observations in the Vedic text- “Women have a fickle mind”, “Women can be easily won over by one who is handsome and can sing and dance well”

**During the ages of Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanisads** the right to property remained nil the only exception being in favor of marriages gifts on movable property. The women of higher section of society were being educated but as the period advances it came to be discouraged. The system of sending out girls to famous teachers or centers of education was not allowed and relations like father’s and cousins uncles could teach them at home. Even in the religious field the sacrifices were being performed by the male all by himself, but some were still performed by her. The marriageable age continued to be the same and still they had a right to choose their partners. Divorce was permitted, widow remarriage was allowed, but women had ceased to attend public meetings.

It would appear here that the general freedom and better status which women enjoyed in these periods was due to men being engrossed in the work of conquest and consolidation. Women used to take active part in agriculture, manufacturing of different items. They were thus useful members of the society, and could not be treated with the air of patronage or contempt. More over cheap and forced labor was yet to be available. Due to the outnumbering of the non-Aryans the women were not favored to perform sati and were allowed to remarry so that the number could be doubled. And more over to have an admission in heaven marriage was a must ritual.

**In the ages of the Sutras, Epics and the Smritis** the position of women deteriorated. A great calamity awaited the sudra women. There are evidences of Aryans marrying the Non-Aryan princes and even the sudra women. But they having less knowledge about the Aryan religion were not on the same footing as of the Aryan women. A son became a religious rather than a secular necessity. There arose a tendency to lower the marriageable age of the girl and discourage the education given to her. The discontinuance of upanayana, the neglect of education

and the lowering the age of marriage, produced disastrous consequences upon the position of women. She ceased to have an effective voice in the settlement of her marriage. Love marriages became a thing of past. Child wives with no education worth the name became the order of the day, and they could not naturally command respect from their husbands. The age being lowered to as low as 12 years. So the parents would be in a hurry to marry of their daughters before the age of puberty would sometimes get them married to an ill suited person, and they were forced to spend their lives with such a person. Widow Remarriage was permitted to the mid of this period but people had started opposing it. During this period marriage became an irrevocable union, however, only so far as the wife was concerned. The husband could discard his wife for the grave offence of not being sufficiently submissive. The dictum “The wife ought to revere her husband as a God, even if he were vicious and void of any merit” was probably prevalent. Kings had started to have big Harems, and these growing harems made men start to keep their wives in seclusion. So the Purdha system crept in. the position of the widow was further affected as she was forced upon to lead a life of a sanyasi. The greater calamity that took over her was the revival of sati custom. It was confined to warrior classes in the beginning, but, however it spread to wider society, and started to be looked upon as a great religious sacrifice, which deserved to be imitated. The only direction in which their position improved was in the sphere of proprietary rights. This was basically done due to the discouragement of widow remarriage, as they had to be provided with a maintenance and protection from the vicious wishes of their in laws who would force them upon them. It was further true that the tendency to regard women as fragile and of weak moral fiber was getting stronger. The women in the abstract did not exist; as there was the wife or the daughter or the mother. The daughter and the wife had the father and the husband to provide to them but the childless widow had no guardian of natural affection.

**In the ages of Later Smritis, Commentaries and Digest writers** the property rights of the women came to be eventually recognized all over. The scope of stridhana was extended. In all the other spheres her position went on deteriorating. The status of the widow was the same as of the sudra. The marriageable age was further lowered that is 10, but the age of 8 was regarded as the ideal age for this. Widow Remarriage was still prohibited and the custom of sati continued in the kashatriya clan and they still continued to marry their daughter at the age of 14 or 15. The

kashatriya ladies were also called upon to run the administration and were trained in the military. As the marriage age was so tender the question of education did not exist and generally illiterate and inexperienced women naturally ceased to inspire respect and the tendency to pass cynical observations about their weakness and worthlessness became more common. The evil example of royal harems made polygamy more and more fashionable. Martial faithlessness on the part of the husband became more common owing to the custom of child marriage. This also led to the increase early maternity and which further led to increased mortality. Some widows ascended the funeral pyres of their husband voluntarily, but occasionally an unwilling widow was burnt by her fiendish relatives so that she could not possess the property or they would say that she would disgrace the family.

**Status of women in the Medieval India:**

Caste and the position of women in society were interrelated. To reproduce 'caste' one had to sexually subjugate the bodies of its women through endogamy and other social techniques. Consequently, when evidences of growing rigidity of caste system in medieval times came up then indications of a gradual lowering of women's position in society also were discovered. B. R. Ambedkar says in his essay Castes in India (1916), "endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste". The practice of widow burning or sati became fairly common all over India by the 11<sup>th</sup> century among the widows of rulers, nobles and warriors. Evidences like the Lekhapaddhati (a collection of documents from Gujarat) show that women could be bought and sold as slaves, and were made to do all kinds of work (dirtiest and toughest kinds). They were also subject to physical and sexual violence. On the other hand, women employed as professional dancers in royal courts and the devadasi or temple courtesans appear to have been another large class of women.

