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Position of Women: Yesterday & Today**Dr. Archana Durgesh***BBD NITM, Lucknow, (U.P.) India***Abstract**

Indian womanhood is at the cross roads of changes, some radical and some ephemeral. The pressures to which it is subject have been astoundingly varied with mutually cancelling effects. The melting point of the female Indian psyche is in a state of perfect liquidity, with multifarious socio-economic and psycho-spiritual ingredients thronging from all sides. Out of this emerges a new self-image taking on the fascinating hues of freedom, self-respect, self-worth, confidence and allied attributes. But the process of change can be understood only in terms of neo-historicism. Therefore an examination-cum-analysis of the historical data relating to Indian womanhood is imperative. The world of Indian woman became much more restricted in the time of the Smriti writers. This culminated finally in the seclusion of women. The status of women refers to her position in the network of social role structure, privileges, rights and duties. It refers to her rights and duties in family and social life. The status of a woman is generally measured in the comparative amount of prestige and respect accorded to her with that of man.

Key Words: Smiriti, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Vedas.

Indian womanhood is at the cross roads of changes, some radical and some ephemeral. The pressures to which it is subject have been astoundingly varied with mutually cancelling effects. The melting point of the female Indian psyche is in a state of perfect liquidity, with multifarious socio-economic and psycho-spiritual ingredients thronging from all sides. Out of this emerges a new self-image taking on the fascinating hues of freedom, self-respect, self-worth, confidence and allied attributes. But the process of change can be understood only in terms of neo-historicism. Therefore an examination-cum-analysis of the historical data relating to Indian womanhood is imperative. This alone can bring forth vagaries and vicissitudes which have been constructing and destroying the evolving image of the

average Indian woman. A historical overview of events and situations leading to the varied shifts and value scales of the Indian female is a logical necessity and so we attempt the same in the following sections. - The essence of the Aryan civilization is preserved in the four Vedas namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva and their different branches like Brahmanas and Upanishads.

Even in early Rig Vedic age the birth of a son was much more welcome than the birth of a daughter. But the Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like female infanticide, sati and child marriage. As a sign of woman's social dignity widow remarriage was permitted in Rig Vedic society, as evidenced in the funeral hymn in the Rig Veda: "the widow who lay on the pyre by the side of her dead husband was asked to come to the world of the living." Girls

normally married after puberty, as can be judged from the frequent mention of unmarried ones such as "Ghosha" who grew up in the houses of their parents. Moreover, "the data of the Rig Veda shows that the girls and boys of the Rig Vedic society had freedom to choose their partners in life." In Rig Vedic times caste system was not all rigid. There was no compartmentalization of society. During this time inter caste marriages took place in society. People were given absolute freedom to choose their caste. "In one case the father was a priest, the mother grinder of corn and the son a physician, all three lived happily together." In Rig Vedic women enjoyed economic independence also to a certain extent. The women belonging to lower strata took up spinning, weaving and needle work. Clothes were much more expensive in ancient India than at present. Among other important occupations, the first place must be given to weaving both in cotton and wool, which supplied clothes to people.

The world of Indian woman became much more restricted in the time of the Smrithi writers. During the time of Kautilya, she began to be treated as a chattel. She had no separate identity of her own. The scriptures as well as the Dharma Sastras favoured the patriarchal system, which marginalized the role of Indian woman. Nothing but implicit obedience or subordination was expected from her. This culminated finally in the seclusion of women. The freedom that she enjoyed during the Rig Vedic age was gradually taken away from her. By 200 B.C. pre-pubescent marriages became the order of the day. The general belief was that if women were given freedom, they would

transgress the limits. The Smriti writers like Kautilya, Manu and Yajnavalkya began to favor seclusion of women. The general belief is that the seclusion of women was introduced by the Mughals in India.

Most of these customs denied woman her primary rights as an individual. The freedom that she enjoyed was taken away from her and she became a caged bird. In fact her condition was like what Emily Dickinson ironically articulated in one of her poems: "They put me in the closet, because they liked me still .O" The Indian woman began to identify herself as a subordinate individual, as a mere instrument of man.

Man believes that woman is by nature, wicked, susceptible to passion and infirmities. Hence she should be controlled by a male who is supposed to be strong and superior to her. Therefore many historians call it the "age of transition" as this period reflects distinctiveness as well as deterioration in the status of women from the preceding ages. Manu's laws do express a corpus of beliefs about women which are still prevalent in India, obviously keeping Manu alive, unconsciously yet with disastrous results. Manu approved only three canons of marriage such as Brahma, where the father himself invites a learned man of Vedas to marry his daughter, then 'Daiva' where the girl is married to a priest who conducts a sacrifice, and the Arsha where the bride groom offers a cow and bull or two pairs of the same to the father of the bride. Manu as well as Yajnavalkya condemned the Asura, Prajapatya forms of marriage. An exception was made in the case of Kshatriyas, who could marry according to Gandharva rites. Marriage was sacred and it

was indissoluble. Remarriage was allowed for men under certain conditions. If the wife was barren, or if she had only daughters, and if she was quarrelsome by nature, he would remarry without any delay. Manu even makes provisions for punishments of a woman by her husband, if ever she committed any faults. She should be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo. He never sanctioned widow remarriage. According to him a widow should remain faithful to her husband's memory. But a widower could marry again in order.

