

Ancient Women of India: Unraveling the Glorious Past of Womanhood in the Country

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Abstract

Women are the most integral part of the society and the roles played by women are considerably remarkable and challenging in nature. The role played by women can be traced back in the time of ancient India due to their sacrifices and contribution to the society. The main objective of this study is to evaluate and analyses the roles played by women in ancient times. This study also curtails information related with the role and status enjoyed by women in ancient India.

Keywords

Dravidian Culture, Vedic Period, Womanhood in India

INTRODUCTION

Human society has been characterized by social differences and gender difference is considered as one of them. In the patriarchal society women were not considered equal with men. Despite the differences women have proved themselves in every field and ruled the world since ancient times. In this study the main objective is to unravel the glorious past of Indian women in ancient times and the role they played in the society. The study also includes the status and position enjoyed by women in the earlier times in order to imprint their impact and importance as per the men.

Glorious past of womanhood in India

In the time of ancient civilization women have been dignified to respectable positions and status. In the Dravidian culture of the southern portion of India women were empowered and honoured with the power to control and manage all the affairs of the household. As per Anālayo (2018), the role of women is not only in managing the household chores but also they are also demonstrated in a position of contributing in the society. The role of womanhood has been idolized in the Indian civilization as well. The two greatest epics of India Ramayana and Mahabharata have depicted the role of women in it in the view of prosperity, dharma and pleasure.[2]

The contribution of women in the ancient period is not only confined to being the centre of attraction and discussion. Rather women have contributed equally in society and in certain conditions more than men. In the words of Venkatesh (2020), glorious women from the past have contributed and changed the thinking of patriarchal society as a whole. The first woman ruler and leader of ancient India Razia sultan, the only female ruler that has ruled in Delhi sultanate, Savatri bai Phule who is known to be the first women teacher of India, Maharani Durgavati the most famous female leader that fought against Mughal emperor Akbar and various other women that have imprinted the past with their heroic action

and sacrifice.[11]

Women status in ancient civilization

The condition of women in society has changed and evolved over a period of time. In the era of ancient Indus valley civilization there was certain evidence of worshipping women goddesses and was given high status and value within the household society. In the meantime, imparting education to girls was also considered important and was considered essential for marriage. On the other hand women were made to sacrifice themselves in the pier of their husband at the time of death as a sacrifice. In the words of Bangwal (2021), the practice of sati was prevalent in the society. However in the patriarchal society women were expected to have sons because they are the carrier of the last rites of the lineage. The level of female children was high but the high degree of fidelity was not to be expected from men. Initially women were confined to perform rituals but due to the changes in society the religious ceremonies were started to be performed by priests resulting in the weakening of women's condition.[4]

The condition of widows in ancient India has improved due to the lowering of marriage age; they were given money to sustain and pursue their education.

Role of women in ancient India

Women played a wide variety of roles in the ancient society in different aspects of the society. In the field of education India had some famous scholarly leaders such as Brahmanadins, who were considered as such women that did not follow the idea of marriage and persuaded the concept of Veda throughout their life. As per Paranthaman *et al.* (2019), women were also confined in writing Veda's and Sanskrit texts that were well versed in the society. The role of women in administration was also seen to be effective in terms of politics. The ruler of Satavahana Naynika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. The role of women leaders were also seen to be against the Mughals for example Rani Laxmi bai, who governed over Jhansi after the death of her husband in the year 1835. Not only did she govern the kingdom but

also fought against the rule of British that was uprising in the years 1857. In the Vedic period women were regarded as the protector of children and imparting them with education. According to Srivastava (2018), in the primitive time of early days the idea of food gathering women also played a very important role along with men. The contribution and condition of women were comparatively better and dignified as they have better education opportunities and religious freedom.[8][9]

Even in the Rig Vedic period in the purines and literature women were given equal rights and property as compared to that of men. Women were seen to be playing the role of female bodyguards in the Mauryan period even in Buddhist text they were depicted to be the life giver and goddess of nature. As per Fergusson & Cavanaugh (2019), there are contradictory facts illustrated about womanhood in the ancient Vedic period, where at one point women were given high positions in the society that were meant to be protected and given equal rights as compared to that of the men. On the other hand a contrasting image is portrayed regarding women which states the fact that women need to be kept inside the premises of house and protect the children as well fulfil all the needs of the families.[5]