In Medieval India, a period that witnessed the spread of Hinduism and the caste system, one of the customs that historians like Habib and Altekar have looked at is that of Sati. "From about 700 AD, fiery advocates began to come forward to extol the custom of Sati in increasing numbers," writes Altekar. As an example, he cites the Parasarasmriti, a post-Manu code of laws that lists out the governing principles for the Kaliyuga (the Age of Kali),

compiled during this early medieval period. In addition, it contains humiliating dictates against the lower-caste Shudras.

Between 700 and 1100 AD, Sati became a more frequent phenomenon than earlier in northern India. Among Kashmir's royal families, with the death of royal men even mothers, sisters, and sister-in-laws ascended funeral pyres! Only later, however, would Sati become a prevalent custom among the north Indian royal families at large. Recorded cases of Satis in northern India outside Kashmir were still very few during the period 700-1200 AD, compared to the numbers we find from later on. However, by this time, Sati had become a custom well recognized in the canons of Hinduism, "for we find it traveling to the islands of Java, Sumatra and Bali along with Hindu emigrants," notes Altekar.

The early medieval Brahmanic texts, while glorifying the ideals and custom of Sati, prohibited Brahman women from committing Sati themselves. This ban was later lifted by the Brahmans, perhaps to imitate 'glorious' Kashatriyas. This would later impact a large number of Brahman widows who were forced to kill themselves, particularly in states like Bengal and UP.

There were also a few accounts that are an exception to these dominant trends of growing Brahmanical patriarchy. Habib recalls celebrated historian of Kashmir Kalthana's account of Jayamati, "brought up by a dancing woman, and notorious for opportunistically changing her male partners. She ultimately became the Queen of King Uchchala of Kashmir (1101-11) and earned great repute in that position, for her benevolence and wisdom". Incidentally, Jayamati also had to perform Sati, and as Altekar notes, against her own will. While education in Hindu society was largely limited to men, Habib points out the famous sculpture of a woman writer at Khajuraho (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> Century).

**In the Sultanate period**, just as in the case of the caste system, there was no substantial change in the treatment of women. The condition of Muslim women could be said to be slightly better than their Hindu counterparts since Islam permits daughters to inherit their parents' wealth and allows widow remarriage. Practices like sati and widow repression remained alien to Muslim custom, much like the case of 'lower caste' communities. Habib however also reminds of "the tolerance to polygamy and unrestricted concubinage" something

that Islamic law shared with the Dharmashastras. Slavery existed before, but this increased in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries as slaves were obtained both in war and in lieu of unpaid taxes. They were made to work within the households and as well as craftsmen. Habib writes, “In the Delhi market early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century a woman slave for domestic work cost no more than a milch buffalo. Sultan Firoz Tughluq was reputed to possess 180,000 slaves, of whom 12,000 worked as artisans. His principal minister, Khan JahanMaqbul possessed over 2000 women slaves”. “[Islamic law] also heavily stressed on enforced seclusion and veiling of women and permitted pre-puberty marriages,” he adds. There was, however, nothing in Islam against women writing and reading, and Habib draws our attention to a 15<sup>th</sup> century dictionary Miftahu'lFuzala (1469) that shows a small girl learning to read along with boys before a school master. It was the Sultanate period when Iltutmish's daughter Raziyya reigned as a Sultan herself (1236-40), which also caused a scandal.

There are small indicators of the position and role of women in the Sultanate period. We have at Tirupati copper sculptures of Krishna Deva Raya (1509-29), emperor of Vijayanagara, with his two queens. There was also the culture of dance and music. ZiyaBarani's Tarikh-I Firozshahi provides glimpses of this in royal courts. Citing Barani, Habib tells us that in thirteenth century young girls were trained in Persian and Hindi music by the courtesans in the Delhi court like that of JalaluddinKhalji (1290-96).

**In the Mughal times**, we have greater clarity about the role of women in society. There is no doubt that society, in general, was oppressive to women, and the growing influence and number of Smritis not only maintained but also elaborated on the restrictions women faced. The nature of oppression, however, varied across classes and communities. And it has evolved along with time. The common Hindu women had negligible rights of inheritance. Child marriage was prevalent. Bride price was common among lower castes, while dowry among the higher castes. Widow re-marriage was possible in many of the peasant and pastoral castes, such as Jats, Ahirs, and Mewatis. Women did various household chores and participated in agricultural activities but not tilling. India was one of the few countries in the world where women carried out heavy tasks in building construction. While

claims to inheritance were legally allowed among the lower castes, in practice however such claims were frequently disregarded.

Women of the upper castes in general had greater leisure, but also faced much greater restrictions. Seclusion was strictly imposed, widow remarriage was absolutely prohibited (Habib). The Mughal administration intervened in sati, and tried to discourage it by ensuring that it was a 'voluntary act' on a case by case basis. But such interventions remained mostly ineffective. Humayun wanted to ban Sati, in the case of widows who had passed the child bearing age. But he could not take effective steps to that effect. Akbar, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of his reign, appointed inspectors to ensure that "no force was used to compel widows to burn themselves against their will." "[Acts of Sati] occurred two or three times a week at the capital, Agra, during the late years of Jahangir's reign," writes Habib.

