
CHANGING POSITION OF WOMEN DURING ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIA

Dr. Farooq Ahmad Rather

PhD (History), Centre of Central Asian Studies,
University of Kashmir, Srinagar, J&K

Abstract: Recorded history of the subcontinent is witness to the fact that Indian women has always been marginalized and accorded a status, minor at law, secondary to that of men along with limited access and role in the socio-economic and political spheres of life. She has remained all obedient to, and under the tutelage of male members of her family, as a child, of her father, as a wife, of her husband, as widow, of her sons, etc. This gender hierarchy and stratification along gender lines with an ensured subordinate place of women to that of men has been in practice during ancient and medieval periods of Indian history. However, the women of upper class to a considerable extent, has shown some signs of progress in coming out of the socially and culturally secluded life. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the changing position of women in the socio-political aspects of life during ancient and medieval periods in Indian history.

Keywords: Women, India, Education, Politics, Employment.

Introduction: All along the ancient and medieval periods in Indian history women has been considered a second class only to the men in every aspect of life and a minor at law. As a girl she suffered under the tutelage of her parents, as an adult of her husband, and as a widow, of her sons and so on and so forth. Even under the liberal rules of Buddhism a nun, however advanced in the faith, was always subordinate to the youngest novice among the brethren. Hindu law- books assessed a women's wergild as equivalent to that of a *Sudra*, whatever her class.

Status of Women in Ancient India: In ancient India society was more extrovert than introvert, people were more ritualistic. They attach more importance to the phenotypical things than to the essence of the religious meanings of the rituals. The social set up and the pattern of life was as such designed on the religious lines. And since Hinduism was the only predominant religion, the society was therefore based on the Hindu religious pattern. When we talk of a society it encompasses men and women and their position and status in the society, theoretical as well as practical.

Most of the ancient schools of law allowed a women some personal property (*stridhana*) in the form of jewelry and clothing. The *Arthashastra* allowed her also to own some money up to 2,000 *pana* (silver money); nevertheless any sum above it was to be held by her husband in trust on her behalf. The husband had certain rights over his wife's property; he could sell it in dire emergency and when she died it passed to her daughters. Thus the property rights of women were always limited from the very beginning. However women sometimes possessed more than what was usually allowed to them by the rules of *stridhana*. Nevertheless the exceptions were always there as the Jaina tradition mentions a potter-women of the town of Sravasti who owned a pottery with one hundred potter's wheels.

In ancient period women took up a religion but not a life of religion, therefore could not officiate as priests. Though a few Vedic hymns are ascribed to women seers but these references are very much scattered. Among the voluminous Buddhist scriptures is a whole collection of poems ascribed to the nuns of the early church; many of these are of great literary merit. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* tells of a learned lady, *Gargi Vacaknavi*, who attended the discussion of the sage Yajnavalkya and for a time so nonplussed him with her searching questions that he could only jestingly reply, "Gargi, you mustn't ask too much, or you had will drop off!" References occur here and there in later texts to girls occasionally attending the lectures of gurus, and mastering parts of the Vedas but in any case women were never

allowed to be at par with men in any aspect of life. Her life in general was that of a miserable one. With the passage of time her life went from bad to worst. By the time of the *Smritis*, around the beginning of the Christian era, Vedic knowledge was closed to women. Nevertheless the Tantric sects of the Middle Ages, who worshipped feminine divinities, gave women an important place in their cult and instituted orders of female ascetics.

Their realistic function was marriage, and the care of their men folk and children. But the better class laywomen seem to have been educated, and there are several references of Sanskrit poetry and drama by women authors. The well-to-do girls in ancient India were taught singing and dancing as well as other ladylike arts such as painting and garland making.

Unlike later periods the *parda* system did not exist in ancient India. Certainly the Rig Veda depicts young men and unmarried girls mixing freely. But kings, nobles and other high-class people however, kept their womenfolk in seclusion and the royal ladies were not accessible at all. The women of the upper class also a distance from the opposite sex. Husband had almost unlimited rights over his wife's movements. Freedom of high-class women was considerably restricted by customs and traditions.

However there were certainly wide differences of custom. As a few girls of upper class and marriageable age are described in stories as visiting temples and taking part in festivals without guarding or chaperone. Early Tamil literature, more popular in character than that of the Aryan in the north, makes many references to the free association of young men and women. Even sculpture of the then times gives the same impression. At Bharhut and Sanchi wealthy ladies, naked to the waist, lean from their balconies to watch processions and scantily dressed women in the company of men worship the *Bodi Tree*. We may conclude that while a women's freedom was generally much restricted, it was rarely completely taken away.

In a more typical society in ancient India a wife, however, had little initiative. Her first duty was to wait for her husband, fetching and caring for him, rubbing his feet when he was weary, awake before him and eat and sleep after him. Here is a passage describing the nature and character of a faithful and obedient wife;

“She should do nothing independently
even in her own house.
In childhood subject to her father,
in youth to her husband,
and when her husband is dead to her sons,
she should never enjoy independence. . .
“she should always be cheerful,
and skillful in her domestic duties,
with her household vessels well cleansed,
and her hand tight on the purse-strings....
“In season and out of season
her lord, who wed her sacred rites,
ever gives happiness to his wife,
both here and in the other world.
“Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure,
though he have no good points at all,
the virtuous wife should ever
worship her lord as a god.”

