CHAPTER ONE

INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES
(Historical Background)

POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA
In Vedic times woman enjoyed quite a comfortable social position is amply justifiable. A full description of the marriage ceremony is given in hymn 85 of the tenth Mandala. The following are the words addressed by the bridegroom to the bride at the time of the marriage ceremony: "Grasp thy hand, that I may gain good fortune. That thou may reach old age with me thy husband Bhaga, Aryaman, Savitri, Pharumadhi. The gods have given thee to share my husband".

The next verse contains the blessings pronounced on the newly wedded couple after the bride has arrived at her future home:

Here abide, be not divided
Complete life's whole allotted span
Playing with your sons and grandsons
Rejoicing in your own abode

Finally the bridegroom plays:

May all the gods us two unite, May waters now our hearts untwine, May Mantras, Van and Dhatri, May Destri us together join
According to some scholars the women were free in Vedic time. Dr. Ambedkar states that –

... at one time woman was entitled to Upanayan is clear from the Atharva Veda where the girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage after finishing her Brahma-charya. From the Shraut Sutras it is clear that women could repeat the Mantras of the Veda and that women were taught to read the Vedas. Panini's Ashtadhyayi bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul (College) and studied the various Shakhas (Sections) of the Veda and became expert in Mimansa.

Patanjali's Maha Bhashya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. The stories of women entering into public discussions on most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are in no means few. The story of public disputation between Janak and Sulabha between Yajnyavalkya and Gargi; between Yajnyavalkya and Maitrei and between Shankaracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu's time could rise to take to learning and education.

That at one time women were highly respected cannot be disputed. Among the Ratnis who played so prominent a part in the coronation of the king, his
queen figured and she received offerings from him. Not only the king elect did pay homage to the queen, he worshipped his other wives of lower castes. In the same way the king gave offerings after coronation ceremony to the ladies of the chief of the Srenies (guilds).  

Certain Vedic sacrifices had to be performed by every citizen and they could not be performed without the presence of a wife. So essential and indispensable was her presence, that Rama had actually to have a golden image of Sita made, before he could perform the Ashwamedha sacrifice. There were certain Mantras which could not be complete unless recited by the wife of the sacrificer, also the wife of the sacrificer should recite in a sacrifice, this mantra, placing the Veda in the hand of the wife, have this mantra recited by her.  

The social organization of the Aryans was essentially the head being called the Grahapati and associated with him in the management of the household affairs was his wife, the Grahapatni. Every house had its sacred fire and in every house the sacrificial rites were daily performed and the simple beautiful hymn of the Rigveda recited at the time of Prayer. Women took active part in the performance of these household duties and the Rigveda gives a pleasant picture of those who assisted
the other members of the family at these sacrifices, kept ready the things required on the occasion, extracted the Soma juice and strained it through a wooden strainer.

As regards marriage, monogamy was the rule but polygamy was not unknown and there are many passages in the Rigveda, referring to the practices. Thus, in one hymn a man complains that his ribs press painfully on his all round like rival wives and in another it is said that Indra took all the castles of the Dasyus, as one common husband of his wives. The marriage of widow was permitted as will appear from the following hymn:

When a woman had one husband before and takes another, if they present Ajupanchaudana offering they shall not be separated. A second husband dwells in the same world his rewedded wife if he offers the Panchaudan.

In the words of Dr. A.S. Altekar:

A certain ritual to household for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter is recommended. It is true that this ritual did not become as popular as the one prescribed for procuring the birth of a son, but it clearly shows that cultured parents were often as anxious for daughters as they were for sons.
Some thinkers like Mahatma Phuley, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar have even pointed out that a well behaved daughter may be better than a son. In cultured circles such a daughter was regarded as the pride of the family. In lower sections of society where the custom of bride-pride prevailed, the birth of a daughter must have been a welcome event.

The marriage of the daughter was not a difficult problem; it was often solved by the daughter herself. The dread of a possible widowhood did not very much weight upon the mind of parents, for all will be shown later, levirate and remarriage were allowed by society and were fairly common.