In fact Sati, had become a much more common practice among the north Indian royal families, specifically those in Rajputana. "When Raja Ajitsingh of Marwar died in 1724, 64 women mounted his funeral pyre. When Raja Budh Singh of Bundi was drowned, 84 women became satis," notes Altekar. The practice had also spread to the warrior classes of the Southern peninsula, though to a much lesser degree than their northern counterparts. While Maratha ruling families by this time claimed Rajput descent and therefore could not remain immune to Sati as a practice, the frequency was still not as high as compared to Rajputana. "When Shivaji died [in 1680], only one of his wives became a Sati. The same was the case with Rajaram. The Queen of Shahu was compelled to burn herself owing to the political machinations of her mother-in-law, Tarabai. There are very few other cases of Satis recorded among the annals of the Maratha ruling families at Satara, Nagpur, Gwalior, Indore and Baroda," writes Altekar.

Bengal had the highest incidence of Sati during the later Mughal period, in the country. "The percentage of Satis in the Hindu population of Bengal was much larger than what [was] obtained in the presidencies of Bombay and Madras, or even in the division of Benares, which was the greatest stronghold of orthodoxy," he writes. The annual average of Satis in the Calcutta division from 1815-28 was 370. In comparison, the average for the Dhaka and Murshidabad divisions, both predominantly Muslim, were 44 and 19 respectively



during the same period. “Most of the Satis in Bengal and UP were from the Brahmana caste,” Altekar observes. He attributes the prevalence of Sati in Bengal to eliminating the widow’s heirs-hip of property.

### **Stories of Resistance against Patriarchy:**

Ahilyabai Holkar, the Holkar queen of the Maratha Malwa kingdom not only did not commit Sati after her husband died, but ruled from her capital at Indore for 30 years after the death of her son. Sanchi Honamma was a poetess in the court of Chikkadeva Raya of Mysore (reigned 1672-1704). In her *Hadibadeya Dharma*, written in Kannada language, she protests against women being considered as inferior to men. Matrilineal systems prevailed among certain communities in Kerala, and among several communities in the North East such as the Garos and the Khasis of Meghalaya. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sikh Guru, Amaradasji, condemned the custom of Sati, “and it was not followed by the Sikhs for a long time,” writes Altekar. Muslim women had a similar, and at the same time different, position. Women could claim a dower for themselves from their husbands as settled in the ‘marriage contract’ and also inherit property, though in proportions less than the male members of the family. While observing marriage contract documents in Surat from the first half of the seventeenth century, Habib finds that “wives obliged the husbands not to marry a second time or maintain any concubine”. The marriage contracts also forbid the husband from domestic violence, and ensured a minimum amount of subsistence for the wife. It is interesting to note that Aurangzeb changed the rules allowing widows to keep the entire land-grants of their husbands for life. While it is probably the case that middle class Muslim women were largely illiterate, we also have a picture of a schoolgirl along with her brother, painted around the late fifteenth century. There was also the exceptional case of Humayun’s sister Gulbadan Begum being educated while her husband was illiterate.

So we can say that during the Medieval period, **between 11<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century**, proved to be highly disappointing for the Indian women, for their status further deteriorated during this period. Medieval India was not women's age it is supposed to be the 'dark age' for them. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India they brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she

does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "harems". In order to protect them Indian women started using 'Purdah', (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education.

### **Better Status of Women in Southern India Comparatively Northern India:**

The status of women in Southern India was better than the North India. While in Northern India there were not many women administrators, in Southern India we can find some names that made women of that time proud. Priyaketala Devi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya ruled three villages. Another woman named Jakkiabbe used to rule seventy villages. In South India women had representation in each and every field. Domingo Paes, famous Portuguese traveler testifies to it. He has written in his account that in Vijaynagar kingdom women were present in each and every field. Nuniz, another famous traveler to the South also agrees to it and says that women were employed in writing accounts of expenses, recording the affairs of kingdom, which shows that they were educated. There is no evidence of any public school in northern India but according to famous historian Ibn Batuta there were 13 schools for girls and 24 for boys in Honavar. There was one major evil present in South India of medieval time. But it was the custom of Devadasis. Devadasis was a custom prevalent in Southern India. In this system girls were dedicated to temples in the name of Gods and Goddesses. The girls were then onwards known as 'Devadasis' meaning "Servant of God". These Devadasis were supposed to live the life of celibacy. All the requirements of Devadasis were

fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temple they used to spend their time in worship of God and by court for pleasure of courtiers and thus some Devadasis converted to Rajadasis (palace dancers) prevalent in some tribes of South.

**Conclusion:**

From the above mentioned details we can state that the position of women has been deteriorating day by day. She is being humiliated or snubbed from the time of her birth till death on the basis of religion and her physical strength. Now also in the modern society her position remains the same no matter what progress takes place in the society the thinking of man can never change and she will always be looked down upon. The need is to change the psychic of human being and that can only be done if he is told to at the very young age and is taught to respect and empower women in all manners in the society.

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