

POSITION OF WOMEN IN VEDIC, POST-VEDIC, BRITISH, AND CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Written by Govind Kumar Saxena & Major Gen. Praveen Kumar Sharma (Retd.)***

**Phd Scholar Law*

*** Director, Amity Law School, Amity University, Haryana*

Abstract

Both male and female are essential components of human society. We depend on each other and life can only be sustained if there is a balance between these two components. For human evolution and existence of humanity, we need both men and women. So, we can agree to this fact that one is not bigger or better than the other. Still, we have witnessed inhumane, unethical, and immoral practices against women.

We have seen gender inequality for many years in India but where does it start? In this article, you will read a comprehensive article on the social status, position, and life of women in Vedic, post-Vedic, British, and Contemporary times. Several sociologists, anthropologists, feminists, and other scholars have tried to assess the position of women. They study the changes in their status over time. Their findings have been both shocking and enlightening. Both men and women are wheels of a chariot, both are needed for proper movement. There should be harmony between men and women according to Hindu scriptures then why we see rape cases, dowry cases, harassment cases, and many such cases? We will look at all of this in this article. To understand the solution to this problem, we must take a look at the current and historic laws.

In the second part, you will read how laws have changed over the years and whether laws have opposed or facilitated gender inequality. We have analyzed the position of women in India based on several parameters like education, rights, economic conditions, social evils, etc. After considering all these factors and many additional factors, we have created this article to give a comprehensive write-up about the changes in the women's position in India.

Introduction

Today, women in India constitutes nearly half of the population but the hegemonic masculine beliefs have been a constant reason for their suffering. Women have been denied equal opportunities, equal pay, equal status, and equal position at mostly all sectors of our society. In the modern days, there has been a rise in Feminist thoughts that have led to the tremendous upliftment of the condition and position of women in our society. If we look back to ancient India then we will see a completely different society that respected and revered women equally. How have the things changed and why women have been subjected to such inequality? Was the position of women same in the Vedic period or different? What can we do to change it in future? All of these questions are dealt with in this article. Instead of a global scenario, we will only look at India and its society here.

We will take an insight into the past, present, and future of position of women in India. In this patriarchal society, women don't have the same status as men but how true is it in the case of India. We will analyze this phenomenon in this article. In the second part, we will look at both Historic and Modern laws that concern women in the Indian society. What is the difference between them and how have things changed? We have analyzed the ancient Hindu scriptures, texts, and literary books to come to a conclusion. After a thorough comparison and juxtaposing, we have found the pros and cons of both. At last, you will get a complete understanding of the evolution of the position of women in India for thousands of years.

Vedic

If we want to understand how women and girls were treated and looked upon in the Vedic period, then we must analyze the ancient Hindu scriptures, hymns, religious books, and various literary work that reflects the social customs that were then prevalent in India. We can get a picture of the status that was accorded upon women by analyzing the position of women in terms of education, society, finance, rights, customs, etc. There are several parameters that can be considered to analyze the position of women in the Vedic period in India. To get a deeper insight into the past, we can look into Vedas, Gita, Mahabharat, Ramayana, Arthashastra, Dharmashastra, and several similar ancient literary work.

In the Vedic times, the women had to face a world full of paradoxes. Women enjoyed high status in early Vedic culture and later it got deteriorated in the later Vedic period. They were allowed to organize 'Sayambhar' and they could choose their significant other in that

Sayambhar. However, women lead a miserable wedded life as their spouses were allowed to have more than one wife. The men from privileged societies of the old Indian culture followed polygamy. Women were married after the age of 16. Also, they had considerable freedom in terms of choosing their matrimonial partner.

Manu, the father of Indian Political Theory, describes the position of women of Vedic age as a place of reliance and subordination. The classical political literature Arthashastra confirms that extensive limitations were placed on the development of women in the society. In terms of education, all unmarried women had to study. Several female saints of the Vedic period like Maitrayi, Ghosa, Gargi, and Vak, were highly skilled and learned as they composed complex Vedic stanzas for hymns. There are several verses in the Vedas that proves that women had the right to education. As a wife, women were given affection and respect and as a mother, she was considered a figure of profound reverence. They were held in higher respect in India than in any other ancient countries. It will not be wrong to say that women enjoyed a much greater freedom and higher status in the Vedic period than in later India.

