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## **Socio-economic, Religious, Educational, Domestic and Political Rights to Women in Ancient India**

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### **Abstract**

*The present manuscript attempts to depict the status of women in ancient India. It refers to her rights and duties in family and social life. We know that the worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. In ancient Indian culture, women were granted honorable place in the society. Women enjoyed the equality in status and position with her opposite sex during the Rig Vedic age. No religious rites were performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Married men along with their wives were allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives were thus befittingly called Ardhangani (better half). With their incomparable quality of calmness of their mind, they can easily handle even toughest situation. Indian women were completely devoted to their families. They were preached in the names of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Goddess Parvati and Goddess Kali. The women were permitted to have personal property in the form of jewelry and clothing. The Arthashastra permitted women to have money up to 2000 silver panas. The property of women could be used by the husband only in case of dire necessity. Women were adequately educated in the early Vedic period. Women also had the freedom to select their husbands. This system was known as "Swayamvar". In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent yet women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. In fact during this time, women had superior position than the males. In Vedic Period (1500-1000 BC) women were regarded like mother goddess (Shakti) a symbol of life with immense capacity of tolerance and sacrifice hence they had respectable place in the society.*

**Key Words: Women, Ancient India, Socio-economic, Religion, Education.**

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**1. Introduction:** The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Manu, who was not advocate of the rights of women, also said that gods live in joy where women are revered and if a husband abandoned the wife without sufficient reason, he should be expelled from the caste by the ruler. The high esteem in which the wife was held during the Vedic age is evidence from the fact that she was considered as the half that completed the husband.

Women of India are now uplifted, emancipated and granted equal status with men in all spheres of life-political, social, domestic and educational. Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. There still exists a wide gulf between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programs and related mechanisms on the one hand and the ground reality on the status of women in India, on the other. Women are often

being brutalized, commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination these days.

The patriarchal system has confined the women to specific areas such as kitchen and the bed room and fixed gender roles like bearing and rearing children, cooking and cleaning. Even today a woman is viewed as a commodity and not a human being who has her own likes and dislikes. Empowering women to be self-dependent and providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities which they were denied in the past only because of their being women is in fact a burgeoning need of the hour. Therefore, this study is also aimed highlight the necessity of empowerment of women in modern times.

**2. Review of Literature:** Literature survey reveals that women enjoyed equivalent status & rights like their males counterparts in ancient India.<sup>1-7</sup> It is evident from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali that women were properly educated in the early Vedic period.<sup>9,10</sup> Women also had the freedom to select their husbands. This system was known as 'Swayamvar'. In fact during this time, women had superior position than the males. In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent yet women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence.<sup>11,12</sup> There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana who abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly.

In the Vedas, woman is invited into the family 'as a river enters the sea' and 'to rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family'.<sup>13</sup> The Hindus from the Vedic times believed in dual worship Siva with Sakthi, Vishnu with Lakshmi, Rama with Sita etc. Lord Shiva appears united in a single body with his spouse (Shakti) wherein he is at the right side and she is at the left. It is a manifestation known as Ardhanariswara, the half-man, half-woman incarnation of God. Each of the three principal Gods Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector and Siva the Destroyer in the Hindu pantheon, is accompanied by a Shakti, which is both his female double and his power of manifestation.

This brighter aspect of the high status of women in ancient India explains only one side. However, the other side of the picture of women seems not so rosy. Several inscriptions and references in literature make it clear that polygamy, particularly among the kings, nobles, rich and high caste men were not uncommon. Polygamy apart, maintaining concubines was considered a social status.

With the passage of time, the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the Vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence.<sup>14</sup> According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also condemns the birth of daughters. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of Smritis, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. During the Mauryan period, Brahmanical literature assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes

testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc. The temple dancers played an important role in promoting fine arts like dance and many inscriptions attest to the fact that the temple dancers enjoyed a position of respect in society.

Manu Smriti proclaims, “Where women are honored there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored no sacred rite yields rewards”.<sup>15</sup> Women were trusted and respected in all walks of life. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

**3. Objective of the Study:** The present manuscript is aimed to understand and investigate social, economic, domestic, educational, religious and political rights imparted to woman in ancient India. This article intends to give an awareness and insight into the problems faced by women over the years and their role and position from different perspectives. The study will help us to visualize the participation of women in social, religious, economic and household matters in the ancient times.

