

Role of Women in Ancient India

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Women are the gift to the society. During ancient period of India, women played a significant role. The Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Their condition was good. The women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no *sati* system or early marriage. But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig-Vedic society, women started being discriminated against since the Later-Vedic period in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, the purdah and polygamy further worsened the women's position.

The epics and Puranas equated women with property. Even Buddhism did little for women. Though the Maurya kings often employed female bodyguards, spies and 'Stri-adhyaksha mahamatras', their status was still quite bad. Upper caste ladies had to accept the purdah. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without husband's permission.

They became worse off in the Gupta period. The Smritishastras abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and *sati*, prostitution and Devadasi system became widespread.

Ancient Women and Education:

There are some bright exceptions in this dismal picture. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahmavadinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students' studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.

Ancient Women in Politics:

Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya

women running the administration. The Satavahana queen, “Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. So did Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. A little after the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Odisha and Andhra. Princess Vijaybhattacharika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King; Vikramaditya I. Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada region. Women from the aristocratic classes enjoyed education and other privileges but the common woman still suffered ignominy, deprivation and hurdles.

Ancient India spans a vast period 2500 B.C-250 B.C... Archaeology, ancient texts, and artifacts are being used to reconstruct the lives of women. “The earliest materials found by archaeological excavations suggest the worship of goddesses. The earliest recorded religious texts (1500 B.C.) call on the life-giving power of goddesses to give life and to nurture and sustain it.” After the Aryan invasion and the development of Hinduism and then Buddhism, India’s extant written texts add greatly to our knowledge.

Centered on the Indus River valley, the oldest known civilization in India ranged from ca. 2500-1500 B.C. Today most of these cities of archaeological interest are now in Pakistan due to Indian independence and partition in 1947, although the ancient city-state of Lothal is in the Indian state of Gujarat. Extensive remains at Mohenjodaro, Harrapa, and Lothal show a well organized, prosperous agriculture and commercial society that traded with other civilizations in the Near East. The most famous ancient artifact is that of a young slender girl posing confidently. Numerous toys found convey a society that valued family life. While their inscribed ancient seals have not been deciphered to determine the actual

meanings, extensive female images have been found that suggest goddesses played a central role. “Often called fertility goddesses, very few depict pregnant women, women giving birth or women nursing children. Several of the seals suggest a goddess associated with vegetation and fertility.”

Apparently this civilization succumbed to major natural disasters that changed the course of the Indus River. Hitherto it was thought that the invading Aryans conquered these indigenous people, but the Indus Civilization was already in a state of decline when these nomads came in from the Hindu Kush. These Aryans were light skinned compared to the natives and over time enslaved them, resulting in the caste system. Aryan’s highly hierarchical society was led by the Brahmin priests, who imposed political and religious power over the rest. The Brahmins composed sacred literature, the Vedas that postulated the beliefs that continue to be revered today by the Hindus. The Rig Veda, oldest of these texts, composed mostly by priests, but a few women too; give us the first ancient Indian writing with decipherable information about their various gods and goddesses. There is a creation story, where the goddess Aditi gives birth to the earth, also personified as a goddess, Prithvi. Mother Earth’s role was to be tender to the dead and Aditi was to be prayed to for release from sin.

Much of the ideal role of women can be ascertained from the images of a maiden and bride in the Rig Veda. A daughter and maiden were praised for the characteristics of beauty, radiance and appealing adornment. This description suggests interest in feminine sensuality, child-bearing capacity of the young girl. At festival gatherings, young virgins met eligible men, with flirtatious coupling after initiating a relationship. They then turned to their parents for approval and marriage arrangements were made. To be a virgin

bride was of paramount importance. Practical advice was given to the new bride including: she not to be angry or hostile to her husband, she was to be tender, amiable, glorious, and mother of sons. The famous statement: "May you be the mother of a hundred sons," was conceptualized.

A woman's role as outlined in Hinduism at this time was to be a good wife so that the gods and goddesses would respond to the couple's requests and needs. An altar tended mainly by the father/husband, was overseen by the wife/mother when he was gone from the home. Her job was to keep the sacred flame burning 24/7. It was also the woman's responsibility to recite and sing hymns to the deities, a duty ascribed to women in most all other cultures. Divine couples like Indra and Indrani and Surya and Soma acted as models. Goddesses were generally viewed positively, although occasional glimpses of their darker side surface. Other early goddesses were the sisters Dawn and Night.

In the next segment of ancient texts, the Upanishads, ca. 800-600 B.C., writers began to reinterpret earlier Vedic literature. Now a person was able to reach the universal soul Brahman through self-knowledge not just through ritualistic knowledge performed by the Brahmin priests. There is evidence of two learned women participating in theological discussions. How different this is compared to the same time frame in the Near East where Pandora and Eve are doing evil. Women in India are doing theological inquiry. Unfortunately, current Indian scholars have commented unfavorably about these two women.

