



WWJMRD 2017; 3(10): 270-272
www.wwjmr.com
International Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
Refereed Journal
Indexed Journal
UGC Approved Journal
Impact Factor MJIF: 4.25
e-ISSN: 2454-6615

Jaswinder Kaur
Assistant Professor of Punjabi
Guru Nanak College
Ferozepur Cantt, India

Women's Position in Ancient Indian Period

Jaswinder Kaur

Abstract

The situation of women in ancient Indian society was better. But in the period of middle age it got deteriorated. Indian society became male dominated society. Women were started to be treated as man's slaves. 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 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 situation of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. Panini mentioned of female students' studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts. They also wrote many parts of Punjabi literature's i.e. poetry, play, story and verses.

Keywords: Ancient, India, women, man, position, society, education, Literature, Religion, Marriage, widow

Introduction

Women played a significant role in society. They are the gift to the society from God. The situation of women in ancient Indian society was better. But in the period of middle age it got deteriorated. Indian society became male dominated society. Women were started to be treated as man's slaves. 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 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 situation of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahmavadinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students' studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts. They also wrote many parts of Punjabi literature's i.e. poetry, play, story and verses.

Women played prominent roles in politics also. 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

Correspondence:
Jaswinder Kaur
Assistant Professor of Punjabi
Guru Nanak College
Ferozepur Cantt, India

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.

In the next segment of ancient texts, the Upanishads, ca. 800-600 B.C., writers began to reinterpret earlier Vedic literature. Now a person was able to reach the universal soul Brahman through self-knowledge not just through ritualistic knowledge performed by the Brahmin priests. There is evidence of two learned women participating in theological discussions. How different this is compared to the same time frame in the Near East where Pandora and Eve are doing evil. Women in India are doing theological inquiry. Unfortunately, current Indian scholars have commented unfavorably about these two women.

The next texts that speak about women in Ancient India are the Laws of Manu. Like earlier law codes in the Ancient Near East, we can gain insights into the legal status of women, but not necessarily what was actually practiced. Law codes are nearly always prescriptive not descriptive literature. As in other ancient societies, women were under the guardianship of males: father, husband and son. When a woman married, it was regarded as her second birth, with a new name. In successful religious rituals, the wife was to be present to utilize her fertility powers. Adultery was not punished as severely as in other ancient cultures. Divorce was possible for the woman too, but only if he was impotent or insane. As true of ancient Rome, a wife could be divorced if she drank, was rebellious or dishonest, was barren (even if she had girls), and was a spendthrift. There is some evidence of the levirate marriage practice used by the ancient Hebrews and Hittites. However, the majority of widows apparently did not remarry.

Women's economic contributions were important in ancient India. As India was an agricultural country, women were needed to assist the men folk in the various seasonal activities. As today, in the past India was made up of thousands of villages. It was the family not the individual that was the basic unit. Usually three generations of the family lived together in an essentially patriarchal structure except along the Malabar Coast in the southwest, where matriarchal social organization prevailed. Poetry written by Tamil women in the south spoke of their singing while at work and with their family, and occasionally including poems on the feats of the aristocracy.

This patriarchal system prevailed in the religious rituals. The Indians practiced a form of ancestor worship, whereby the oldest male was responsible for conducting the rites on a regular basis in the home. It was the eldest son's responsibility to light his parents' funeral pyre. Women could not serve as Brahmin priests or study the sacred Vedas. Some women could be seers, though.

Courtesans and prostitutes were part of ancient Indian society. As in ancient Greece, courtesans were often

literate, and skilled in music and dancing besides the usual sexual services. Regular prostitutes engaged in their trade in busy places. Later on prostitutes will come from a certain caste. Repentant courtesans and prostitutes sometimes went into Buddhist nunneries. As Hinduism developed, certain facets became dominant: the caste system, karma, dharma, and reincarnation. There were originally four main castes, and women were represented in all of them. Caste determined whom you associated with, who you could marry, and your diet. In certain cases a man was allowed to marry a woman of a lower caste, but a woman could not without disgracing her family and defiling herself. Because of the relative lower status of women in India, if you did not do your proper duty or dharma, then you did not accrue good enough karma to be reincarnated in a higher caste or life form, including being reborn as a woman, who was inferior to a man. Hindus came to think the various deities were manifestations or avatars of the Brahma, the world soul. Each god has had many rebirths. Goddesses of special reverence were Kali, Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi, Durga, and Devi.

Saraswati was the consort to Brahma, who set the world in motion, but lost importance with the emergence of the gods Shiva and Vishnu. Saraswati was the goddess of learning, writing, knowledge, mathematics, the arts, music, magic, and eloquence. She created the first alphabet. Many consider her the mother of all life since it was her divine energy that united with the awareness of Brahma, who was born from the golden egg from sea. Thus the two created all knowledge and all creatures of the world. Saraswati was also a river goddess, and her name translates as the flowing one. She is usually shown seated on a lotus blossom throne accompanied by a white swan. She has four arms, showing that her power extends in all directions. Two of Her arms hold books and beads (showing her spiritual knowledge), with the other two arms and hands She is playing the vina, an Indian lute.