METHODS

The main focus of the study relates to analyzing the role of ancient women in the society during the time of ancient India. However for collecting relevant information related with the facts certain methods of data collection have been taken into consideration. As per Johnston (2017), for collecting data and information related with the concept of ancient women secondary qualitative methods are taken into consideration. In this method various uses of secondary data has been put into use such as various articles and journals having information related to the topic as well as various online resources and portals relevant for the study.[7]

RESULT

Women are considered as the gift of society and all the continents treated their women with some significant notions. In Indian subcontinent the status of women had changed constantly from the ancient to the modern age (Ahuja, 2003).[1]

Indus Valley Civilization [2300 BCE-1750 BCE]

This urban civilization is considered as the most ancient civilization of Ancient India. Though there was a lack of evidence about the women's status in the society, it is clear from their worship style that the women were given equal status like the men. In view of Indradeva (1976), the appearance of *Mother Goddess (Fertility cult)* along with the *Pashupati Mahadeva*, who was the major deity, gives the evidence that the status of women were dignified in that period.[6]

Rig Vedic Age [1500 BCE-1000 BCE]

The status of women was far better in the ancient period than the medieval period. Indus Valley Civilization was the serene land where women were given higher authority that continued till early Vedic age. In the later Vedic age, it has been seen that the status of women were destroyed in many places where they were superior previously. The Rig Vedic women enjoyed high positions in education and politics. They were given a notable place in politics too; in some political assemblies the opinion woman was given priority. 'Upanayan' and knowledge of 'Veda' are also provided which was seized in the later Vedic Period (Ayub and Raina, 2018). There was no mention of child marriage or Sati system in the society. Widow Remarriage was allowed to give dignity to the women. The perfect age for the marriage of women was mentioned as 16-17 years. According to great historian *Max Muller* though the society was patriarchal the time between 1500BCE-1000BCE was the glorious period for women. Some of the early Vedic women were dignified as 'Seer' (a position given to the person who composed Vedic hymns). Such great women of the early Vedic period were *Apala, Ghosa, Vishwavara* and *Lopamudra*. Rig Vedic Age is considered as the most glorious part of ancient India where women were more dignified than the other time.[3]

This higher authority of the women was demolished in the Later Vedic Age [1000 BCE-500BCE], as the education, political priority was seized. They were deprived of prior Upanaya and right of knowledge.

Later part of Ancient India [From 600 BCE up to the medieval period]

In the later age from 600 BCE the northern India was dominated by the *Magadha- Haryanka dynasty, Nanda Dynasty, Mauryan dynasty* and so on. In this period the change of the women's status can be observed in the marriage system (Srivastava, 2018). According to the Greek writer, *Nearchus*, the Indian married without dowry, when the girl reached the marriageable age, she was married to a person who had some manly virtue like, wrestling, running or boxing. Though the absence of dowry in the entire subcontinent is not right, it was prevalent. From the notes of famous historian N. Jayapalan, it was said that in the *Mauryan Age* the women were considered as part of the kingdom (Thakur, 2017). They participated in the war too and in the religious ceremony they joined together. There were no restrictions about their education in ancient India, if they had the economic stability or stability; they preferred to take education about the *war, medicine, dharmashastra, business code and ethics etc. . . .* Without the glorious part, somewhere it was also criticized that the kings used their daughter for the expansion of their kingdom and the *Matrimonial alliance* was prevalent between the kings as a treaty. Most importantly, the *polygamy* was very common among the kings, *Bimbisara* from Haryanka dynasty who was the contemporary of the Gautama Buddha and Mahavira, married three times. *Kosladevi, Chellana* and *Khema* were his wives who belonged to famous dynasties. The status of

women in ancient India was dignified and in some places contrasting too.[9][10]

CONCLUSION

The women were dignified to the upper position in the ancient Indian; in fact their position was far superior to the man in the society. They were considered as “*Shakti*” which means power. Much literary evidence gives the evidence that the woman was considered as the origin of power. There are several examples that many kings fought bravely to save the dignity of their women. Here, in this study, it can be noticed that the priority of women was higher in the early part of the ancient age which was destroyed in the later days. From the great history of the Mauryan Period, it can be seen that the opinion of women was prioritized in many places to make decisions. Moreover, the study is helpful to highlight the characteristics of the women of ancient India. It is hopeful to reflect the picture that may help the reader to know more about ancient India.

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