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**AN ANALYSIS UPON CONTRIBUTION AND
STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA: A
REVIEW**

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An Analysis upon Contribution and Status of Women in Ancient India: A Review

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Abstract – Most of the social reformers tried to uplift and restore the women's glory through preaching, press and platform. Among them a few notable reformists are raja ram mohan roy, iswarachandra vidya sagar, swami dayanad, kandukuri veersalingam, duragabai deshmukh, jyotiba phule and ramaswami. Raja ram mohan roy succeeded in making viceroy lord william bentick, to declare the sati system illegal. In the patriarchal family and society of our country for centuries, the law of manu in regard to the role and behavior of women have been rigidly adhered. The state never set out to restructure rectious of authority within the family or other resources .for many political and academic reasons the specificity of women's oppression and exploitation and role of the state remained substantially unexamined to bring an end to the oppression of women in our country, several reformers tried their best to influence the state. nevertheless, it was Ambedkar who had been successful to influence the state to come the rescue of the women of our country. The purpose of the present chapter is to examine Dr. Ambedkar's efforts in understanding the complete reality about the status of women in India through a comprehensive hindu code bill was on his pragmatic approach to recognize, restructure and reform the patriarchal family for repairing the dilapidated component of Indian society , namely, the women.

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INTRODUCTION

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 'Striadyaksha 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.

As we all are very well aware from the fact that, all over the world 50% of population is constituted by woman. But in our country only, there is decreasing ratio of woman on the basis of sex selection abortion. The situation of decreasing sex ratio of male to female is the reason of unequal social status of woman with men. On the other hand, in western countries woman's in reality are equal with men. But in India the situation is not so, in fact it is just on paper that we provide equal status to woman in our country also. It is evident from our culture that at one side we treat woman as goddess in the form of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga and very next movement all the heinous and illegal offences being committed against them like rape, sexual exploitation, kidnapping and most importantly nowadays 'Female Foeticide'. On the other hand, we can say that everybody treats them like a slave who work without any wages.

Today as per our Constitution we provide equal status to woman on the basis of equality principle. But to achieve or gain this equality Indian woman have to struggle for a long time. Our ancient era is the witness of this inequality, for example Draupadi, wife of five Pandavas was, used by them on the dice like goods. Woman were also used for dance to please the kings and other male members of kingship, woman was also not having right to speak loudly in home or public places, these are some instances which shows that in ancient period also

woman was not being treated equally with men. Even she was not having right to participate freely in economic, social, political and personal activities.

In this way status of woman has been changed from ancient time to modern age. But still 'Female Foeticide' and Infanticide are committed frequently in India and other countries. Therefore, researcher in this research has discussed the position of woman from primitive society to modern society which will help to find out reasons of 'Female Foeticide'.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instill respect for women. *Ardhanareshwar* (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. The system of *Sati* existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral, forced child marriages were unknown. Women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called *Swayamvara*. In this, potential grooms assembled at the bride's house and the bride selected her spouse. Instances of *Swayamvara* ceremony can be found in epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This continued even in the later period in high caste families.

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deplores the birth of daughters. Yet, certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The Vamsavalis or genealogies of teachers attached to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in which many seers bear metonymics, indicate their importance. There are references to women seers like Gagri and Maitreyi. However during this period, we see the growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. The position of women gradually deteriorated as

the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis*, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty. During the Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc., permission of widow remarriage and divorce. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

WOMEN IN INDIA

The Constitution of the Republic of India ensures equality for women and men in every sphere of life and activity. Women in India have been given equality of opportunity in all matters relating to education, employment, and legal status, and they can aspire to grace the highest offices of the state. However, this is indicative of the existence of women in the country. Though legally and constitutionally all women have equal access to and right to venture in every walk of life, a vast majority of them are still illiterate and uneducated. This is a paradoxical situation which must be understood and seen in its historical perspective. The status of women and their activities can be divided into three main historical periods, the ancient, the medieval and modern.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA MEDIEVAL PERIOD

As by passage of time, the position of woman became worse in medieval period, rather to develop some good changes in their status. During the medieval period only, system of *Purdah* and *Jauhar* were being introduced by Muslim and Rajput community against woman. Firstly '*Purdah*' means, woman in Muslim community is fully covered with clothes, so as to cover their body from male. Secondly '*Jauhar*' means, woman with their own consent immolate themselves so as to save their body and property from detention of enemy, if they are from defeated Warriors family. In both the systems, liberty of woman was curtailed by the community that they were not giving right to moment or leave their lives without any restriction of fear and without any burden.

Instead of all these religious restrictions, woman at that time actively participated in social, political educational and religious field like *Raziya Sultan* who was first lady Monarch of Delhi, *Chand Bibi* who has defeated Akbar etc. in this period too, bhakti movement had played a very important role for improvement and impoverishment of the status of woman. These were the movements which tried to give equal status to

woman in society at that time. The best example, who preaches the equality of men and woman at that time, was a '*Guru Nanak*'. He advocates equality of woman in each sector that is religious, political, educational and cultural.

