

The Saga of Women’s Status in Ancient Indian Civilization

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Abstract

Foundation of human civilization and endorsement of its potency are the consequences of prolonged women endeavor, which through its history of superiority and confinement, convey the picturesque of civilization. Although the tale of women’s accomplishment remained subdued in history, yet the ancient Indian texts symbolizes women’s visibility in this regard. Indian society influences the genders with its diversified socio-cultural practices, which varies extensively over space and time. Since ages, the societal structure played an active role in stimulating the trends of change, which with time also proved to be hindrance to the progress of this country. In this context, the study has assessed the women’s status in ancient Indian civilization, mainly based on the ancient scripts and texts viz. the Vedas, the great Epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Buddhist texts, Smritis and Dharmashastras. Examining the position of women in socio-cultural and politico-economic sphere in ancient India, the study has been divided into three segments. First segment of the study has revealed the Vedic period, the Epic period and the period of Jainism and Buddhism of Indian civilization depicting prominent roles of women in society, with equally important share that of men. Second segment of the study has analysed women’s unsatisfactorily subordinate position in the age of Dharmashastras, representing the scenario of women’s deprivation. Finally the third segment attempted to visualize the relegation of the women’s status entirely to a subservient one from Vedic period to the period of Dharmashastras.

Key Words: Dharmashastras, Mahabharata, Puranas, Ramayana, Smritis, Vedas

1. Introduction

Women’s endeavor plays the key role to en-strengthen the dynamism of human civilization by dint of their superiority and confinements to make a rapid progress of it in all spheres on this globe since ages. Although the tale of women’s accomplishment remained subdued in history, yet the ancient Indian texts symbolizes women’s visibility in this regard where women’s status had varied with space and time (Chakravarti & Roy, 1988).

2. Objectives

- To analyse the women’s status during the periods of Vedic, Epic, Jainism and Buddhism and in the age of Dharmashastras in ancient Indian civilization.
- To visualize the relegation of the women’s status entirely to a subservient one from Vedic period to the age of Dharmashastras in ancient India.

3. Methodology

Based on the ancient Indian scripts and texts viz. *the Vedas, the great Epics - the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Buddhist texts, Smritis and Dharmashastras* the study has assessed women’s status in ancient Indian civilization. Following the chronology of Indian history, the ancient era (1500 B.C. - 647 A.D.) has been categorized into four distinct periods viz. the early Vedic period or Rig Vedic period, the Epic period or the later Vedic period, the period of Jainism and Buddhism and the age of Dharmashastras.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Vedic Period (1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C.)

4.1.1 Importance of Women’s Affair

Prioritized participation in public activities, war, gymnastic, education, decision making and in selection of their male partners (Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014).



Fig.1: Women Empowerment: Vedic Period. Kiradu Temple (1153 A.D.-1178 A.D.), Rajasthan, India. Source: National Gallery of Art, Government of India.

4.1.2 Glorious Role in Education

- *Upanayana* to lead the *brahmacharya* stage of life.
- *Maitreyi, Gargi, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Viswavara* as female authors of the Vedic hymns.
- *Brahmavadinis* and *sadyodvahas*: Scholarly women.

4.1.3 Authority in Marriage and Family Affairs

- Women had been considered as *ardhangini*.
- Prevalence of widow’s remarriage and *swayambara*.

4.1.4 Right in Economic Affairs

- Profession of building health and in teaching profession.
- Spinning and weaving of clothes at home.
- Helped out their husbands in agricultural activities.

4.1.5 Property Rights

Disallowance of married daughters to inherit their father’s property, whereas each and every spinster had the enough liberty to inherit patrimony’s one-fourth share.

4.1.6 Religious Liberty

- Regular participation in religious discourses and rituals.
- Sacrifices were carried out jointly by both the genders.
- Take part as debaters in public assemblage.

4.1.7 Freedom in Women’s Sexuality

Special attentions toward female’s priority and satisfaction during sexual act had been observed in Vedic texts (Rossella, 2010). The female sex workers had been portrayed as dignified women who were free from any sort of restrain.



Fig.3: Goddess Parvati: Vedic Period. Khajuraho Group of Monuments (950 A.D.-1050 A.D.), Madhya Pradesh, India. Source: National Gallery of Art, Government of India.



4.2 The Epic Period (1000 B.C. - 600 B.C.)

4.2.1 Women as Idols

Sita, Draupadi, Kaikeye, Rukmani, Sabitri and *Satyabhama* had symbolized huge value, strong willpower, courageous and honourable role and position (Chakravarti, 1988).

4.2.2 Empowerment in Marriage and Family Affairs

Ideal womanhood where *Sita, Savitri, Arundhati, Anasuya* and *Damayanti* had celebrated life as the *pativratas*.

4.2.3 Economic and Religious Freedom

- Unconditional and unbound economic freedom.
- Religious importance of the mothers viz. *Ganga, Gandhari, Parvati, Uttara and Kunti*.

4.2.4 Physiological Devotion as Devadasis

Women who were married to the god and were expected to spend her life in serving the priests of temples had been recognised as psycho-sexually devoted *devadasis*.

4.2.5 Dominant Role in War and Sexual Affairs

- Kshatriya women used to participate in war.
- Men’s dependence on women for sexual pleasure.



Fig.5: Women in War: Epic Period. Srisailem Kshetram (200 A.D.-300 A.D.), Andhra Pradesh, India. Source: National Gallery of Art, Government of India.



Fig.6: Women Wrestlers: Epic Period. Hazara Rama Temple (early 15th Century), Karnataka, India. Source: National Gallery of Art, Government of India.