As time passed, says Dr. A.S. Altekar, the above circumstances gradually changed. The importance of ancestor-worship increased and sons alone were regarded as eligible for offering oblations to the manes; daughters could not perform this very important religious rite. Child marriage came into vogue from about the beginning of the Christian era, and soon thereafter, both lavirate (niyoga) and widow remarriage were prohibited. Intercaste marriage began to be disapproved by society, and there came into existence hundreds of sub-castes all insisting upon endogamy. The field of choice for the selection of a suitable son-in-law thus became
very narrow, intensifying thereby the anxiety of the daughter's father about the selection of a proper bridegroom. If a cruel fate inflicted widowhood upon the daughter, the calamity would break the parents' heart. Remarriage being no longer possible, parents had to bear the heart rending pain of seeing their daughter wasting herself in an interminable widowhood. The growing prevalence of the Sati custom from about the fifth century A.D. added to the poignancy of the grief; parents had often to pass through the terrible ordeal of seeing their daughters burning themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands. To become a daughter's parents thus became a source of endless worry and misery.

In the matter of religious life which was all important and very absorbing aspect of the daily life of the people we are definitely informed that women actively participated in it. The Suma hymns were chanted by women. If the husband had gone on a journey, the wife was required to perform the sacrifices. Further, there are special sacrifices like Seetayagna, Rudrabai and Rudrayaga which were exclusively performed by women.

As regards the other aspects of woman's life, we are told that she used to move about freely in the public. There are references, in the Vedic texts, of woman attending fairs, festivals, and meetings. The
great popularity of the institution of 'Samanas' an universal festival in which women participated, reveals that women enjoyed freedom of movement with men. Even in the matter of selecting the partner she seemed to exercise a good deal of influence. Marriages and evidently they must have been done with their consent. Evidences of previous courtship are well known. There are references to marriages which were of Gandharva form in which one's choice played importance.

The Atharvaveda alludes to the early married widows who in consequence of their remarriage obtained the flattering style of Punerbhu - re-born, rejuvenated.

The practice of attaching a widow to a relative with a view to beget a son for the deceased, viz., Niyoga, was also known to the Vedic Aryans.

According to S.C. Sarkar, in the Vedic society Niyoga was not resorted to with the limited objective of getting a son, "but love, progeny and property generally, it is obvious that the main concern in this rite is a normal re-marriage of the widow, who oftener than not must have had borne sons already".

On the whole, in this period, within the framework of the patriarchal society the position of women was high. The marriage of a girl used to take place at the age of 16 or 17. By then a large percentage of
girls were fairly conversant with religious rituals.

Textual Hinduy law permitted polygamy for a man. It is not a matter of long past that in India hypergamy brought forth wholesale polygamy and along with it misery, plight and ignominy to women, particularly of high caste women.

Hypergamy prevailed amongst Kulin Brahmins in Bengal, Anavil-Brahmins and Leva-Patidars of Gujarat, Rajput of Gujarat and Rajasthan, Marathas of Maharashtra and Nayars, Kshatriyas and Ambulavasis of Kerala. In rich and royal families polygamy was common, although ordinarily monogamy was the custom. The practice of polygamy was unknown in ancient Indians. It is only in the Mahabharata and Puranas that we come across a few stray cases of Polyandry. The most wellknown case, of course, is that of Draupadi marrying five Pandava brothers.

The custom of Sati was unknown in Vedic times. The widow could, if she liked, remarry or follow the custom of Niyoga (Liverate), which allowed widow to have conjugal relations with her husband's younger brother or some other near relation till she got some child. A widow, who had children, was prohibited from having recourse to Niyoga. The main disability from which the widows suffered in the Vedic age, as well
as in the next one, was proprietary rights.

Opinions differ regarding the prevalence of the dowry system. Tulsidas in the Ramayana, Jayasi and Surdas and some foreign travellers speak of the prevalence of this system among rich in later years. Particularly in Rajput families the system assumed alarming proportions. The dowry system was responsible for female infanticide in Rajput families. 8

Polygamy was allowed and appears to have been the fashion at the end of epic period for Arjuna, Bhima and Duryodhana had all more wives than one. There is, however, a considerable difference of opinion as to whether the custom of polyandry obtained among them. Those who hold that it did, of course, cite the instance of the Pandavas marrying a single wife and the very explicit statement made by Yudhishtira to the effect that such was the custom among them. On the other hand, it is argued that the astonishment with which the proposal made by them was everywhere received, the story about the previous birth of the Pandavas, narrated by Vyasa to allay the perturbation caused in the mind of the father of Draupadi and the paucity of the instances which Yudhishthira is able to cite in support of his request go to establish the fact that polyandry was not current among them. It is thus not possible to
come to any definite conclusion in the matter and the question is still wrapped in considerable ambiguity.