Though women played an important role in all the spheres of development yet the socio-economic status of women seems quite miserable. Hence it is essential to study the past and present status and rights of women and suggest measures for their upliftment. The position and status of women did not remain constant throughout the ages, so the position women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during Vedic age and ancient India will help us to examine the emerging issues like increasing violence against women, declining respect of women in the modern era in spite of sincere efforts to empower and strengthen the women.

**4. Methodology:** The methodology of this paper is purely descriptive and required information are collected from different secondary sources like Epics, Vedas, Smritis and Puranas and other publications relating to women in the ancient age. Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata depict the true picture of ancient Indian society. Manusmriti, Rigveda Samhita, Susruta Samhita, Smritis and Puranas have also been the sources of information to examine the social, domestic, economic, educational, religious and political status of women in ancient Indian history. Vedas, the most adored Hindu scripture highlighted the respectable position of women in the ancient society and provided valuable information needed for this manuscript. Rig Veda revealed the economic rights of a daughter who resides for ever with her parents.

**5. Women in Ancient India:** The history of women in India has been quite exciting. Women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life in ancient days of India. Patanjali and Katyayana pointed out about the education of women in the early Vedic period.<sup>9,10</sup> The Rigvedic verses tell that, the women married at a mature age and were free to select their life partner.<sup>16</sup> Rig Veda and Upanishads, the holy books mention that there were many women sages and seers, like Gari and Maitreyi. Stri. In some kingdoms of ancient India, tradition like Nagar Vadhu i.e. bride of the city was practiced. Amrapali was the famous Nagar Vadhu.

The status of women in ancient India can be well understood by examining the social, economic, domestic, educational, religious and political rights imparted to women and the ground reality by the critically analyzing each aspect in a systematic way.

**5.1. Domestic status of ancient women:** One of the chief duties of the women was to bear children and to rear them up. At home, generally the mother was the mistress of the house. The position of women in ancient India was not that bad as it depicted in the Smritis. She was at once a goddess and a slave. The women were to be well fed and cared for and provided with all possible luxuries

according to the means of the husband. The wives were not to be beaten or maltreated for the God did not accept the sacrifice of a man who beats his wife.

In ancient India, women are considered as the perfect home maker. With their incomparable quality of calmness of their mind, they can easily handle even toughest situation. Indian women are completely devoted to their families. They were preached in the names of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Parvati & Goddess Kali.

With the passage of time, women were deprived of the right of liberty & equality. Their condition becomes even worse when they gave birth to girls. Men treated them in a humiliated manner. They were not only permitted not to step outside their house but also abstained from being educated. They were also supposed to eat after their husbands or even sometimes to eat their husband's leftovers. Women were prohibited from taking external matters as well as domestic matters. The practice of using veils by women of high caste families was in vogue. They were under the influence of their parents before marriage & their husband after marriage.

**5.2. Economic status of ancient women:** The women were permitted to have personal property in the form of jewelry and clothing. The Arthashastra permits women to have money up to 2000 silver panas. The amounts in excess of this limit were held by the husband as a trust on behalf of the wife. The property of women could be used by the husband only in case of dire necessity. He could also exercise check on his wife if she want only to give away her property. After the death of a woman the property passed to the daughters (not to the husband or the sons). When there were no sons, the widow inherited the property of the husband.

Women seem to be considered as the commodities in several references. She could be given away or loaned as any item of property. This was the attitude of a typical patriarchal society based on private property. The Brahmanical law did not allow any proprietary rights to women; the provision for Stridhana is of a very limited nature and does not extend beyond the wife's rights to jewels, ornaments and presents made to her at the time of her marriage.

**5.3. Educational status of ancient women:** In the literary sphere, women had made valuable contribution. Some of the Vedic hymns and a number of Buddhist hymns are ascribed to the Buddhist nuns. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad we are told about the learned lady Gargi Vaca Knavi, who held discussions with Yajnavalkya and puzzled him. Another scholar Mastery, wife of Yajnavalkya, also participated in the learned discourses.

In the Vedic period, women litterateurs such as Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sikata Nivavari, and Ghosha contributed immensely to the growth of Vedic literature. In the Upanishad period, names of women philosophers like Sulabha, Maitreyi, Gargi are encountered. Ramayana reveals that Atreyi studied under Valmiki along with Lava and Kusha, the sons of Rama. There were two types of scholarly women namely Bramavadinis i.e. the women who never married and cultured the Veda throughout their lives and Sadyodvahas i.e. 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.

