

## SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

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### **Abstract:-**

This article is about the social and religious status of women in ancient India. Religion at present is a highly developed social institution. With the growth of human mind, religion took the form of worship of benevolent divine beings who were personification of powers of nature. The concept of Gods and Goddesses had been developed in the Harappan civilization. We have got many terracotta figurines identified as Mother Goddess. During the Vedic period, Goddess Devi Saraswati, Ila, Aditi, Usha, Vak and Bharti are frequently mentioned in the Rigveda. It is well known that the names like Ambika, Durga, Kali, etc. are mentioned in later Vedic period. In the Vajasaneyi Samhita, the Taittiriya Brahmana and the Satapatha Brahmana women are celebrated as the most powerful and the empowering force. In the Smritis the position of women in Hinduism is mixed and contradictory.

### **Keywords:-**

**Rigvedic Period:** The Vedic civilization which flourished between 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C., is named after the Vedas. This civilization is period is divided into the Early Vedic Period or the Rigvedic Period and the later Vedic Period. The period between 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. is known as the Rigvedic Period. It is the period in which 'The Rigveda' was written.

**The Epic Age:** The later Vedic Age/Period is called the Epic age because the main Epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagwat Geeta were written in this period.

**The Smritis:** Smriti literally "that which is remembered" are a body of Hindu texts usually attributed to an author, traditionally written down but constantly revised, in contrast to Shruti (the Vedic literature) considered authorless, that were transmitted verbally across the generations and fixed.

**Buddhism- Period:** Buddhism is a world religion, which arose in and around the ancient Kingdom of Magadha (now in Bihar, India) and is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who was deemed as "Buddha". Buddhism spread outside Magadha starting in the Buddha's lifetime.

**Jainism-Period:** Jainism is somewhat similar to Buddhism, of which it was an important rival in India. It was founded by Vardhamana Jnatiputra or Nataputta Mahavira (599-527 BC), called Jina (Spiritual Conqueror), a contemporary of Buddha.

At present religion is a very important part of our life. It is a highly developed social institution in India. The beginning of civilization and appearance of religion are simultaneous in the history. During the Paleolithic period the first concept of religion was believed as a supernatural guardian. The history of religion of India which begins from the third millennium B.C. during the Indus Valley civilization.

### **Status of Women in the Rigvedic Period:**

The Rig-Vedic society was a free society. The Aryans evidently preferred male child to female child. However, females were as free as their male counterparts. Education was equally open for boys and girls. Girls studied the Veda and fine arts. Women never observed purdha in the Vedic period. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their mates. But divorce was not permissible to them. In the family, enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as Ardhanginis. In domestic life women were considered to be supreme and enjoyed freedom. Home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes was done at home. Women helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits also. Husband used to consult his wife on financial matters. Unmarried daughters had share in their fathers' property. Daughter had full legal rights in the property of her father in the absence of any son. Mother's property, after her death, was equally divided among sons and unmarried daughters. However, married women had no share in father's property. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband's property. A widowed mother had some rights.

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. In the Rigvedic period no religious rites were accomplished without women. They took part in every realm of life. Even the Ashvamedha and Rajsuiya Yajna were not complete due to lack of participation of women. Thus, in Rigvedic period, women were esteemed. Goddess Saraswati, Ila, Aditi, Bharti are frequently mentioned in the Rigvedic period. It is well known that the names like Ambika, Durga, Kali, etc. are mentioned in later Vedic period.

### **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. Uma the consort of Siva is known as Parvati in the late passage of the Epics. Goddess Shakti retained a position of a famous deity at the time of Puranas. In Haryana the references of Shakti are found in the Mahabharata worshipped by Arjuna as Durga to get blessing for a victory in the battle. During the course of visit of various holy spots of Kurukshetra a pilgrim, according to Mahabharata, goes to Sritirtha and pay homage to the Goddess. Other tirthas of goddesses were Sankhini (Kaithal), Kalasi Tirtha (Kaithal) and Thanesar as a seat of Durga also called Katyasyani, Bhadra, Nidra, Maya and Sanatani where a pilgrim bathing in the pool overcome the

difficulties of worldly life. In Haryana the references of Shakti are found in the Mahabharata worshiped by Arjuna as Durga to get blessing for victory in the battle.

### **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 Buddhism- 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 Brahmins 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. The Buddha advised to the king of Kosala clearly that Buddhism does not consider the birth of a daughter as a case of worry and despair. The Buddha accepted that women are capable of realizing the truth just as men are.

### **Status of Women in the Jainism-Period:**

Women in Jainism are treated within the same code of ethics as that is prescribed for men. However, the status of women in Jainism differs between the two main sects, Digambara

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sect and Swetambara sect. Jainism prohibits women from appearing naked. It is for this reason that the Digambaras, who consider renunciation of clothes necessary to Moksha; say that the women can't achieve Moksha. They also believe that women must be reborn in male form before they can achieve moksha. On the other hand the Swetambaras, who allow sadhus to wear clothes, believe that women can achieve Moksha. Some Jains consider women to be inherently inferior, but most do not. However, there are more Swetambara sadhvis than sadhus and women have always been influential in the Jain religion. According to the Swetambara Jains Lord Mallinath, the 19th Jain Tirthankara; was a female. However, according to Digambara Jains Lord Mallinath was a male. As regards the status of women in the Jain community, one needs to go back to the period of Lord Mahavira. He made a crucial revolt against the existing tradition and extended his full support for the upliftment of women. He felt that they were the most neglected organ of the household where they became least powerful and most disregarded and controlled bitterly by men.

Considering all these immoral practices and alimentative attitude of men towards women, Lord Mahavira stood against these pernicious social elements. He tried to free from indignation and tried to improve their status in all walks of life. However, certain reservations had, naturally to be observed because of the slight physical incapability of women. Hence, some special rules were prescribed for nuns. Although they used to be heads of their units as Pravartini and Ganavacchedini, similar to Acharya and Upadhyaya, they were entirely responsible to the Acharyas. There were many well-known nuns of ancient period like Candana, Puspacula, Subrata. Even the patriarchal form of the society was developed and nuns were treated as slightly inferior to monks in certain respects. The Jains believe that nothing holds women as anything less than human beings who, like all souls, have the right and capability to achieve redemption.

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