

The Status of Women in Ancient India

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Abstract

The status of women in ancient India has been a topic of great interest since the nineteenth century struggle for women's rights reformation, when reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohun Roy relied on ancient hindu scriptures to fight for upliftment of women, and widows in particular who had to deal with many social evils in the form of sati, isolation, restriction on lifestyle and prohibition against remarriage.

However, with the pioneering works in the field by eminent scholars such as Anant Sadashiv Altekar and others, there is a general picture in the minds of people about the status of women in the ancient Indian society.

It can be perceived as a very advanced and liberal society as interpreted by Altekar based on the Rig Veda and the eminent women therein who have left indelible marks on the the scripture by composing numerous hymns present in it.

But others would refer to the Manusmriti, which is at times associated with promoting sexism in the society till the modern times in Indian history.

Both are part of the ancient Indian society, but at different points in time, hence a closer look with focus on specific time periods and demographic would reveal the changes in women's status over the millennia that constitute the ancient period of Indian history.

Introduction

The status of women in ancient India is a nuanced topic in the sense that there is no one particular position to be assigned to women in ancient Indian society. This is largely due to the vast stretch of time covered by ancient Indian History, from 1500 BC, the start of the early vedic period, to the 6th century AD, the end of the Gupta period. Understandably, the status of women changed drastically throughout the millennia covered in this period.

Another reason for multiple opinions, however is the difference in status given and role accorded to women across the strata of ancient Indian society in one particular point in ancient Indian history.

The upper caste women in various points have had better or worse position in Indian society relative to the men of their castes when compared to women of lower castes, or varnas.

For example, it can be observed that even though the sexuality of women came to be highly controlled with the passing centuries, in order to maintain the purity and the position of the 'higher' varnas, relative to the 'lower' varnas, such restrictions were not as big a concern in the 'lower' varnas. In the same manner, while the mentions of learned women in the rig veda allude to access of education to women at the time, such an access cannot be generalised to women of all sections of the society, just as the simple supposition that all men had access to education itself is extremely unlikely.

Of course, in absolute terms in the societal structure, the women of upper castes were always perceived as having higher status than the women of lower castes.

In this manner, keeping in mind the aforementioned factors, the status of women in ancient India can be gauged through four lenses: The historically recorded accounts of prominent women in the Early Vedic Period, The condition of the women among the common populace in the Early Vedic Period, The historically recorded accounts of prominent women in the Later Vedic Period and beyond, and the condition of the women among the common populace in the Later Vedic Period and beyond.

Prominent Women of the Early Vedic Period

The Early Vedic Period is often referred to as the golden age for women in Indian History, particularly by the writers of the 19th century's historiographers, such as Anant Sadashiv Altekar.

This view has a large support across academia and teaching materials such as school history books, and for good reasons, many of which are supported by the historical records of the prominent women of the earliest period of ancient Indian history, namely in the Rig Veda, the earliest of the four Vedas, which are said to contain all the knowledge of the Universe, and all further knowledge and work is derived from these works which are said to have been written by no man, but heard and passed on through oral tradition for centuries before being written down once the first written script was developed in the Indian Civilisation.

The Rig Veda has numerous verses attributed to female authors, such as suktas 39 and 40 of the tenth mandala of the Rig Veda, each containing 14 verses is attributed to Ghosha, along with other female composers like Lopamudra who are credited for composing around ten sultans in the Rig Veda.

These historical figures demonstrate that the apex of knowledge in the Early Vedic times was not exclusive to men and that many women were as learned as the best of men.

But, Although women have made significant contributions to the Rig Veda, it remains that a vast majority of shlokas were in fact written by men.

Furthermore, it can be noted that although learned women can be found in historical accounts, they are either Brahmavadinis, the equivalent of celibate nuns dedicating their lives to the search of truth alone, such as Ghosha when she attained wisdom¹, or the wives of sages, such as Lopamudra, the wife of sage Agastya. It is as if women were not permitted to be superior to their partners.

Even so, it is undeniable that women were given the opportunity to educate themselves and played a significant role in academia and in the society at large, which only degrades as the centuries went by.

Status of Women among the Common Populace in the Early Vedic Period

There are many sources to gauge the status of the women among the common populace in the ancient Indian society, but the sources that can allow the people of the twenty-first century to take a glimpse at the status of the women among the common populace in the Early Vedic period are scant at best. The scant few refer to the Vedas themselves, and even among those, the Atharva-veda may have been composed in its entirety as we know it today by the Later Vedic period.