As regards the form of marriage, the Mahabharata mentions the eight forms of marriages which are referred to in the later Smritis, viz.,

(1) The Brahma marriage, in which the father pours out a libaration of water and gives his daughter to a suitor, a student.

(2) Diva marriage, in which the father decks his daughter with ornaments and gives her to an officiating priest, when the sacrifice is being performed.

(3) Arsha marriage, in which the father gives his daughter for a cow or bull.

(4) Prajapatya, in which the father gives away his daughter to a suitor, simply saying "fulfil ye the law conjointly".

(5) Gandharva marriage in which the lover takes and weds a loving damsel.

(6) Rakshasa marriage in which the bridegroom forcibly takes a damsel, destroying her relatives by strength of arms.
Asura marriage in which the suitor purchases a damsel from her father.

Paisacha Marriage. In this form, a man embraced a woman deprived of consciousness.

Of these, the first four were approved and the other four condemned, the Paisacha form being considered the beastly. It will be seen from the description of the first four forms given above that they mark the different stages in the development of the idea of marriage from sale to gift.

The other four probably prevailed among the tribes of the Gandharvas, the Rakshasas, the Asuras and the Paisachas and were named accordingly. The practice of Niyoga or raising issue on the widow of a dead man was also in vogue and was frequently resorted to both by the high and the low.

Proprietary (Ownership)
Rights of Women:

Most of the legal authorities in ancient India did not recognise the right of a woman to own property, land, houses etc., which come under the category of immovable property. But those authorities admitted the right of a woman to Stridhana (ornaments, jewellery etc.,
which were given to her at the time of her marriage by her husband, parents, relatives etc.). On those things the woman had the exclusive right. Those things which formed part of the Stridhan could not be taken away from her even by her husband. The Arthashastra of Kautilya not only stated that the Stridhan was the property of the woman, but also stated that went up to 2,000 silver Panas (approximately 1 Pana = 2½ to 3 Rupees) or any sum that being held by her husband in trust on her behalf. Her property was used by others after her death. In her life time she was permitted to part with the Stridhan if she wanted to give it as a present to her daughters.

During the Gupta period and after the things changed, according to the Yajnyavalkya Smriti, the wife had the right to own the property of her husband immediately after the son. Her daughters also were given the right to property after her as well as her son's death. But while her husband and her sons were living she had to remain at their mercy.

The most pleasing trait in their character was their devotion to their husbands and we have an excellent picture thereof in Chapter 263 of the Vana Parva, where Draupadi explains to the wife of Sri-Krishna the way in which she won the affection of her husband. Leaving
... always serve my husbands with their other wives. I am always afraid of speaking a bad word, standing in a bad posture, glancing in a bad manner, sitting in a bad position and going in a bad place and I avoid guessing the intentions of my husbands. I do not look at another man, be he a God or a young well decked man or a rich or noble person. I do not take food before my husband dines or sleeps before he goes to bed. Whenever my husband returns from the field or the forest or the village, I always stand up and receive him with offerings of water and a seat. I wash the pots clean, prepare food well, give it to my husband at the proper time, preserve the provisions carefully and keep the house well swept. I do not keep company with bad women and giving up idleness always strive to please my husband. I avoid jestingly or laughter or standing in the front door or frequenting public places or keeping long in the compound of my house. When my husband goes away on a journey for the sake of the family, I put on neither flowers nor pigments. I do not take what my husband does not drink or eat or like. I observe the family customs carefully. I serve guests and Brahmins carefully and know everything which is done by the servants beginning with the goathered or cowherd. I watch carefully the income and expenditure of the house.
Manu invests the Brahmins with new privileges. Manu deprecates the Shudras and woman and concedes to them an inferior status. He thus laid down a theoretical basis for the social and legal subordination of women. This theoretical degradation of women got strengthened ideologically when in the Bhagavadgita the new path of Bhakti was shown to the Vaishya, the Shudra and women.

Being dependent, her rightful place is under the guardianship, successively, of her father, husband and son.

In Manu Samhita ideas about womanhood are laid down and morality is assigned in authoritarian codes which bring down women to the level of sub-species. Manu was a law-giver of the most perverted Brahminical brand. According to Manu the nature of the women is to seduce men; they lead astray, not only fools but even learned men, they are not fit for that. Manu equated woman with a slave and his laws epitomise complete submission of woman to man and they are still by and large accepted by women.

