

The saga of women's status in ancient Indian civilization

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. Since ages, the Indian societal structure has played an active role in stimulating the trends of change in women's status, which with time also proved to be hindrance to the progress of this country. In this context, the study has attempted to emphasize the women's status in ancient Indian civilization based on the ancient scripts and texts. The ancient era has been categorized into four distinct periods viz. the Vedic period, the Epic period, the period of Jainism and Buddhism and the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānasmṛiti onward. The study has portrayed the relegation of the women's dignified role and position entirely to a subservient one from Vedic period to the period of Dharmaśāstras, Mānasmṛiti onward.

Keywords

Dharmaśāstras • India • Jainism and Buddhism • Mahābhārata • Rāmāyaṇa • vedic period

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Introduction

Women play a key role in strengthening the dynamism of human civilization. According to Altekar (1938, p. 1), "one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it." Although the ancient Indian texts have focused on women's visibility in this regard, historians, while reconstructing the past, have created certain spaces for women that exist merely within definite parameters (Chakravarti & Roy 1988). In regard Indian history, women's studies have a tendency to throw light on the broad terminology of women's status, which has, consequentially, focused on a restricted set of queries. These queries, as well as their parameters seek to explore women's roles and positions in different socio-cultural, as well as economic and political spheres of the country (Sharma 2014). Moreover these parameters have tended to create a major lacuna in our perception of the societal structure that had endeavored to shape gender roles and positions in ancient India. The influence of Indian society on gender has varied widely over time and space due to the differences in socio-cultural traditions and practices (Chakravarti & Roy 1988). Since early times, societal structure has played an active role in stimulating change in women's roles and positions, but with time has also hindered the progress of the country. In this context, this study has made an attempt to assess women's status and to highlight the structural framework of gender relations in ancient Indian civilization.

Materials and Methods

Based on the ancient Indian manuscripts and texts: the Védas; the Great Epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata; the

Buddhist texts; the Smritis; the Purāṇas; and the Dharmaśāstras; this study has made an attempt to assess women's roles and positions in ancient Indian civilization. Following the chronology of the ancient period in Indian history, the study has been confined to four distinct periods: the Early Vedic or Rig Vedic period (1500 BC–1000 BC), the Epic or Later Vedic period (1000 BC–600 BC), the Jainism and Buddhism period (600 BC–200 BC) and the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānasmṛiti (200 BC–647 AD).

The Dharmaśāstras are part of Hindu discourse, and the Dharmaśāstras period is considered to be from 600 BC to 200 AD. On the other hand Jainism and Buddhism also flourished in ancient India during the same period. Women's status began to decline in 200 BC during the Dharmaśāstras period with Mānu's codification (Mānasmṛiti) of societal legislation. Therefore, to avoid an overlap of periods and to highlight women's status in ancient Indian civilization irrespective of religious bias, the Jainism and Buddhism period and the period of Dharmaśāstras, Mānasmṛiti is considered separately as 600 BC to 200 BC, and 200 BC to 647 AD, respectively.

Discussions

The Early Vedic or the Rig Vedic Period (1500 BC–1000 BC)

Women were dignified with a respectable status in early Vedic civilization. Dravidian culture "has had a very long history as a referential term for the southern portion of India" (Marr 1975, p. 30), in which women were honored as well as empowered in the affairs of the home and family. They were also honored by their participation in all the socio-cultural activities of early Indian

civilization. Moreover, “the Aryan culture, based on the Vedic culture, remained the centralizing factor” (Burrow 1975, p. 29) of the early Vedic civilization. Women’s freedom to participate in war, gymnastics, archery, horse riding, public activities, education, decision making, and in the selection of male partners has portrayed the nature of women’s status in the social canvas of the Rig Vedic period (Altekar 1938). As explained in Devi and Subrahmanyam (2014), the value of women and the respect shown towards them was not only limited to the idea of mistress of the household, rather, women demonstrated huge potential for contributing to human civilization during the Vedic period. The Rg-Vedā-Saṃhitā text revealed that the “goddess *Durgā*” (trans. Müller 1869, p. 211); “Aditi, the goddess of freedom” (trans. Müller 1869, p. 243); and Sārasvatī the “best mother, best of rivers, best of goddesses” (trans. Griffith 1896, Hymn XLI) were worshipped with complete dedication. Sculptures representing early Vedic society have also shown that women were placed in a higher status in this society.