The next texts that speak about women in Ancient India are the Laws of Manu. Like earlier law codes in the Ancient Near East, we can gain insights into the legal status of women, but not necessarily what was actually practiced. Law codes are nearly always prescriptive not

descriptive literature. As in other ancient societies, women were under the guardianship of males: father, husband and son. When a woman married, it was regarded as her second birth, with a new name. In successful religious rituals, the wife was to be present to utilize her fertility powers. Adultery was not punished as severely as in other ancient cultures. Divorce was possible for the woman too, but only if he was impotent or insane. As true of ancient Rome, a wife could be divorced if she drank, was rebellious or dishonest, was barren (even if she had girls), and was a spendthrift. There is some evidence of the levirate marriage practice used by the ancient Hebrews and Hittites. However, the majority of widows apparently did not remarry.

Women's economic contributions were important in ancient India. As India was an agricultural country, women were needed to assist the men folk in the various seasonal activities. As today, in the past India was made up of thousands of villages. It was the family not the individual that was the basic unit. Usually three generations of the family lived together in an essentially patriarchal structure except along the Malabar Coast in the southwest, where matriarchal social organization prevailed. Poetry written by Tamil women in the south spoke of their singing while at work and with their family, and occasionally including poems on the feats of the aristocracy.

This patriarchal system prevailed in the religious rituals. The Indians practiced a form of ancestor worship, whereby the oldest male was responsible for conducting the rites on a regular basis in the home. It was the eldest son's responsibility to lite his parents' funeral pyre. Women could not serve as Brahmin priests or study the sacred Vedas. Some women could be seers, though.

Courtesans and prostitutes were part of ancient Indian society. As in ancient Greece,

courtesans were often literate, and skilled in music and dancing besides the usual sexual services. Regular prostitutes engaged in their trade in busy places. Later on prostitutes will come from a certain caste. Repentant courtesans and prostitutes sometimes went into Buddhist nunneries.

As Hinduism developed, certain facets became dominant: the caste system, *karma*, *dharma*, and reincarnation. There were originally four main castes, and women were represented in all of them. Caste determined whom you associated with, who you could marry, and your diet. In certain cases a man was allowed to marry a woman of a lower caste, but a woman could not without disgracing her family and defiling herself. Because of the relative lower status of women in India, if you did not do your proper duty or *dharma*, then you did not accrue good enough *karma* to be reincarnated in a higher caste or life form, including being reborn as a woman, who was inferior to a man.

Hindus came to think the various deities were manifestations or *avatars* of the Brahma, the world soul. Each god has had many rebirths. Goddesses of special reverence were Kali, Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi, Durga, and Devi.

Saraswati was the consort to Brahma, who set the world in motion, but lost importance with the emergence of the gods Shiva and Vishnu. Saraswati was the goddess of learning, writing, knowledge, mathematics, the arts, music, magic, and eloquence. She created the first alphabet. Many consider Her the mother of all life since it was Her divine energy that united with the awareness of Brahma, who was born from the golden egg from sea. Thus the two created all knowledge and all creatures of the world. Saraswati was also a river goddess, and her name translates as the flowing one. She is usually shown

seated on a lotus blossom throne accompanied by a white swan. She has four arms, showing that Her power extends in all directions. Two of Her arms hold books and beads (showing Her spiritual knowledge), with the other two arms and hands She is playing the *vina*, an Indian lute.

Parvati was Shiva's wife. She is often seen with Him in statues and paintings. They look like the model loving couple. In some of Her avatars or reincarnations She is also Durga, the ten armed goddess of battle, Kali, or Uma, the beautiful one who rides on a tiger. Parvati means mountain girl and She is considered the daughter of the Himalaya Mountains.

Lakshmi was the wife of Vishnu the preserver. She is often shown seated on a lotus as She was born from an ocean of milk standing on a lotus flower. She is the goddess of good fortune, prosperity, wealth, and beauty. Representing all that is feminine, while Her consort Vishnu represents all that is masculine. Many paintings show them riding on the back of Garuda, the eagle, the giant king of birds, as they fly across the land. Lakshmi chose Vishnu. They had a son, Kama, who was the god of romantic love, and in many paintings he looks similar to the cupids on valentine cards. Her attendants are white elephants. Lakshmi is also worshiped as Sita, the reincarnation of the perfect wife to Rama in the Indian epic, the Ramayana. Once a year on the night of the new moon in November Indian women clean their homes and hang tiny lanterns outside that look like stars. Women hope that Lakshmi will be attracted to their homes, blessing them with good fortune and prosperity for the coming year. Lakshmi lives in the sky with the most beautiful jewels of all, the stars.

Durga, the warrior goddess, is one of the *avatars* of Devi. She is invincible in battle, and was created by the gods to destroy the buffalo monster that was threatening their power. Taking

a weapon in each of her ten hands, she killed the beast.

The goddess Devi was the essence of being, and in this She was the Shakti, less anthropomorphic than the conceptional. She was the one great mother goddess, and She was responsible for fire, water, earth, and air. Devi is unknowable, omnipotent, and the myth of Devi as Kali dates back to goddess worship in the early Indus Valley cultures.