Women are not to be free under any circumstances. In the opinion of Manu 1X-2, day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families.
and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control XX-3. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age, a woman is never for independence. IX-5. Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations however trifling (they may appear); if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families.

IX - 6, considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husbands (must) strive to guard their wives.

V - 147. By a girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

V - 148. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth in her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent.

IV - 149. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible. Woman is not to have a right to divorce.

IX - 45. The husband is declared to be one with the wife which means that there could be no separation
once a woman is married.

Many Hindus stop here as though this is the whole story regarding Manu's law of divorce and keep on idealizing it by comforting their conscience with the thought that Manu regarded marriage as sacrament and therefore, did not allow divorce. This, of course, is far from the truth. His law against divorce had a very different motive. It was not to tie up a man to a woman but it was to tie up a woman to a man and to leave the man free.

For Manu does not prevent a man from giving up his wife. Indeed, he not only allows him to abandon his wife, but he also permits him to sell her. But what he does is to prevent the wife from becoming free. He says:

IX-46 Neither by sale nor by repudiation is a wife released from her husband. The meaning is that a wife sold or repudiated by her husband, can never become the legitimate wife or another who may have bought or received her after she was repudiated. If this is not monstrous, nothing can be. But Manu was not worried by consideration of justice or injustice in framing his law. He wanted to deprive woman of the freedom they
had under the Buddhistic regime. Manu was outraged by her licence and in putting a stop to it he deprived her of her liberty.

A wife was reduced by Manu to a level of a slave in the matter of property.

IX-416 A wife, a son, and a slave - these three were declared to have no property; the wealth which they earn is acquired for him to whom they belong.

When she becomes a widow, Manu allows her maintenance, if her husband was joint, and a widow's estate in the property of her husband, if he was separate from his family. But Manu never allows her to have any dominion over property. A woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows the husband the right to beat his wife.

A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil and a younger brother of the full blood, who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo. Under Manu a woman had no right in knowledge. The study of Veda was forbidden to her.

Even for a woman the performance of the Sanskaras are necessary and they should be performed.
But they should be performed without uttering the Veda Mantras.

Offering sacrifices according to Brahmanism formed the very soul of religion. Manu forbids women from performing sacrifices. Manu ordains that –

A woman shall not perform the daily sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. If she does it, she will go to hell. 13

Instances are not wanting when the women played an active part in political, social and literary life of the country. Plurality of wives was a recognised practice especially among the wealthy classes. Child marriage was very common and formed part of regular custom. The evil practice of exacting exhorbitant dowries was generally prevalent amongst those who were well placed. The state occasionally interfered in social affairs to settle disputes among various communities. The rite of Sati was common in Vijayanagar. Being held in high esteem by the rulers, the Brahmans exercised a predominant influence not merely in social and religious matters but also in the political affairs of the state.

Epigraphic account tells us that the women attached to temples were of lose character and lived in the;
Buddhism is in its essence a religion of self-culture and self-restraint. One who is able to develop these two qualities whether man or woman, can have access to Nirvana. Hence if a woman is able to achieve this she also is entitled to attain Nirvana. Thus, after a long period since the dissolution of the Vedic society, the doors of religion were once again opened to woman and her right to salvation proclaimed. Only six years after the establishment of the Buddhist order, women were admitted to it.

Though woman, according to Buddhism, can reach the highest state, she is, however, considered inferior in status to a male Bhikkhu. In spite of this distinction in the status of the Bhikkhu and that of the Bhikkhuni, Buddhism brought great freedom and equality for women in the sphere of religion till now a circle for the elite.

Any woman could enter Buddhism. Even the prostitutes were admitted to the Buddhist order to join the order rather than live the life of a courtesan of the whole city.

It is difficult to conjecture the main reasons which prompted women to join the order. B.C. law thinks
that it might either be due to the influence of Buddha's Dharma or it might be an easier method to escape the sufferings to which women were condemned in the Hindu society.

As far as lay-women were concerned their lot was also not bad when Buddhism was dominant in India. These references show that the birth of a daughter was not regarded a calamity. The education of women was also well looked after. The religion harangues of Sakha and the philosophical discussion of Khema and Dhammadinny reveal what high intellectual capacities women can manifest when given freedom and opportunity for development.