Despite the existence of a preference for sons, daughters were always accepted and treated well in early Vedic India, where the “girls’ education passes through the stages of *Upanayana* and *Brahmachārya* leading to the marital state” (Tharakan & Tharakan 1975, p. 117). During the Rig Vedic period all genders were offered the privilege of equal educational opportunity to study the Vedāḥ (Vedic literatures), and the role of women in ancient Indian literature became of great importance. The Rg-Vedā-Saṃhitā mentioned several women seers and sages, of which Sulabhā Maitreyī, Gārgī Vāchaknavī, Lopāmudrā, Ghōṣa, Visvavārā, Vadavā Prāchiteyī, and Sikatā Nivāvarī represented renowned female authors of the Vedic mántras (hymns), as well as being persons of intelligence due to their learning during that era. Early Vedic texts have also revealed two types of women scholars of the period: the *Brahmavādinīs*, women who never married and who studied the Vedāḥ throughout their lives; and the *Sadyodvāhās* who studied the Vedās until they married. The Vedāḥs referred to female teachers as *upadhyāyās* (unmarried female teachers) or *upadhyāyānīs* (married female teachers) within Vedic society. The early Vedic period was therefore characterized by women’s glorious role in education.

In early Vedic family affairs, women who enjoyed both their autonomy and their role as wives were considered to be *ardhangini* (better half) and *sahadharmini* (equal partner). Marriage was never forcibly imposed on women in Rig Vedic society. The Rg-Vedā-Saṃhitā has often referred to spinsters as “*Amajuh*, one who grows old in (one’s parents’) house” (Altekar 1938, p. 38). After puberty and the completion of their education, girls had permission to take up married life by selecting their life partners through *swayamvara* (choosing a husband). The Rg-Vedā-Saṃhitā has disclosed the existence of both polygamy and polyandry during the early Vedic period. In some passages of the Vedāḥ too, the “wife is mentioned in connection with husbands in plural” (Altekar 1938, p. 132). Remarrying was also socially acceptable for widows; however, divorce was not permitted in Rig Vedic’s marriage system. As Bala states (2014, p. 123), “the tradition of child marriage cannot be traced to the Vedās.” Women were honored as the “very source of *Puruṣārthas*, not only *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kāma*, but even *Mokṣa*” (Nandal & Rajnish 2014, p. 22) in Rig Vedic India.

Women of the early Vedic period enjoyed absolute economic freedom. They engaged in professions for increasing health and well-being, as well as in teaching professions as *achāryās* in Rig Vedic society (Altekar 1938). During this period, women also earned money through the spinning and weaving of clothes at home, while also helping their husbands in agricultural activities. However, the Vedāḥ has emphasized women’s greatly restricted right to the inheritance of property, in which married daughters

were never allowed to inherit their father’s property. However, spinsters had access to patrimony in the form of one-fourth of the share allocated to their brothers.

In addition to this, in early Vedic religious discourses, women had the privilege and full right to regularly participate in ceremonies and rituals. In Rig Vedic society the women would have been honored to carry out sacrifices jointly with their better half. Women also had the liberty to read sacred literature, and also had the right to take part as debaters in public assemblies.