The daughters in ancient India had some legal rights. In Vedic and post-Vedic ages, married and unmarried daughters had some rights of inheritance. But a widow, as well as a wife, had no claim over her husband's property. As far as the treatment of daughters is concerned, Manu orders affectionate treatment.

Despite Manu's commitment to the concept of a stable, secure and morally founded society, his strictures against women seem to be cutting at the root of fairness, equality and the resultant happiness. He seems to be thinking that a woman could be the sacrificial goat at the altar of male supremacy. Denying woman's basic human rights is virtually like cutting the wings of a bird which would like to fly high to the empyrean heights of performance and fulfillment. Denial of the right to education, free choice in marriage, inheritance and other property rights, the right to remarriage, the right to social mobility and so on, has ultimately resulted in making the Indian woman a very unenviable entity devoid of, among other things, the highly necessary

self-esteem which she always needs and deserves.

Dowry system was a common phenomenon. It actually meant "Stridhana" which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period the term acquired special significance. It meant money or "Dakshina" which was actually presented to the bride groom along with the bride. In Vedic times it ensured some sort of security for her. But during the middle ages she was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin. During the Middle Ages the term "Stridhana" acquired huge dimensions. The Hindus and Muslims favored this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the Vedic ages it was given with the intention of providing security for women when a crisis occurs. She was free to make use of this "Dhana." But the Middle Ages witnessed a sudden transformation. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free access to this wealth, which rightfully belonged to her. Dowry system existed even among the Muslims, especially among the Shias. As years rolled by dowry became an integral part of the marriage ceremony. This in a way contributed to female infanticide, as it became a heavy burden on the poor. The birth of girls became a nightmare to the majority of the population. Another negative effect of the dowry system was that the Indian woman lost her importance as a worthy human being. She began to be regarded as movable and removable property by her husband. Created by the so-called law-givers and

upholders of religion in the medieval age it literally induced physical as well as intellectual damage on women in medieval India. It took away her fledgling morale which was as expectedly delicate. Above all it resulted in the emotional break-downs and the traumas of a serious kind. Thus her self-concept received another lethal lash at the hands of the dark forces that ruled the roost. The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death. The feudal society of the time encouraged "Sati" which meant self-immolation of the widow. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. According to Saroj Gulati "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society." And Sati was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity. Saroj Gulati, *Women and Society: Northern India in the 2nd and 12th*

century (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985), p. 150. 60

Prostitution became a recognized institution. The Devadasi system which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans, who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the Devadasi system women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Alberuni: "the kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons." 4'

4' Quoted in Saroj Gulati, *Women and Society: Northern India in the 2nd and 12th Centuries* (New Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985), p. 226.

Male and Female, the two basic components of our human society, depend upon each other and each one of them constitutes about half of the population. Over years sociologists and other scholars have tried to assess the problems faced by women and to study changes in their status around the globe in general and in Indian society in particular. We find that man and woman have been established as the two wheels of a chariot.

The status represents the position of individual in the group. The word status denotes the position of an individual in a system with attendant rights and duties. It is the position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age,

family, occupation, marriage and achievement.

The status of women refers to her position in the network of social role structure, privileges, rights and duties. It refers to her rights and duties in family and social life. The status of a woman is generally measured in the comparative amount of prestige and respect accorded to her with that of man.

The status of Hindu women in India has been fluctuating. It has gone through several changes during various historical stages. Historically speaking, women in India have passed through two phases of their life – the period of subjugation and the period of liberation. At times she has been suppressed and oppressed and at times she is regarded as the deity of the home. From the Vedic age till today, her status and position has been changing with the passing of time.

The woman was regarded as having an equally important share in the social and religious life because a man without woman was considered as an inadequate person. She regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. There were many scholars who composed hymns of Rig Veda. Lopamudra, Gargi and Maitreye were the pioneers among them. Lopamudra, the wife of Agasti rishi, composed two verses of Rig Veda.

It may be concluded that during Vedic period the status of women was not unequal to that of men. Women got the same education as men and participated in the philosophical debates. Prabhu has remarked, “this shows that men and women were regarded as having equally important status

in the social life of the early period’. Women had equal rights in social and religious fields but had limited rights in economic field.

Status of Women in the Epics: Epic age, in the history of female freedom, may be regarded as a golden age. Women had been accorded an honorable status in the society. Most of the female characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata were well educated. The Ramayana illustrates the Hindu ideal women of India. In Mahabharata we find instances where women gave counsel and advice to men on social and religious issues. Women had an effective role in social and political life of the then society. A general survey of the Puranas reveals that the position of women declined in the corresponding age.

Status of Women in the Smritis: While speaking about woman and her relation to man, Manu says “Women must always be honored and respected by the father, brother, husband and brother-in-law who desire their own welfare, and where women are honored, there the very Gods are pleased, but where they are not honored, no sacred rite even could yield rewards”. Manu observes that the family, in which women suffer, is bound to be ruined, while the family in which women are happy is bound to prosper. He further enjoins that every person is to maintain peace with the female members of the household. He also advises every householder to treat his daughter as the highest object of tenderness and honor mother as the most venerable person in the world.

