

## **THE BORN SLAVE OF ANCIENT INDIA: RELATIVE EFFECTS OF SON PREFERENCE**

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**Abstract:** The evolution of the status of women in India has been a continuous process of ups and down throughout the history. While man has been all time proud of his supremacy over women and care a little about the well-being of women. There had been spirited women, who dared man in every field of human activity. This struggle is not a new for women. They are facing this discrimination since the history of Indian civilization. The Indian cultural tradition begins with the Vedas. Many historians believed and it also suggested in the works of many ancient Indian grammarians such as *Patanjali* and *Katyayana* that the position of women was quite satisfactory during early Vedic period, although girls were not welcomed as boys but they were taken good care of. They were educated and also took part in religious and social activities. But this satisfactory position that women enjoyed during Vedic age was very short-lived and there onwards she began to be treated as a second class citizen. Even the women of Epic India were not free from this discrimination. Although both **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** Epics had given respectable place to women. Women had been called *Devi* (Goddess) and considered as the root of *Dharma* (Religion), but there were also some incidents which degraded the status of women like **Sita's Agni Pariksha** (Trial by Fire) by her husband- **Lord Rama** in **Ramayana** and **Cheer Haran of Draupadi** in **Mahabharata**. Even the renowned scholar and philosopher **Shakracharya** opposed the female education. *Manu*, the law giver of Indian society puts more restrictions on women and depicted that a woman should worship her husband like God. This was the period when women were in their lowest position. Woman was the first one to taste bondage. She lived as a slave even before the enslavement existed. Since then their struggle for equality has been started and in this way many bold and daring women came forward and became forerunners of the women's liberation movement in their own way. Slowly and gradually the mind set of people has been changed. Although women are not getting full equality to the men but still they are in a better position in comparison to the past.

**Keywords:** Equality, Girl's Education, Motherhood, Women Status.

**Introduction:** The Vedic period was generally considered from 4000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. and the main contribution of this period was the four Vedas, i.e., *The Rig Veda*, *The Yajur Veda*, *The Atharva Veda* and *The Sama Veda* which were written in that time. When we examine the position of women in Vedic period, we find that women enjoyed a high status in Vedic society. They were educated and also has the right to express their choice and taking decisions on their own. Although polygamy was prevalent in the society but customs like child marriage and Sati were not in practice. Overall position of women was quite satisfactory and people love and respect their wife and children. Women continued to have this satisfactory status till the age of late *Samhitas*, *Brahmans* and *Upanishads* (1500 B.C. to 500 B.C.).

It was the period of *Manusmriti* (200 B.C. to 200 A.D.) when gradual deterioration in the position of women began. The main reason behind this were the Aryans who started marrying to non-Aryan women, who could not participate in religious sacrifices as they did not know Sanskrit. Gradually all women (Aryans as well as non-Aryans) were not considered eligible for performing religious duties. Rituals had become very complex and needed special training of ten or twelve years, which was not practical for girls. Gradually, Upanayanam for girls became a mere formality.<sup>1</sup> Basically society looked upon the daughter as a curse. Famous sayings of that time were, "The wife is a friend, an object of misery is the daughter, the son is a light in the highest heaven." Or "The son is the self, the wife, a friend, the daughter is but a suffering to men."<sup>2</sup> This shows that man has some respect towards his wife and at least considered her as his friend but he wanted only son from his wife, who would help him in his old age and considered daughter as a burden. According to the laws of Manu a women is never fit to be independent in her whole life. She always need a support from male members of her family. In childhood a girls must be under the control and guidance of her father, in youth under her husband and when her lord is dead, under her son. So a woman should never think of independence.<sup>3</sup>

**Ancient Women and Education:** Girls were given education and like boys Upanayanam ceremony was also performed for them in Vedic period. Vedic texts also mentioned a number of women seers, poets and seekers of enlightenment. Women who belongs to three higher castes (*Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishya*) had access to studying Vedic knowledge under a teacher and in some cases women also had an opportunity to act as a teacher. Although the final aim of education was always a religious one, i.e., attaining *moksha* or liberation. There are many evidence in Vedic texts that girls could be initiated and taught the Vedas. The oldest section of the Vedas, The Rig Veda, contains 27 hymns out of more than 1000, which said to have been composed by women seers in the philosophical dialogues of the Upanishads (800-500 BCE) also we find some name of women who engaged in the pursuit of saving knowledge and wisdom like **Gargi**, the daughter of a sage and **Maitreyi**, the wife of a sage, who preferred the spiritual quest for enlightenment to personal wealth.