Special attention to the female’s priority and satisfaction during sex has been markedly observed in Vātsyāyana’s *Kāmasūtra*, which highlights the Rig Vedic’s sexual eroticism and emotional fulfillment in life (trans. Fosse 2012). Moreover, Jayadeva’s *Ratimāñjarī* (based on the *Kāmasūtra*) has thrown a light on a profound illustration of *kāma* during the Rig Vedic period (trans. Rossella 2010). As written in the *Ratimāñjarī*, other than being described as wives, girlfriends, or prostitutes; women were, significantly, considered to be partners in giving pleasure to men and for being completely satisfied by him at the same time in the area of sex (trans. Rossella 2010). In the Rig Vedic civilization, prostitutes, along with their practices, were never considered to be undignified or shameful, rather female sex workers were depicted as classy women, without societal restrictions (Nandal & Rajnish 2014). In the *Arthasāstra*, while emphasizing the legal position of prostitutes during the Rig Vedic period, Kautilya referred to several special classes of prostitute: *Ganikā*, *Rūpājīva*, *Vésya*, *Pratiganikā*, *Dási*, *Devadási*, and *Rūpadási* (trans. Shamasastri 1956). Besides, prostitutes were also portrayed as being beautiful, talented, and prosperous within this societal canvas (trans. Shamasastri 1956). Moreover, a broad understanding of sexuality through tantra sex (divine prostitution) has been revealed in early Vedic society. Thus the Rig Vedic civilization endeavored to create a picture of the idyllic conditions of women’s sexuality (Chakravarty 1988).

The Epic or Later Vedic Period (1000 BC–600 BC)

Womanhood was idealized as an honorable position both in and outside the home during the Epic period of Indian civilization. The two great epics of India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmīki and the *Mahābhārata* by Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, depicted women as the root of *dharma*, pleasure, and prosperity. According to Thakur (2017, p. 382), “the bride is designated as the queen of the house whose position is supreme above all the members of groom’s family.” The *Rāmāyaṇa* emphasized the line “tell of Sītā’s noble life” (trans. and ed. Griffith 1870-1874, p. 31). Moreover, Sītā, Draupadi, Kaikeyi, Rukmani, Sabitrī, and Satyabhama symbolized the great value, strong willpower, and the courageous role and position of women in Epic society.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, ideal womanhood was well illustrated as glorifying the value of *pativrata* (devotion to one’s husband) and has also idealized Sītā as the “best of womankind” (trans. and ed. Griffith 1870-1874, p. 493) and the most esteemed aspect of Indian heritage. Sītā has been symbolized as a devoted wife in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, representing the ideal character that all women were expected to strive towards (Wadley 1977). However, during the Epic period, “in later Vedic literature it is pointed out in several places how polyandry is not permissible, though polygamy is legal” (Altekar 1938, p. 132). Traditionally, the life and characters of Sāvitrī, Sītā, Anusūyā, Damayanti, and Arundhatī have also been widely celebrated as *pativratas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* (Kang 2015).

Women possessed unconditional economic freedom during the Epic civilization period, while the *Mahābhārata* upheld the religious importance of the mother in the betterment of the family. As Ganguli indicated (1883–1896), the character as well as the contribution of the Mothers, that is, Gaṅgā, Gāndhārī, Pārvatī,

Uttarā, and Kuntī, towards their families' benediction was considered worth mentioning in the Mahābhārata.

The prevalence of the *devadāsi* practice emerged during the Epic period, in which women were psycho-sexually devoted to the gods. Being recognized as *devadāsīs*, these dedicated girls were bound to spend the rest of their lives serving the priests and the pilgrims (Das 2017).

Women were given "sexual liberty" (Ganguli 1883-1896, Section XXX, p. 65), and higher roles and positions in war, during the Epic period of Indian civilization. The Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata offer a picture of Kṣatriya women taking part in wars to defend and protect their culture. On the other hand, the Mahābhārata also disclosed men's dependency on women in the area of sex during the Epic period (Ganguli 1883-1896).