Hence, to take a glimpse at the status of the average woman of the Early Vedic Indian society, differentiated from the Prominent historical women mentioned in the Vedas, we need to take an indirect approach.

The first notable thing is the fact that the Early Vedic society was most probably one with ill-defined political identity. That is, although there were roles for the councils, like the Rajan (King), who was

¹ Vivekananda (1954). p. 161.

elected, the Sabha (general assembly), the Mahishi, Purohit, etc.², it failed to qualify as a state, for as per the Saptang theory of Kautilya's Arthashastra, it did not have a defined territory. This leads to the possibility that much of the subcontinent was yet to be claimed by the Vedic society, the struggle for which can be gauged by the Devas versus Asuras theme in much of Indian mythology.

In this case, it is debatable that the customs of Vedic society can represent the ancient society of 'India', as we know it today, especially considering that the status of women declined considerably once the Indian subcontinent largely came under the gambit of Vedic culture in the Later Vedic period.

Even in the Early Vedic society itself, the head of the 'Jana', or community, was a male, and never a female. In fact, both the politically supreme and the religiously supreme representatives in the Sabha, i.e., the Rajan and the Purohit were men, which can be seen as a display of defined gender roles in the Early Vedic society faced by the common woman of the time.

The Deterioration of the Status of Women in Later Vedic India

It is widely agreed upon in academia that the status of women in the Later Vedic period in Indian history to beyond saw a considerable decline as compared to even the most pessimistic outlook on the status of women before this point in history.

While the questions raised over the high status of women in the Early Vedic period pertain to the lack of equality and equity of women as compared to men in the social, political and religious spheres of the society, the deterioration of status in the ancient Indian history from that point onwards raises the question of the extent of oppression faced by women over the passing of centuries, and turning points that lead to even more handicaps being heaped upon women.

The word 'Oppression', although a strong word to be employed in any situation, can be seen from various instances of unreasonable societal norms pertaining to women, such as the excerpts from Yajnavalkya's works studied by Sukumari Bhattacharji³,

"on the death of a son-less 'putrika' the husband shall unhesitatingly take the entire estate left by her"

Thereby showing the lack of rights of the daughter of the son-less 'putrika' if there was one. Another excerpt of Yajnavalkya's work reads thus,

"If a husband renounces a wife who carries out his command, is skilful in work, who has given birth to heroic sons, such a wife should be given one-third of (her husband's) property and maintenance!"

This displays a ceiling of the right of even a wife as perfect as someone described by Yajnavalkya, on her husband's property.

Although the tales pertaining to Yajnavalkya depicts many learned women that surpassed most male scholars in intelligence and wisdom such as Gargi and Maitreyi. The tales pertaining to these learned women, the debate between Gargi and Yajnavalkya in Janak's court in Mithila, which entailed Gargi questioning Yajnavalkya for a prize of 1000 cows if she wins the debate. The debate ended with neither philosopher coming out on top in the end.

² A brief account on the Political Organisation in India during Vedic period. Jagran Josh.

³ Bhattacharji, Sukumari. *Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women*. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 26, No. 9/10 (Mar. 2-9, 1991), pp. 507-512

However, the manner of concluding the debate, employed by sage Yajnavalkya is notable. He ends the debate by forbidding Gargi from questioning him further, and threatening her with dire consequences if she continues, and arbitrarily eliminates her from the contest.

While historians such as Shakuntala Rao Shastri have put a positive spin on the tale by depicting it as Gargi seeking knowledge from Yajnavalkya, the manner of arbitrary dismissal of this most learned female sage is a very telling example of the deteriorated status of women in the later Vedic period as compared to the earliest period of Vedic Indian history.

The most popular example perhaps, cited very frequently, and has been declared to certain feminists to have perpetuated sexism in the Indian society since the ancient Indian period.⁴

The Manusmriti, which is a book that was clearly established by 5th century BC⁵, as per the scholar Patrick Olivelle, and he has clarified in the same book that the original author was not one single person called 'Manu', but rather a whole slew of contributors who added to the ancient code of law gradually over centuries.

Hence, if the above claim is to be believed, the Manusmriti can be perceived as the ideal source to gauge the status of Later Vedic women among the common populace. What it depicts, however, is not very pretty. In Chapter 9(3), it is written, as translated by Patrick Olivelle,

“Her father guards her in her childhood, her husband guides her in her youth, and her sons guide her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently”

This is a very direct, and telling perception of the freedom that women were qualified to possess, and qualified only upon the basis of the accident of birth.

Other excerpts from Patrick Olivelle's translation of the Manusmriti are as follows:

“Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god.”