The relatively high position in ancient India deteriorated over the centuries. In the course of time the teaching of girls by outsiders came to be deprecated. The girls only from the rich families were given education and that too by father or close relatives. In the early nineteenth century it was still believed that the education of women was against Hindu scriptures and a girl who was taught to read and write would soon after marriage become a widow and drive away the good fortune of her family.<sup>4</sup>

**Role in the Religious Field:** Earlier women took part in religious activities and could performed sacrifices. There was no restriction over women to read any sacred literature. But gradually the emphasis had shifted from the importance of knowledge of rituals for the women. No sacramental rite with sacred texts may be performed for women for they are weak, impure and have no knowledge of Vedic literature. It was believed that no sacrifice, no vow, and no fast may be performed by a woman independently of her husband otherwise she will go to hell.

**Economic and Occupational Freedom:** Ancient woman had economic and occupational freedom like men. Women were trained in occupations such as, dyeing of garments and threads, basket making, plaiting mats, making of rope and garments, perfume making, making scabbards for swords, doll making, etc. Some women engaged in teaching work and some helped their husbands in agricultural work. Thus, they had freedom of work, they earned money and helped their family.<sup>5</sup>

**Position of a Married Woman:** The marriage age in Vedic period for girls was fifteen-sixteen years and they also had freedom in the selection of their husband. Since girls' education was ceased in later centuries, child marriage become common. Girls were married at the age of eight or nine years of age. Thus, they neither had a right to express their choice in the selection of their marriage partner nor respected by their husband. While husband in a marriage had enjoyed supreme position. According to Manu, a wife should worship her husband like a God even if he is a destitute of character or seeking pleasure elsewhere. They believed that a woman's salvation lies only in the devoted service of husband.<sup>6</sup>

**Motherhood in Ancient Period:** place of a mother in Ancient India was higher but only if she had a male child. It was obligatory; a girl was trained to be a good wife, a good mother and was blessed with the motherhood of sons. Immediately after the wedding ceremony the newly wedded couple prayed, i.e., the wife silently joined her husband who said, "Come, let us join together that we may generate a male child, a son for the sake of increase of wealth." So the main purpose of marriage was to get a male child and since there was no guarantee that a single wife would deliver a male child, husband had right to marry more than once.<sup>7</sup> Motherhood was often imposed on unwilling women, because a woman was not considered complete until she became a mother. According to the laws of Manu, after attaining the age of eight years, a childless wife should be divorced, a wife loosing children soon after birth should be abandoned in the tenth year after matrimony and in the eleventh year after marriage, a wife gets only female children should be divorced. Thus, a woman get respected in society only when she became mother or more correctly, a mother of a male child.<sup>8</sup>

**Widow of Ancient India:** The position of widow in Ancient time was more deplorable. According to Manu's rules a woman after the death of her husband has to live a simple and solitary life. Widow re-marriage was not permitted. However, a widowed husband has right to remarry and to enjoy the company of other women. The only positive move in this period was granting property right to widow so that they could support themselves for rest of their life.<sup>9</sup>

Though Sati was not mentioned in the Manu, it was the post Gupta Period when law givers or commentators found that Sati was assigned to woman as one of her duties. The society believed that it is the duty of a woman to

preserve and protect her purity and sanctity after the death of her husband or to ascend the funeral pile after him.<sup>10</sup>

**Conclusion:** the status of Ancient women had gone through many ups and down. A close examination of Vedic texts by twentieth century scholars shows that the position of women and their access to education, religious knowledge and practices were far more superior in Vedic period in comparison to the later centuries. In post Vedic period men ruled the society, they have all the power of taking decisions. Women suffered throughout her life, as a daughter, wife, mother and as a widow. Women's primary and only task was child-bearing, and in return they were received scant honour. Thus, the saying that women were the born slave in Ancient India is sounds true.

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