The Jainism and Buddhism Period (600 BC–200 BC)

The existence of a persistent gender equity was observed during the period of Jainism and Buddhism. In the Tipitaka, the "*Vimāna Vatthu Pālī*" (ed. Ko Lay 1990, p. 139) section of the "*Khuddaka Nikaya*" (ed. Ko Lay 1990, p. 133) chapter portrays women's freedom in education, and religious and cultural activities in society. During this period the various Indian cultures were "united by a common culture, of which the Aryans were the original founders, but to which Dravidians and others also made their contributions" (Burrow 1975, p. 29).

During the period of Jainism and Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy encouraged women to lead a liberal and honorable life. Moreover, the Tipitaka disclosed the "admission of *bhikkhunis* in order" (ed. Ko Lay 1990, p. 23), and emphasized that the Buddha considered women "capable of attaining *Magga* and *Phala* insight" (ed. Ko Lay 1990, p. 23). Women were found not to be just restricted to domestic jobs but also able to pursue educational careers if they desired. Sanghamitra, the daughter of Ashoka, was able to get herself inducted into the preaching of Buddhism. With regards to the Jain texts, Jayanti, the Kaushambi princess remained a spinster in order to study philosophy and religion. Moreover Buddhist nuns were found to have composed hymns, while other women were, significantly, observed to have written Sanskrit plays and verses. They also achieved excellence in painting, music, and other fine arts.

During the period of Jainism and Buddhism, women occupied esteemed positions in religion and were permitted to become *Sanyāsinīs*. In the Tipitaka, women "left the household life like their menfolk" (ed. Ko Lay 1990, p. 23) to lead a Buddhist monastic-life during this period. Women who had superior intellect had enough confidence to run their own *sangha* (also known as *bhikkhunisangha*), as directed by a set of legislation, which was not gender-biased. Women were also observed to involve themselves in participation in socio-cultural services and activities, creating abundant prospects for public life.

However, women's economic status deteriorated during the Jainism and Buddhism period, in which they were also prohibited from political participation. The low politico-economic status of nuns compared to that of monks indicated a deterioration in women's roles and positions during the of Jainism and Buddhism period.

The Age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti (200 BC–647 AD)

Women's right to education was fully withdrawn with Mānu's codification of the laws governing society. During the age of Dharmaśāstras (the rules of right conduct), Mānsmṛiti, a number of problems started to creep in with the introduction of various restrictions on women's ability to obtain an education.

Pre-puberty marriage (child marriage) occupied a significant place in societal customs and husbands were given the status of god during the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti (Altekar 1938).

In the Arthaśāstra, while explaining "the duty of marriage, the property of a woman, and compensations for remarriage" (trans. Shamasastri 1956, p. 222), Kautilya stated that men, "having given his wives the proportionate compensation and an adequate subsistence (*vṛitti*), he may marry any number of women; for women are created for the sake of sons" (trans. Shamasastri 1956, p. 222).

Apart from this, motherhood had been "glorified as compensation for an imposed reality in which women merely gratified society's preference for male progeny" (Bhattacharji 1990, p. WS50). During this age, the contribution of women to society was always outshone by that of the men. Self-sacrifice and the observation of social rituals for the welfare of the male members of their family was considered to be a woman's duty. As in Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (500 AD), the custom of *avagunthana*, also named *purdah*, began approximately 100 BC; it was also practiced by married females while going about in public (trans. Basham & Sharma 1994). Moreover, the act of widow's re-marrying was strictly declared illegitimate, while the prevalence of *satī*, or *sahagamana*, increased markedly in society (Altekar 1938).

Mānu's codification of social norms considered women to be impure as well as second class citizens. Following from this, a strict prohibition and oppression of women offering prayers, sacrifices, and undertaking pilgrimages, was declared during the of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti period. In addition, they were strictly prohibited from practicing penance.

Women were completely deprived of inheriting any share of their husband's property under the-then Indian socio-economy. The Arthaśāstra disclosed that "no woman shall succeed in her attempt to establish her title to the property of her husband" (trans. Shamasastri 1956, p. 220). Furthermore, Mānu's codification declared that women would be dispossessed of any sort of property inheritance and thus snatching away women's independence. In the Mānsmṛiti, while codifying "the duties of women" (trans. Buhler 1964, p. 33) Mānu stated that "by a girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house" (trans. Buhler 1964, p. 33). These laws also stated that "in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; an women must never be independent" (trans. Buhler 1964, p. 33).