-[Chapter 5(154)]

“If the wife does not sparkle, she does not arouse her husband. And if the husband is not aroused, there will be no offspring. When the wife sparkles, so does the entire household; but when she ceases to sparkle, so does the entire household.”

-[Chapter 3(61)]

The above excerpts highlight the gender role and bondage of marriage for the ordinary women of the time, and the emphasis on the sexuality of the woman, with no such emphasis on the man.

Of course, it has to be noted, that although the fact that no one author wrote the book, but it was composed on the basis of phrases and idioms prevalent in that period, this also robs the book of any authorial intent, and divorces it from any social, political and economic context within which these statements may have been used.⁶

However, episodes like Yajnavalkya arbitrarily shutting down Gargi in their debate, and even going so far as to threaten her with no regard of following consequences can be seen as traces of existing inferiority in the status of women as compared to men, which might have been reflected in the customs among the common populace as well, giving some credence to the contents of the Manusmriti.

⁴ TK, Smitha (2022). *Manusmriti: The Problematic Guide to Being a 'Good Woman' & 'Good Wife'*. thequint.com. <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/manusmriti-guide-good-woman-bjp-sanatana-dharma-wife-delhi-high-court-judge-pratibha-singh#read-more>

⁵ Olivelle, Patrick. *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the 'Manava-Dharmasastra'*

⁶ Olivelle, Patrick. *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the 'Manava-Dharmasastra'*

Prominent Women in the Indian Society in the Later Vedic Period and Beyond

Even though the general condition of woman and their status in the ancient Indian society declined considerably by most metrics, it is undeniable that there were still many prominent women of the later Vedic period and later who played important roles in society in various spheres of life, such as knowledge and politics.

Among the prominent women in the field of knowledge who searched for truth alongside many male sages and learned scholars were women like Gargi, who was one of the nine gems in the court of the king of Mithila, Janak, the father of Sita, wife of Ram in the epic of Ramayana.⁷

At the same time as Gargi, the wives of sage Yajnavalkya, Maitreyi and Katyayani were also extremely learned who found a notable mention in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.⁸

This can be seen as an indication that even at a time when gender roles were becoming increasingly defined, they were not yet restrictive enough to become barriers against education for all women across sections of the society.

In the political arena, women in ancient India played important roles even in the Gupta age after the Later Vedic period. The first great king of the Gupta dynasty, considered the founder of the imperial dynasty of ancient India, Chandragupta I ruled in conjunction with his wife, Kumara Devi.⁹

In the same dynastic period, the Vakatakas, a kingdom in the Deccan, was ruled by the regent queen, Prabhavati Gupta, with the support of her father, Chandragupta II Vikramaditya, after the death of her husband, Rudrasena II.¹⁰

Although both instances were with the support of men, and the political power was vested in them in lieu of her husband in the case of Prabhavati Gupta, and Kumar Devi can be considered the lesser of the two equals, it remains a fact that woman were nevertheless considered good enough to hold political power, and even rule an entire kingdom in ancient India.

Conclusion

From the various sources and the four categorisation of women across the ancient period of Indian history, it can be noted with a fair degree of confidence that women's status was by no means constant, and that any term such as, 'status of women in ancient India' is bound to be a misnomer, for it can only pertain to a particular categorisations status and not the status of all women in ancient India as a whole.

In the Early Vedic period, women can be seen to be playing significant roles in all spheres of life, religious, political, and economic.

Women had the right to be present in the sabhas and samitis of the Jana, or community. There was to be a Mahishi in the political body of that time along with the Purohit and Rajan.

In the field of knowledge, women have left indelible marks on the earliest of the four Vedas, by composing hymns present in the Rig Veda, albeit much lesser in proportion to those composed by men.

⁷ Grinshpon, Yohanan (1998). "The Upaniṣadic Story and the Hidden "Vidyā"; Personality and Possession in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad". *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. 26 (5): 373–385.

⁸ Pechilis, Karen (2004). *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States*. Oxford University Press. Pp. 11-15.

⁹ Altekar, A.S. (1957). pp.186.

¹⁰ Altekar, A.S. (1956). *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. Motilal Banarsidass. p. 187.

This state of affairs of the presence of women in various spheres of life saw considerable deterioration in the later Vedic period, as evidenced by the Manusmriti, composed by the 5th century BC, the end of the later Vedic period and the beginning of the first imperial period in Indian history, the Mauryan Empire. As per the code of law, the women were to be perfect to ensure virtue, and bound to her husband even if he was completely lacking in virtue. And the women have been compared to dogs and witches, as well as treated as sexual objects in certain verses quoted above.

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