Parvati was Shiva's wife. She is often seen with Him in statues and paintings. They look like the model loving couple. In some of her avatars or reincarnations She is also Durga, the ten armed goddess of battle, Kali, or Uma, the beautiful one who rides on a tiger. Parvati means mountain girl and She is considered the daughter of the Himalaya Mountains.

Lakshmi was the wife of Vishnu the preserver. She is often shown seated on a lotus as she was born from an ocean of milk standing on a lotus flower. She is the goddess of good fortune, prosperity, wealth, and beauty. Representing all that is feminine, while her consort Vishnu represents all that is masculine. Many paintings show them riding on the back of Garuda, the eagle, the giant king of birds, as they fly across the land. Lakshmi chose Vishnu. They had a son, Kama, who was the god of romantic love, and in many paintings he looks similar to the cupids on valentine cards. Her attendants are white elephants. Lakshmi is also worshiped as Sita, the reincarnation of the perfect wife to Rama in the Indian epic, the Ramayana. Once a year on the night of the new moon in November Indian women clean their homes and hang tiny lanterns outside that look like stars. Women hope that Lakshmi will be attracted to their homes, blessing them with good fortune and prosperity for the coming year. Lakshmi lives in the sky with the most beautiful jewels of all, the stars.

Durga, the warrior goddess, is one of the avatars of Devi.

She is invincible in battle, and was created by the gods to destroy the buffalo monster that was threatening their power. Taking a weapon in each of her ten hands, she killed the beast.

The goddess Devi was the essence of being, and in this she was the Shakti, less anthropomorphic than the conceptual. She was the one great mother goddess, and she was responsible for fire, water, earth, and air. Devi is unknowable, omnipotent, and the myth of Devi as Kali dates back to goddess worship in the early Indus Valley cultures.

Kali is the most terrible aspect of Devi. Sent to earth to destroy the race of demons, Kali caused such devastation that many died. To bring an end to the slaughter her husband, Shiva, threw himself upon the dead bodies. Only when Kali realized She was trampling on Shiva's corpse did She come to Her senses. She has four arms and hands. One holds a sword and the other a severed head, both symbols of death. With the other two hands she holds a holy book and prayer beads, both symbols of life. Sometimes Kali is depicted as a black goddess, signifying the essence of all perishable things, with her dark skin reflecting the dark soil of earth. Her teeth are blood-stained fangs, and rivers of blood flow from her. In India today bloody sacrifices still are made to her at Her Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, the city named for her.

In the two famous epics of India, the Mahabharata, and Ramayana, women are shown as having more freedom and competency than in the religious and legal literature. In the Mahabharata, there is evidence of both polyandry and polygamy. Events in these stories demonstrate women's managing and problem-solving skills. In the Ramayana, the heroine, Sita, is the example of the good wife, who still shows determination to manage her life. Public opinion still negates her innocence, forcing her to go into exile, where she goes back to her mother, Earth. This ritual suicide then becomes the prototype for sati, the self-sacrifice of a wife on her husband's funeral pyre, which occurs later in Indian history. Just as in the medieval west, wives and daughters could become ascetics if their present life was untenable.

Two new religions developed in India, Buddhism and Jainism, that will have an enormous impact on not only in India, but in other regions of Asia. Buddha grew up as Siddhartha Gautama, a prince in a powerful tribe in the foothills of the Himalayas, what is now Nepal. Kept purposefully ignorant by his parents of the omnipresent poverty, when Siddhartha became aware of this, he renounced his tribal wealth and prestige, and went in search of the causes of this. Turning first to the Brahmin sages, he then tried extreme ascetic meditation. Arriving at a pipal tree, which is now in Sarnath on the outskirts of Varanasi, he experienced a flash of understanding, and at this point became the Buddha, the enlightened one. His goal was to eliminate suffering in this world, and over time his Four Noble Truths and eight-fold path attracted adherents and followers. Buddha regarded himself as a philosopher and teacher, rather than a founder of a religion. He did not attack the Hindu gods or rituals. For Buddha he wanted the elimination of the caste system, ritual sacrifices and fulfilling one's dharma according to the Brahmin regulations. Buddha did feel that our actions in life affect others, thereby maintaining the Hindu idea of karma. Nirvana was possible for everyone to achieve. Teaching for forty-five years until his death around 483 B.C, Buddhism

developed monasticism like the west will do nearly a thousand years later, but Buddha discouraged women becoming nuns. Buddhism stressed that the proper relationship in India was between a married couples. Wives should be encouraged to provide the home atmosphere conducive to the maintenance of society.

In religious matters, Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity. One of the things most misconstrued about India and Hinduism is that it's a male dominated society and religion and the truth is that it is not so. It is a religion that has attributed the words for the strength and power to feminine. "Shakti" means "power" and "strength". All male power comes from the feminine. The Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) are all-powerless without their female counterparts.

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