In view the above, it is apparent that women of higher status (Agra Varnas) enjoyed liberty of higher education while a common housewife received limited education. Nevertheless, she was very well acquainted with social morals and worldly affairs. Because of these laudable qualities woman

was considered as the goddess of prosperity of the family. Women were denied access to the Vedas and Vedic literature in the beginning of the Christian era.

**5.4. Marriage, Widow and Sati system:** Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. Forced child marriages were unknown. Women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called Swayamvara. In this, potential grooms assembled at the bride's house and the bride selected her spouse. Instances of Swayamvara ceremony can be found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This continued even in the later period in high caste families. They could leave their husbands.

The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral. The Sati system was probably also in vogue. The system of Sati existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The Greek writers have recorded the incident of widow's burning themselves alive along with the dead pyre of her husband. It was considered to be a matter of great honor. There are instances of the widows burning themselves with their dead husband viz. the queens of Kshemagupta and his predecessor Yashkar on Kashmir. However, Self-burning of widows was not sanctioned by the Vedic religion. There may be other causes of incidence of women burning themselves. When the Mohammedans conquered India, they treated the widows of the Hindu Soldiers so brutally that the women preferred death and voluntarily adopted Sati system.

The Atharvaveda mention instances of women who remarried. Sage Vashisht prescribed that a woman could remarry after having waited for her husband for no longer than five years. Kautilya and Narada have also laid down similar rules for women who could enter into nuptial ties for a second time. In an old Shakti hymn it is said - Striyah devah, Striyah pranah "Women are devas, women are life itself". "If a husband dies, a wife may marry another person. "If a husband deserts his wife, she may marry another".<sup>17</sup> Remarriage of widows was generally not favoured. Widow had to shave her head, discard all her ornaments and eat only plain food that too once in a day and wear white clothes. In general, widow remarriage was not favored and it was considered a sacrilege and adultery.

**5.5. Religious status of ancient women:** "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular".<sup>18</sup> According to ancient Hindu scriptures no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite.<sup>7</sup> Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives are thus befittingly called Ardhangani (better half). They are given not only important but equal position with men.

The wife assisted the husband not only in his secular duties. The husband and wife together were supposed to keep the household fire burning so that the daily offering of the angophora could be carried on. If a person lost his wife he was either expected to bring another wife to keep the sacred fire burning or else to retire and take to Vanaprastha Ashram. It is only the Hindu tradition, which provides, even at the conceptual level, the picture of the male and female principles working together, hand in hand, as equal partners in the universe.

**5.6. Political status of ancient women:** There are very few instances of participation of women in politics in the ancient ages. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration. The Satavahan queen 'Nayanika' ruled the kingdom of minor son. Prayabati, daughter of

Chandragupta II, also ruled on the behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. At the end of Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orrisa and Andhra Pradesh. Princess Vijaybhattacharika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King 'Vikramaditya I'. Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada region too.

**5.7. Social status of ancient women:** In addition to an important position in the family the women actively participated in the various social activities. Unlike the medieval and modern times, women were-encouraged to learn singing, dancing and other arts like painting and garland making. Dancing was not merely the profession of the low caste women and prostitutes, but ladies from respectable families also took keen interest in it.

The women observed high standard of morality. The wives were expected to follow the path adopted by her husband, even if it meant the path of death. Even after the death of her husband a widow did not remarry and led a very pure and chaste life.

The epic Mahabharata says, "While a father is superior to ten learned priests well-versed in the Vedas, a mother is superior to ten such fathers, or the entire world". Manu says "A faithful wife, who desires to dwell after death with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he is alive or dead".

**6. Conclusions:** We have honored our country as our Motherland "Bharat Mata" and our nationalism has grown up from the seed Mantra "Vande Mataram". Position of women in society is the index to the standard of social organization. In ancient India woman enjoyed equal status with man in all fields of life, she received the same education like man, many Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata have mentioned the names of several women who were great scholars, poets and philosophers of the time. Wife was regarded as 'Ardhangini' which means she is half of her husband. An unmarried man was considered to be incomplete man. All religious ceremonies were performed by the husband along with the wife.

The position of women in modern India has changed considerably. Her position in modern India is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. Her sufferings from Sati, Pardah System, Dowry System and Child Marriage do no longer exist.

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