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Status of daughter in ancient Indian society

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“Divine souls take birth in such houses, where the women are respected. Where they are not respected, all works become useless there.” (Manusmriti 3/56)1.

The evolution of the status of women in India has been a continuous process of ups and downs throughout history. 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. 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. In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence.

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. Education was equally open for boys and girls. Girls studied the Veda and fine arts. It is believed that according to "Sarvankuramanika" there were as many as twenty women being credited for composing the hymns of the rig Veda. It is believed that during Upanishad period there were Brahmanyadinis, lifelong students of Philosophy. One renowned scholar was Gargi who challenged Yagnavalkya and asked many subtle and intricate questions. Upanishad also includes a conversation between Yagnavalkya and one of his two wives Maitreyi over division of property at the decision by the sage to renounce the world. Maitreyi indicated her preference for initiation to the knowledge of Brahmanvidya to property. Passages in the Vedas show that women apart from a mere literary career had other careers open to them. They entered fields of teaching, medicine, business, military and administration. The wife enjoyed with her husband full religious right and regularly participated in religious ceremonies. In fact, such ceremonies without the wife joining her husband were regarded as invalid. It is further ordained that the woman whose hand is accepted in marriage should be treated with respect and kindness and all that is agreeable to her shall be given to her. All these indicate that a woman held a status equal to man and there were considerably less restrictions on her activities outside the home. Divorces were not permissible for male and female both. According to Basham in his book he wrote

“In Rgvedic period polygamy was not unknown. Kings and invariably Chiefs were almost polygamous, as were many Brahmins and wealthier members of lower order”2.

The position of a daughter in the Hindu family during the Vedic period did not include much authoritative role. Her socialization from childhood involved a high degree of Modesty peculiar to Hindu culture. **“In the times long gone by. Even the daughters had to bind belts, study the Vedas and chants Gayatri mantra.”(Parasara Madhav/2/pg. 485)3.**

Upanayan samskar were observed for both men and women. Her training installed in her tolerance, patience, submission and identification of her personality with her husband's. Though marriage was of great social and religious significance, it was not mandatory as the extensive use of the word "Amajur", which means a girl who grew at her father's house, suggests this. The Vedas include references to unmarried female rishis like Apala and aitreya and some of them received co-education, though rare, which sometimes led to love marriage. Girls were regarded as objects of good women. Ramayana includes a detailed description of the reception of Rama after his long exile by the unmarried girls first and later a religious bath at their hands. The grown-up daughters during the temporary absence of the parents managed household and received the guests.

The daughter-in-law entered her husband's family as a stranger, because the other members had already imbibed the traditions and customs of the family. The bride's major duty was to make efforts to merge her personality with that of her husband's in matter both mundane and spiritual, and also to adapt herself to the traditions and sentiments of the family of which she had become a full fledged member. Her position was one of honorable subordination. It was expected from her to show respect to and obey all the elder members of the family. She had to help the mother-in-law in household duties such as cleaning, washing, drawing water, cooking, rearing children, tending cattle, and nursing the sick and

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the aged. Women had limited rights, as a daughter she had no right in father's property. Each unmarried daughter was entitled to one fourth of patrimony received by her brothers. After the death of the mother, her property equally divided into sons and unmarried daughters. According to Baudhaya was declared

“a father who did not give his daughter in marriage before her first menstruation incurred the guilt of one procuring abortion (a grave sin, worse than many kinds of murders) for every menstrual period in which she remained unmarried”.⁴

The wife was always supposed to participate in religious ceremonies with her husband. In fact, no religious rite was complete without her presence. She was called "ardhangini" or the other half. Wife enjoyed full rights and regularly husband could not take part in Yagna ceremonies, if woman was not educated how could

she recite the mantras? “Upanayan samskar were observed for both men and women. The ideal age for upanayan sanskar varied from verna in vedic period. Eight years for Brahmins, eleven years for Kshatriya, twelve years for vaishya. We find Gargi and Maitreyi distinguishing themselves in Brahnavidya, the highest knowledge. Apala and Atreyi were also knowledgeable and authority on women, they suggested that matrimony was not mandatory for women. Hemandri referred to unmarried educated, knowledge of Vedas women asa vidushis. From the above examples we can say that in Vedic period the status of women was very high and they enjoyed rights in social, religious field, limited rights in economic and political field. They enjoyed the same status as male.

In the later vedic period onwards status of women was started deteriorating. Rights which they had earlier were not enjoying in this period. Restrictions were put on social, economic, religious life. During Smrities women bracketed with shudras. Pre puberty marriage came to be practiced. **According to Manu “Bride was one third the age of the groom thus a male of twenty four should marry a girl of eight year i.e. Nagnika.**⁵ In the contrary some literature were totally against of early

marriage of girl child for example According to **Sushuta samhita “Ancient Indian medical authorities state that the best children are produced from mothers over sixteen and apparently recognize the practice of child marriage as occasionally occur”**⁶. Divorce was quite impossible between both male and female. Widow Remarriage were also prohibited. But in Mahabharata there are so many example found related to laviarate marriage, according to Basham **“ If husband died without producing male issue, his brother might act on his behalf. This practice of laviarate (niyoga) was well known in many ancient societies and references to it are common in early Indian legal literature.**⁷

By the time of smrties Vedic knowledge was confined for male only. Sati system had become to prevalent in this period. This might be the main reason that women often immolated themselves on the husband's funeral pyres. Veil system came into practice. Polygamy in ordinary circumstances was not encouraged by earlier Hindu literature. Polygamy became a fashion for only kings and their chiefs so that, the women may be guarded.

“She was to be guarded in by her father in her childhood, by her husband in youth and by her sons after the death of her husband”. (Manusmriti 9/3) 8

Hindu Dharmashastras denied women to offer prayers and perform sacrifices, practice penances and undertake religious pilgrimages. They could not allow chanting Vedic mantras. They could not take part in religious discussions as they used to earlier. Manusmrti laid down various restrictions regarding the traditional rights of women in his book. Smrti constitute the beginning of a set of law books which have come down to posterity under the special designation Samhita, as a code of law. It has, for centuries, held sway over India and the Hindu population. The later lawmakers based their treatises on Manu. Upanayan sanskar which was previously for both boys and girls is now for boys only. Women were passive observers rather than active participants. They could not even observe any fasts and vratas without their husband's permission.

During the time of Buddha status of women was slightly improved in the religious field. They had their own sanghas “Bhikshuni Sanghas” observed the same rules and regulations as monks did. During the Gupta period there were laws regarding marriage, dowry, inheritance and allowing widow remarriage. Vikramaditaya (Chandra Gupta II) expressed romantic and chivalrous attitude towards women. Rajyashri sister of Harshvardhan learnt laws from Heuin Tsang. Queen Prabhavati, the daughter of Emperor Chandra Gupta II played a prominent role in governing the country and on the death of her husband, she ruled for 13 years until her sons had grown up to take over the charge. In the 10th century Queen Dida ruled in Kashmir, Apart from queens and princesses there were women from the ordinary ranks who distinguished themselves in the field of a literature, philosophy, arts, Maths etc. Bharti of Mithila was a famous philosopher who had received appreciation from Shankaracharya.

Women in India are not treated equally as men. Indian women are socially politically and economically are equal to men. They have to change their mindset and break the shackles of social injustices only after that will they get greater freedom, better education, self reliance independence, good jobs, better treatment from men. It will only happen when they develop courage, empower themselves and raise their voices against any discrimination. It will definitely improve their social status and the socio- economic conditions in the days to come.

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