Kali is the most terrible aspect of Devi. Sent to earth to destroy the race of demons, Kali caused such devastation that many died. To bring an end to the slaughter her husband, Shiva, threw himself upon the dead bodies. Only when Kali realized She was trampling on Shiva's corpse did She come to Her senses. She has four arms and hands. One holds a sword and the other a severed head, both symbols of death. With the other two hands She holds a holy book and prayer beads, both symbols of life. Sometimes Kali is depicted as a black goddess, signifying the essence of all perishable things, with Her dark skin reflecting the dark soil of earth. Her teeth are blood-stained fangs, and rivers of blood flow from Her. In India today bloody sacrifices still are made to Her at Her Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, the city named for Her.

Shiva, as the destroyer and giver of life, and Varuna, as the Lord of Universal order or *dharma* were the two most popular male gods. Varuna also appears as Vishnu, who was reborn as the great hero Krishna.

In the two famous epics of India, the Mahabharata, and Ramayana, women are shown as having more freedom and competency than in the religious and legal literature. In the Mahabharata, there is evidence of both polyandry and polygamy. Events in these stories demonstrate women's managing and problem-solving skills. In

the Ramayana, the heroine, Sita, is the example of the good wife, who still shows determination to manage Her life. Public opinion still negates her innocence, forcing her to go into exile, where She goes back to Her mother, Earth. This ritual suicide then becomes the prototype for *sati*, the self-sacrifice of a wife on her husband's funeral pyre, which occurs later in Indian history. Just as in the medieval west, wives and daughters could become ascetics if their present life was untenable.

During the 6th and 7th centuries, two new religions developed in India, Buddhism and Jainism, that will have an enormous impact on not only in India, but in other regions of Asia. Buddha grew up as Siddhartha Gautama, a prince in a powerful tribe in the foothills of the Himalayas, what is now Nepal. Kept purposefully ignorant by his parents of the omnipresent poverty, when Siddhartha became aware of this, he renounced his tribal wealth and prestige, and went in search of the causes of this. Turning first to the Brahmin sages, he then tried extreme ascetic meditation. Arriving at a pipal tree, which is now in Sarnath on the outskirts of Varanasi, he experienced a flash of understanding, and at this point became the Buddha, the enlightened one. His goal was to eliminate suffering in this world, and over time his Four Noble Truths and eight-fold path attracted adherents and followers. Buddha regarded himself as a philosopher and teacher, rather than a founder of a religion. He did not attack the Hindu gods or rituals. For Buddha he wanted the elimination of the caste system, ritual sacrifices and fulfilling one's *dharma* according to the Brahmin regulations. Buddha did feel that our actions in life affect others, thereby maintaining the Hindu idea of *karma*. Nirvana was possible for everyone to achieve. Teaching for forty-five years until his death around 483 B.C, Buddhism developed monasticism like the west will do nearly a thousand years later, but Buddha discouraged women

becoming nuns. Buddhism stressed that the proper relationship in India was between a married couples. Wives should be encouraged to provide the home atmosphere conducive to the maintenance of society.

Conclusion:

The women occupied a very important position, in the ancient Bharat Varsa, in fact far superior position to the men of the time. "Shakti" a feminine term means "power" and "strength". Literary evidence suggests that kings and towns were destroyed because the rulers troubled a single woman. For example, Valmiki Ramayana teaches us that Ravana and his entire kingdom were wiped out because he abducted Sita. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram teaches us Madurai, the capital of the Pandyas was burnt because Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan mistakenly did harm to Kannaki.

In Vedic times women and men were equal in many aspects. Women participated in the public sacrifices alongside men. One script mentions a female rishi Visvara. Some Vedic hymns, are attributed to women such as Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant or Indrani, the wife of Indra. Apparently in early Vedic times women also received the sacred thread and could study the Vedas. The Haritasmrti mentions a class of women called Brahmavadinis who remained unmarried and spent their lives in study and ritual. Panini's distinction between acarya (a preceptor) and acaryani (a lady teacher or a preceptor's wife), and upadhyaya (a preceptor) and upadhyayani

(a lady teacher or a preceptor's wife) indicates that women at that time could not only be students but also the teachers of sacred Vedas. There were several noteworthy women scholars of the past such as Kathi, Kalapi, and Bahvici. The Upanishads refer to several women philosophers, who disputed with their male colleagues such as Vacaknavi, who challenged Yajnavalkya. The Rig Veda also refers to women engaged in warfare. One queen Bispala is mentioned, and even as late a witness as Megasthenes (fifth century B.C. E.) mentions heavily armed women guards protecting Chandragupta's palace. Hindu religion has been occasionally criticized as encouraging inequality between men and women, towards the detriment of Hindu women. This presumption is inaccurate. In the Vedic period, we come across female scholars like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Romasha and Indrani. In the Upanishad period, names of women philosophers like Sulabha, Maitreyi, Gargi are encountered.

In religious matters, Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity. One of the things most misconstrued about India and Hinduism is that it's a male dominated society and religion and the truth is that it is not so. It is a religion that has attributed the words for the strength and power to feminine. "Shakti" means "power" and "strength". All male power comes from the feminine. The Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) are all-powerless without their female counterparts.

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