With the coming of Muslim rule, medieval India witnessed enhanced dependency of women on men. The Islamic custom of *Purdah* (veiling of women) forced the public world to be separated from the private world, with women confined to the latter. Following its subjugation by the Muslims, and fearing adverse outcomes for its women, a large part of the Hindu India accepted the practice of veiling. Through this privatization, Indian women were forced to trade their mobility for safety. Repeated invasions by the Muslims further pushed the Indian women towards inhuman "traditions" such as child marriage, the dowry system, *purdah* and *sati* (the immolation of the widow on the dead husband's pyre). The challenge of Islamic aggression also made Hindu India defensive and introverted causing a desperate return to orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices and further constraining the status of Indian women. Thus, during the medieval period, Indian women lost their earlier status and were at the lowest ebb.

However, women like Razia Begum rose to become a ruler, Chand Bibi, Tara Bai and Ahaliya Bai Holker, left their great imprints for their ruling capabilities. In Bhopal also, Begums or princesses ruled. With the advent of Islam, once again, women like Jahanara, Begum Mumtaz and Noor Jahan enjoyed respectable positions in the country. These remarkable ladies though strict Muslims, publicly administered justice with their faces covered by veils or burkas.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT PERIOD:

Women in Pre-Vedic Period: Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian woman enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome. The Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded woman as useful and productive members of society. The condition of Vedic Woman was good. Woman also enjoyed religious status like that of men, especially in Vedic initiation and studies. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of woman with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge.

The Rig Veda had rendered the highest social status to qualified woman of those days. But status of woman fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. They were not at all treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal rights and privileges as compared to men.

Though the woman participated in each family ceremony with men but they only played a role as a silent observer not an active participant. As per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority over their wives. Child marriages, Polygamy and *Sati* were prevalent at that time. Still out of all these things woman at that time were respected by the society. However, changes into the status of woman introduced in 15th century. Saints and supporters of *bhakti* movement were expounded and spoken about equality of woman with men.

Position of woman in Vedic Age: As we have studied position of woman in Pre-Rig Vedic period was very high. In later Vedic period, the position enjoyed by woman in the early Vedic society, was not retained. In Vedic society participation of wives was required in many rituals. Woman could select their husband in an assembly called '*स्वयंवर*'³⁰. But in most cases the woman had to lead an unhappy married life. This was simply because their husbands were allowed to have more than one wives and this was especially quite common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society. A widow was expected burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. This would make her '*Sati*'³¹. Manu assigns to the Woman of Vedic age, a position of dependence, not of subordination. In the work called *Amarkosh* written in the Gupta era names of the teachers and professors are there and they belonged to female sex. They were the authors of Vedic scripts and '*mantras*'.

Concept of Abortion and family planning in ancient time: Abortion was also there in ancient time. Families also aborted the foetus in different ways. It was a mostly found in tribal people. The woman who performed an abortion against the will of her husband was subjected to severe punishment and the higher caste woman, who performed abortion with the help of slave, that slave was also punished with hard punishment. At that time religion and community always criticized the abortion and preferred preparation or self-punishment for abortion and rarely enforced other punishment. In ancient time, pregnancy can be terminated by way of consuming some herbs, by using injurious weapon, by creating abdominal pressure and many other ways.

In 19th century, the British's declared some area as Infanticide prone. In 1805 they had found a high incident of female Infanticide among the Rajputs of Saurashtra. In Eastern Uttar Pradesh, there was a village with no daughters. In 1808, Alexander Walker, the chief authority in Baroda summoned the head of all the communities and asks them to give an understanding that they would not kill girl babies. In 1870, the British Government enacted the Prevention of Murder of Female Infants Act. To begin with, it was to be enforced only in the Northwestern Provinces

including Punjab and Oudh. In 1872 some areas were notified as Infanticide prone after census figure indicated 40% deficit of woman. Already the woman killer belt was getting established. In 1898, female Infanticide was recognized as a crime and a Government order was passed making it a cognizable offence. However, within eight years, in 1906, the Prevention of Female Infanticide Act was repealed as the Government claimed that Infanticide was no longer practiced in these areas. The 1901 census actually indicated that there were just 832 females to 1000 males in Punjab. So obviously the Act was withdrawn because of some other political consideration.

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, Harappa, 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, childbearing 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.

CONCLUSION

Through this research we have found that as the time changes women's rights also have undergone wide changes. Indian women have mastered anything and everything which a woman can dream of. But she still has to go a long way to achieve equal status in the minds of Indian men. With the changes in policies women have become more powerful in various fields but crimes against women have grown much with the increase in various rights of women. Women are still treated, in some respects, in the same old way, yet the perception that women are second to men has not been erased. Mushroom growth of crimes against women have been seen, and also women's own perception is responsible for changing but not respectful status of women in India. Still lots of new policies, and awareness is needed. Many new tribunals and public institutions are to be established to guarantee women effective protection against discrimination.

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.

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