Post-Vedic

As per ancient Hindu scriptures and texts, women enjoyed considerable freedom and high status in the Indian society. However, in the next thousand years, the position of women deteriorated significantly in all spectrums. In the post-Vedic age, the status of women had started degenerating due to several factors. Child marriage began in the Smriti age and the self-immolation practice called Sati started in the Medieval period. Till the time Mughal period started, a number of problems arose for the Hindu women. We can clearly see that as the time passed, the conditions of women became worse.

During the first Muslim invasion in the eighth century and the second invasion in the eleventh century, there was a gradual decline of social, political, economic, and cultural life of women, particularly Hindu women. Mohammad Ghazni conquered India in the eleventh century and from this period till the eighteenth century, Mughals ruled in India. In this period, several gender inequalities had surfaced the Indian society. Practices like Pudah Pratha, Sati Pratha, Child marriage, polygamy, female foeticide, etc, were the biggest social evils of the post-Vedic period. At the same time, social reformers and revolutionaries like Kabir, Meera, Ramdas,

Nanak, Chaitanya, and many others stood for equal rights for women. Due to their support, women achieved religious freedom and to some extent, social freedom. On the economic status, women were completely dependent on the male members of the family. The status of women deteriorated from a divine being to an object of gratification as we approached the post-Vedic and Mughal period from the Vedic period.

British

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Britishers entered India as traders. For the first 100 years, the British East India Company ruled over India and then it came under direct control of the queen of Britain for the next 100 years. In this period, practices like Sati, Child marriage, and several other social evils were banned and eliminated from the Indian society. They also encouraged widow remarriage and they legalized it too. At that time, there were high cases of female infanticide in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sind, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, etc. In 1779, the Britishers declared female infanticide to be murder by the Bengal Regulation XXL. Similarly, the age of consent was raised to 12 by the British government in 1891. Several forms of slavery like domestic and predial were dealt with.

However, the British government only passed laws and bills. The main hero or the main character behind all these social reforms were great Indian revolutionaries like Raja Rammohan Roy, Arya Samaj, Ishwar Vidyasagar, B. R. Ambedkar, and several others. Several legislations have contributed to the upliftment of the status of Hindu women in terms of marriage, inheritance, and adoption. Some of them are the Hindu Law of Inheritance (1929), the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act (1937), The Hindu Marriage Act, etc. In this period, women helped their male counterparts to fight Britishers and they contributed extensively to the Freedom movement. The gradual process of being a conglomeration of languages, ethnicities, cultures, and states to an independent nation, contributed to the upliftment of women's position in the society. India as a nation suffered under the hands of Britishers and their oppressive economic and political policies. However, it ignited and united the entire nation to stand up against inequality in one voice, whether women or men.

Contemporary

The post-independence India has a democratic government and a constitution that mentions women as legal citizens who have equal rights. If we analyze the contemporary times from several parameters then we can understand the current position of women in India. The law protects women, her fundamental rights, and her existence, in general.

Every year new policies and laws are enacted to protect women from crimes, discrimination, gender inequality, etc. So, we can say that we are conscious of the fact that women deserve equal rights. However, the ground reality speaks a different truth. In modern society, women are treated as sexual objects and they are constantly targeted for being the weaker sex. Every day, several rape cases, harassment cases, dowry cases, sextortion cases, and several other gender-based crimes are reported across India. It clearly depicts that the society has not accepted women as an equal counterpart in India yet.

On the other hand, women have the right to education, right to property, right to practice any religion, right to marry without parents' consent, and so on. Still, women lack acceptance from the male-dominated society. We cannot deny that we live in a patriarchal society and men mistreat women on several occasions. Men are greatly revered and little girls have little respect in the social hierarchy. Social workers, social activists, and reformers are trying to bring gender equality in India through laws, bills, and policies. However, we must strengthen women from the core. We must work on 3Es - Empower, Educate, and Enable. The need of the hour is to enact these 3Es properly and work extensively for the upliftment of women in our society.