4.3 Period of Jainism and Buddhism (600 B.C. - 200 B.C.)

4.3.1 Gender Equity

Gender parity in culture and religious practices.

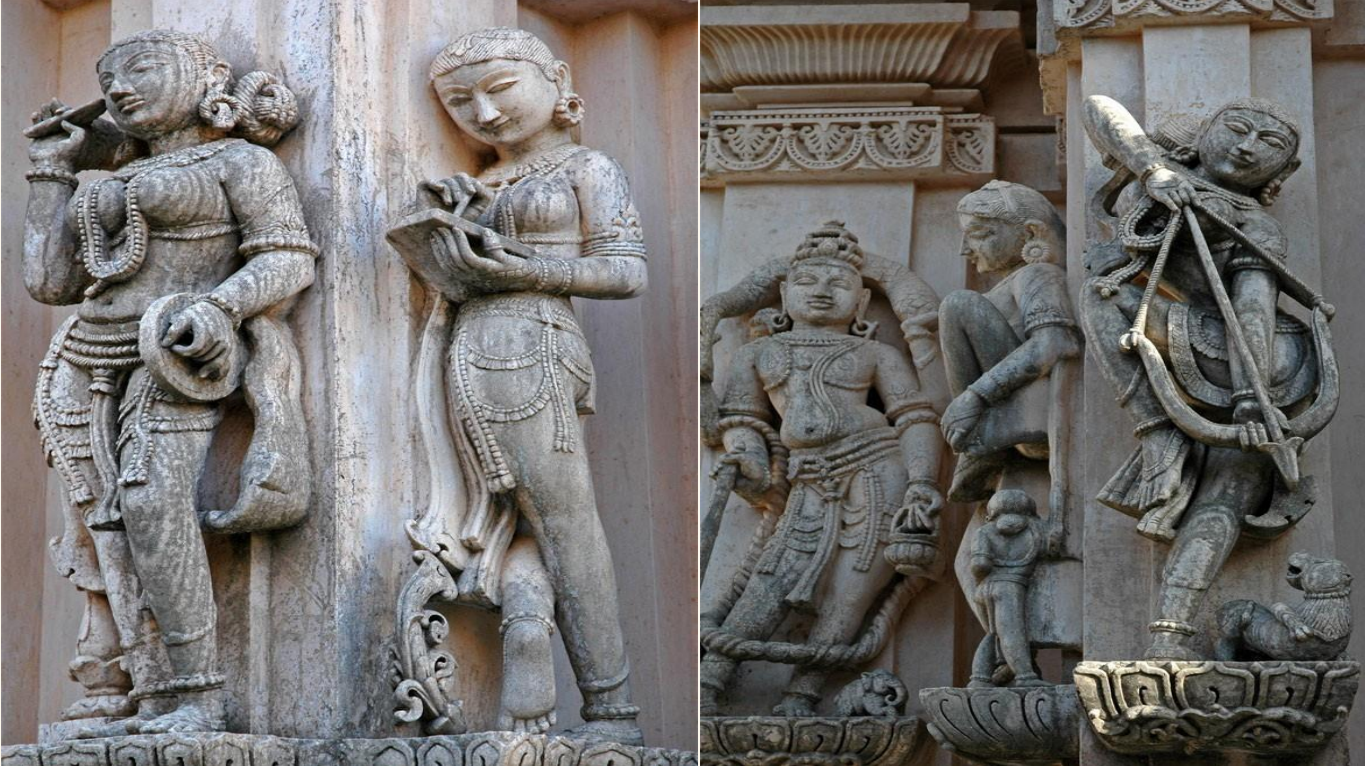


Fig.8: Musician and Learned Women: 600 B.C. Palitana Jain Temple (early 11th Century), Gujarat, India. Fig.9: Woman Archer: 600 B.C. Palitana Jain Temple (early 11th Century), Gujarat, India. Source: National Gallery of Art, Government of India.

4.3.2 Liberal Access to Education

- *Sanghamitra* as a teacher in preaching of Buddhism.
- *Jayanti* had remained spinster to study philosophy.

4.3.3 Esteemed Religious Freedom

- Women as *sanyasis* to lead a Buddhist monastic life.
- Women used to run their own *bhikshuni sangha*.

4.3.4 Deterioration of Politico-economic Status

Women’s inferior politico-economic status had depicted deterioration of women’s role in this arena.

4.4 The Age of Dharmashastras, Manusmriti Onward (200 B.C. - 647 A.D.)

4.4.1 Deprivation from Education

With Manu’s codification of the societal legislations, the right of women’s education had been fully withdrawn.

4.4.2 Confinements in Marriage and Family Affairs

Illegitimacy of widow re-marriage and prevalence of *sati, purdah* system and child marriage (Jaiswal, 2001).

4.4.3 Religious Oppression of Women

Women’s prohibition in offering prayers, sacrifices, undertaking pilgrimages and practising penance.

4.4.4 Patriarchy and Women’s Subordination

Manu’s codification turned women to be the slave of uncontrollable vice of masculine demands and sexuality.

4.4.5 Dispossession of Property Inheritance Rights

Deprivation from all sort of property inheritance right.

5. Conclusion

Glorious position of women during Vedic period, Epic period and the period of Jainism and Buddhism completely deteriorated during the age of Dharmashastras, Manusmriti onward. The deterioration of women’s status was attributed to Manu’s codification of societal rules, brahmanical austerities on Indian society, rigid restrictions of social caste system, foreign invasions and the marital relationship between Aryans and non-Aryans.

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