During this period "the growth of monogamous families with insistence on female chastity indicated the direct influence of economic developments in favour of male domination" (Tharakan & Tharakan 1975, p. 119). According to Wadley (1977, p. 119) "the basic rules for women's behavior, as expressed in the Laws Mānu, ca. A.D. 200, stress the need to control women because of their evil character." Mānu's codification also asserted that females were not at all independent, either in childhood or adulthood, nor when she is aged (Wadley 1977). Moreover, women's character was depicted as being fully malevolent in which they became possessed and acted like slaves in order to satisfy the uncontrollable vice of masculine demand and sexuality. Therefore, the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti, was characterized by the subordination of women's status.

The Relegation of Women's Status from the Vedic period to the Period of Dharmaśāstras

In the subsequent period to the Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti with the introduction of Brahmanism, the dignity and fame of women's status was entirely reduced to one of virtual subservience. The conflicting social and religious thoughts converted the position of women in to a subordinate and unsatisfactory one (Halli & Mullan 2016). During the age of the Smṛitis (Holy Scriptures of Hindu) women had the right to attain

an education related only to household purposes. Moreover, as written in the Arthaśāstra (350 BC–275 BC), being deprived of formal education, girls were considered to be an inconsequential section within a patriarchal society (Jaiswal 2001). Women were not only deprived of learning the Védas but also had a strict prohibition on becoming Brahmacharinis. Gender inequity had started to creep into society during the Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti period, and gradually women's positions were degraded to such an extent that they were deprived of all sorts of freedoms. Women were restricted in exercising their human rights as well as being barred from enjoying fundamental freedoms. A preference for sons was at its apex during this period, which, too, curtailed the freedom of women and girls (trans. Shamasastri 1956, p. 222). Hence the roles and position of women was gradually turned around through the major changes that occurred during the period of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti. During this period the "caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and closely interconnected" (Chakravarti 1993, p. 579). Women were also barred from practicing religious activities, although women who devoted themselves to being *saṭī* by burning themselves on their husbands funeral pyre were honored as well as proclaimed goddesses by the patriarchal society (Wadley 1977). Moreover, being gender prejudiced, the then Brahmanical society stressed its power over women's sexuality. The Mānsmṛiti (200 BC–200 AD) stated that a woman's submission to male control in any sexual relationship was the principal duty of her life (Wadley 1977). In the prologue to Mānu's codification of societal rules "the concept of women as chattel or a commodity for a man's enjoyment is borne out" (Saxena 2006, p. 5). Thus, women's unsatisfactorily subordinate position in the Dharmaśāstras period jeopardized not only women's status and security, but also the socio-cultural as well as the politico-economic stability and well-being of Indian civilization.

Conclusion

The dignified role and position of women in the early Vedic period, the Epic period, and the Jainism and Buddhism period was completely reduced to one of virtual subservience during the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti. Although the Mānsmṛiti considered women's subordination to be a common phenomenon, the socio-cultural set-up further hardened the form and extent of women's confinement during the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti. During the period 1500 BC to 647 AD, the deterioration in women's roles and position can be attributed to the imposition of Mānu's codification of social rules, gender based discrimination, Brahmanical austerity applied to the entire Indian society, the crudest materialization of women, the implementation of rigid restrictions induced by the societal caste system and the system of joint families, women's exclusion from educational facilities, foreign invasions, as well as the introduction of non-Aryan females as wives in Aryan families. Historical studies and women's contemporary status have disclosed that although Indian society has never accepted womanhood as being equal since the age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti, even today women's stories are reflected repeatedly as interesting episodes from the ancient period of Indian civilization.

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