Historical Law

In Vedic times or ancient India, laws were primarily evolved from customs and religious parameters. India has a detailed and recorded legal history and a set of laws also known as smritis starting from the Vedic ages. Even in Indus Valley Civilization, India had a set of laws and a legal system that was the backbone of the society and the government. Hindu laws have been emanated from the Vedas, the Upanishads, and several other religious scriptures and textbooks. The secular law in India differed from one region to another. However, courts and the legal system remained essential features of various ruling dynasties. Hindu laws were based on Dharma and they are mentioned in Dharamshastra written by Manu. It consisted of Varna

system which means Caste system. According to Hindu Varna system, the society had 4 classes in a hierarchy. It consisted of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Dharmashatra consisted of life-cycle rites, daily rituals, specific duties, proper conduct of all four classes or varnas. It also consisted of punishments, crimes, king's duties, etc.

Women had equality in the society and they were treated same as men. Therefore, no specific laws are stated to provide reservation to women or laws that protect women from dowry or laws that ban female foeticide. All these laws didn't exist in the historic times and neither they were needed. However, things changed in the coming centuries and new laws were made to tackle the present situation. As we moved to British period, women had faced several social atrocities like Sati practice, Pardah practice, child marriage, and the list is long. To counter and eliminate these social evils, new laws were enacted by the British Government. Later, Indian government enacted more laws to provide safety and security to women and their rights.

Modern Law

After independence, India has enacted several laws that fight several social practices that are not just inhumane but extremely atrocious. The modern law protects women from harassment, slavery, crimes, and discrimination at the workplace, home, or anywhere. New laws were enacted to meet the present requirements at the ground level. Many laws and acts have been passed in various parts of the world that protects the rights of women. Several massive programs in different countries have been introduced to the constitution that deals with the socio-economic development of the weaker section of the society, especially women. Similarly, in India, many acts have been passed for women, some of them are PITA, Protection of women against sexual harassment at workplace bill, National Commission for women act, the rights of children to free and compulsory education act, and many more. Other than these, women and children are protected under criminal law.

There are several provisions for women's protection from psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. In the Indian Penal Code (IPC), section 304B deals with dowry death, section 375 deals with the rape of women, section 498A deals with cruelty by a spouse, section 312-318 deals with the protection of the unborn child, etc. In different countries various act, provision, program, law, policies, and constitution provides protection to women. All of these factors have

definitely improved the current position by building trust among victims, promising justice, spreading awareness, etc. The reporting mechanism has been improved to support victims. So, there has been a positive change without a doubt. However, we still have a long way to gender equality and better women's position in the society. With the help of 3ES, we can achieve gender equality and it will reduce the crimes against women by enabling women to fight and win. 3Es are Empower, Educate, and Enable.

Conclusion

During the Vedic period, there was no kind of gender discrimination in India. Women were extremely respected and revered by the male members of the family, they were considered goddesses. In those times, women took part in several professions, they were free to marry as per their choice, study and gain education until they get married, etc. They had a special place in the society.

The gender discrimination in India started in the post-Vedic period and it reached its highest peak in the Mughal period. In this period, crimes against women became highly dominant and women were treated as objects. They went from the highest position in the society to the lowest position. They were subjected to constant suffering and they had no fundamental rights. Even minimum freedom was denied to the female members of the society. This continued even in the British period and it remains unchanged for a long period.

However, in the post-independence era, the position of women in India changed significantly and they secured several fundamental rights. The law protects rights of every person. Still, women on ground level continue to suffer due to social evils like gender inequality, unethical beliefs, etc. Things have changed a lot from Vedic to post-Vedic and to contemporary times, we still live in a patriarchal society. As a society, we have to work together to make the life of women safe and happy in our country. This is only possible through 3Es - Empower, Educate, and Enable.

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