Passages of this type are frequent in literature of a religious and semi-religious type and stories of obedient and faithful wives are numerous.

The great models of Indian women-hood are *Sita*, who faithfully accompanied her husband *Rama* into exile and endured great hardships and temptations for his sake and *Savitri* who like the Greek *Alcestis*, followed her husband *Satyavant* when he was being carried away by the death-god *Yama* and so

impressed the god with her loyalty that he released her lord. A medieval tale gives an even more striking example of wifely fidelity: Another reference from the ancient Indian literature depicting obedience of a wife to a husband is hereunder:

“A woman was holding her sleeping husband’s head in her lap, as they and their child warmed themselves in winter before a blazing fire. Suddenly the child crawled towards the fire, but the women made no attempt to save it from the flames, for she would wake her lord. As the baby crawled further into the flames she prayed to the fire-god Agni not to hurt him. The god, impressed by her obedience, granted her prayer, and the child sat smiling and unharmed in the middle of the fire until the man awoke.”

Though the early Indian mind, prone to exaggeration, perhaps overdid the necessity of wifely obedience, her status was not without honour.

“The wife is half the man,
the best of friends,
the root of the three end of life,
and of all that will help him in the other world.
“With a wife a man does mighty deeds. . .
With a wife a man finds courage.
A wife is the safest refuge. . .
“A man aflame with sorrow in his soul,
Or sick with disease, finds comfort in his wife,
As a man parched with heat
finds relief in water.
Even a man in the grip of rage
will not be harsh to a women,
remembering that on her depend
the joys of love, happiness, and virtue.
“For women is the everlasting field,
in which the Self is born.”

Passages like these, showing the honour and esteem in which women were held, are quite as numerous as those which stress their sub-servience. Everywhere it is stated that a women should be lovingly cherished, well fed and cared for, and provided with jeweler and luxuries to the limits of her husband’s means. She should never be upbraided too severely, for the gods will not accept the sacrifice of the man who beats his wife. The ancient Indian attitude to women was in fact ambivalent. She was at once a goddess and a slave, a saint and a strumpet.

The latter aspect of her character is frequently brought out in semi-religious and gnostic literature. Women’s lust knows no bounds:

“The fire has never too many logs,
The ocean never too many rivers,
death never too many living souls,
and fair-eyed women never too many men.”

If *Sita* the heroine of the *Ramayana*, is invariably meek and complaint before her lord, *Draupadi* of the *Mahabharata* can round on her five husbands and reproach them in no uncertain terms. The Mauryan kings were guarded by amazons trained in the use of sword and bow, and the Greeks were impressed by the ferocity with which the women of some of the Punjab tribes aided their men-folk in resisting Alexander. In later times women sometimes took part in war, and the tradition continued among the Rajputs until quite recently; there are numerous records of masterly and war-like widows resisting the enemies of their husbands.

Position of Women during Medieval India: Islamic society, especially upper class during medieval period, was polygamous, although there was a limit of four to the number of wives but under *mut’a* (marriage for a fixed temporary period) any number of women could be married. There was no limit on the number of concubines. In his youth, Akbar, who at that time was completely under orthodox influence, is known to have exceeded the limit on wives.

From the time of their earliest settlements, Muslims had married Hindu girls, and preference was given to the girls of higher classes and of young/er age. Khwaja Mu'inu'd-Din Chishti at Ajmir took two wives, when he was sixty-five. One of them was a Sayyid's daughter, and the other was a Hindu raja's daughter who had been seized during a raid on the Hindus by the local Muslim commander. Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khalji married Kamla Devi, the widow of Raja Karan of Gujarat, who had been taken captive after the Raja's defeat. Ala-ud-Din's son, Khizr Khan, married Kamla Devi's daughter by Raja Karan, Deval Devi. Firuz Tughlaq married the sister of a Gujar Saharan.

Women played a very significant historical role. Shah Turkan Khatun, Raziya's mother, was the most prominent among Iltutmish's queens. Qazi Minhaj was deeply impressed by her munificence to the ulama, holy men, Sayyids and Muslims ascetics. Raziya herself a brilliant administrator also commanded the army.

The ladies of the Mughal palaces were proficient in both horsemanship and social etiquette and were also often astute politicians and artists. Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum, was a capable adviser to both her husband and her son. Mumtaz Mahal, Shahjahn's wife, was the Emperor's leading counselor and after her death her place was taken by their daughter, Jahan Ara.

The veiling of women was strictly observed by higher-class Muslim families and the Hindus imitated the Muslim governing classes by keeping their women at home. Both Muslim and Hindu women travelled in closed litters. Females laboring on building sites and in the fields did not even cover their heads.

Conclusion: The birth of a son was desirous and was considered as blessing by both Hindus and Muslims; girls were unwelcomed. Both Muslims and Hindus married off their daughters at an early age without their consent. Dowries were essential for girls and were considered a great strain on a family. Sati was prevalent among Hindus, especially Rajputs, during ancient medieval periods of Indian history. Akbar's ordinance forbidding the forcible burning of Hindu widows was not strictly obeyed. Women therefore in the said period were subjected to discriminations and hardships at the hands of men. But at the same time a few women achieved the levels of excellence but their representation was almost negligible.

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