On the other hand we find a number of provisions in the Manu Smriti, which

certainly go against her interests. Women are deprived of the Upanayana ceremony and thereby of education. Manu relegates her to an entirely subservient position. He preaches self-negation as the highest ideal of a wife. She is asked to serve and worship her husband even if he is not a person of all virtue and character. Since service and worship of the husband are the primary duties of a wife, by so performing she can hope to attain heaven. Manu deprives women of her economic rights also. He says, "A wife, a son and a Slave, these three are declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is for him to whom they belong".

It appears that Manu had a very poor opinion about women. According to him women should be guarded against her evil inclinations. Otherwise she will bring sorrow to both the families. He also observes that if a woman is chaste, it is because she has not found a proper man, place and opportunity. He, therefore, calls her a 'Pramada a temptress. So, he wants woman to be under the surveillance of father in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her sons after the death of her husband. He declares in unequivocal terms that no woman deserves independence. There are two schools of thought regarding the status of women in ancient India. One school has described women as the 'equals of men', while the other school holds that women were held not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred.

Status of Women in the Buddhist Period: Many evil social practices, like the practice of prepuberty marriages, denial of right of women to education and also to mate

selection etc were imposed on women during the periods of Brahmans and Puranas. In the Buddhist period, the position of women improved to some extent. In the religious field, women came to occupy a distinctly superior place. They had their own Sangha called Bhikshuni 'Sangha', which provided avenues of cultural activities and social services. They got ample opportunities in public life. However, their economic status remained unchanged.

Status of Women in Medieval Period: According to ancient Hindu texts and tradition, until about 500 B.C. women in India enjoyed considerable freedom. But during the next thousand years, women's position gradually deteriorated. Educational and religious parity was denied to them and widow remarriage was forbidden.

In fact, the status of women started degenerating in the post-Vedic age because of the conception of purity and pollution and restrictions of inter-caste marriages. Child marriage had started in the Smriti age. During this period, a woman's husband was regarded as God. During the middle ages, the position of women in Hindu society further degenerated. A number of problems arose for Hindu women in the Mughal period.

The first Muslim invasion took place in India in the eighth century. During this period the Hindu society was engaged in evolving, under the leadership of Sankaracharya, a technique to face the expanding Buddhism. Sankaracharya re-emphasized the supremacy of Vedas to counter the spread of Buddhism, and the Vedas had given a status of equality to

women. India experienced a second Muslim invasion in the eleventh century when Mohammad Ghazni conquered India. From this period till the middle of the eighteenth century, when the British rule was established in the country the breakdown of social institutions, the vast migration of people and the economic depression in the country contributed to a general decline of social life, particularly among women. The 'Purdah' system was followed which resulted in seclusion of women. Education of women in whatever form came to be stopped. Child marriage was started. During this period the inhuman practice of 'Sati Pratha' was in vogue. Purdah Pratha, Sati Pratha, child marriage, girl killing, polygamy etc. were the main social evils of this period.

However, during the fifteenth century, the situation underwent some change. The Bhakti movement organized by Ramanujacharya during this period introduced new trends in the social and religious life of Indian women. The saints like Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Meera, Ramdas and Tulsi stood for the right of women to religious worship. Hence, this movement, at least, provided religious freedom to women. As a result of this freedom, they secured certain social freedom also. The saints encouraged women to read religious books and to educate themselves. Although the Bhakti movement gave a new life to women, this movement did not bring any substantial change in economic status of women. Hence, women continued to hold low status in the society.

There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in

the last fifty years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. The Hindu Code Bill has given the daughter and the son equal share of the property. The Marriage Act no longer regards woman as the property of man. Marriage is now considered to be a personal affair and if a partner feels dissatisfied she or he has the right of divorce. But passing of law is one thing and its absorption in the collective thinking of society is quite a different matter. In order to prove themselves equal to the dignity and status given to them in the Indian Constitution they have to shake off the shackles of slavery and superstitions. They should help the government and the society in eradicating the evils of dowry, illiteracy and ignorance among the eves. The dowry problem has assumed a dangerous form in this country. The parents of the girls have to pay thousands and lacs to the bridegrooms and their greedy fathers and mothers. If promised articles are not given by the parents of brides, the cruel and greedy members of the bridegrooms' family take recourse to afflicting tortures on the married women. Some women are murdered in such cases. The dowry deaths are really heinous and barbarous crimes committed by the cruel and inhumane persons. The young girls should be bold enough in not marrying the boys who demand dowry through their parents. The boys should also refuse to marry if their parents demand dowry. But unfortunately the number of such bold and conscientious boys is very few. Even the doctors, engineers, teachers and the administrative officers do not hesitate in allowing themselves to be sold to the

wealthy fathers of shy and timid girls. Such persons have really brought disgrace to their cadres in particular and society in general.

The government should enact stringent laws to afflict rigorous punishment on dowry seekers, women's murderers and rapers.

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