The age of marriage is generally believed to be between sixteen and twenty. The relation of the husband and wife is that of mutual respect though the status of the former is superior. If the unmarried daughter wishes to join the order, the consent of parents is necessary. This is a very significant right given to the mother who now gets a privilege to opine on the most vital matter in the life of her daughter. The right of divorce was given under certain conditions.

The presence or sight of a widow was not regarded as inauspicious. Though only one instance of widow
remarriage has been recorded this might be due possibly to the fact that widows used to join the order and so had no need to remarry. Summing up it can be said that in the initial stages when corruption had not crept in the religious world of Buddhism, it worked as a powerful democratic force against the narrow outlook of the Brahmanic culture pattern that was slowly emerging, generated self-confidence among women. With the growing perception that their life was worth as an end in itself there was liberated a spirit of independence in women and for women.\textsuperscript{10}  

The women of the higher castes did not take part in the industrial and business activity. It seems that ladies in the royal families of this period used to take part in the political and state matters. This is proved by the fact that Prabhavati Gupta, the daughter of Emperor Chandra Gupta-II (Vikramaditya 380 to 415 A.D.) of the Gupta dynasty who was married to King Rudrasen-II (385-390 A.D.) of the Vakataka dynasty of Berar, acted as the regent of her two minor sons (Divakarasen and Damodarasen) during 390-410 A.D., after the death of King Rudrasen-II.\textsuperscript{16} Many evils such as slavery, untouchability, casteism, Kulsim, racialism, blind faiths, injustice, inequality, poverty, economically handicappedness, child sacrifice, child-marriage, child
widowhood, Devadasi, idol worship, Niyoga system, dowry system, polygamy, Vaghya-Murali, forced widowhood, permanent widowhood, prostitution, prevention of widow remarriage, Jouhar, were the various evil practices current in Indian society particularly from the fifth century A.D.

The Devadasi:

When the people of ancient India started constructing temples for the worship of the Hindu gods after 300 A.D. onwards and endowed magnificent gifts to those temples, the singing girls were appointed to those temples to play music on the occasions of god's worship and festivals. As those girls used their art and skill for the worship of god (Deva), they came to be known as Devadasis. The Devadasis were required to devote all their life in the worship of the God to whose temples they were attached. They were not permitted to marry as it was thought that they belonged to the Gods. The Devadasis were generally at the mercy of the priests who used to perform the worship of the temple Gods. After the Gupta period when the force of Jainism and Buddhism was declining and Hinduism emerging as a powerful and popular religion, the Hindu priests in general did not attend the religious duties properly. As a result, persons with ordinary talent and average moral
level became the priests of the Hindu temples, the life of the Devadasis seems to have started becoming wretched.

A more concrete proof of the practice of Sati is found in the Greek accounts of India written by the Greek scholars who had accompanied Alexander the Great, when he invaded India in the fourth century B.C. The data found in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata also show that the custom of Sati was practised by the women of that period in ancient India. The early Smritis (Hindu works on law) allowed the practice of Sati to the widow but did not lay strong emphasis on it. Those works did not permit a pregnant wife to practise Sati. During the period 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthians, and the Kushanas, who were central Asian tribes conquered territories in India. After that they became permanently settled communities by becoming followers of the different Indian religions and thereby got absorbed in the ancient Indian society. As the custom of Sati was common in the life of the tribes belonging to central Asia, it is felt by the scholars that the people belonging to those tribes also practised that custom after their absorption in the Indian society. Seeing them following the custom of Sati it is felt by the historians that other members of the Indian society also practised that custom by
larger degrees. This is proved by the fact that it is during the Gupta period (300 to 600 A.D.) that ample evidence is available to prove that following the custom of Sati became quite common. The inscription of Goparaja (150 A.D.) (near Sagar in Madhya Pradesh) of the time of King Bhanu Gupta of the Gupta dynasty proves that the practice of Sati was very common during the period. The large number of Sati stones which have been found in north India after the period of that inscription indicate that the custom of Sati was practised on a large scale then.  

Opposition to the Custom of Sati:

This cruel practice did not go unopposed even in ancient and mediaeval periods. The Tantric cult of Hinduism did not approve it. Thinkers of that cult felt that the widow who practised Sati went to hell and not to heaven. The Tantric cult felt on those lines because those cults worshipped different goddesses and held women in great reverence. They felt that since the source of life in the world was the woman, she should not follow the custom of Sati, which destroyed her previous life. Their ideas seem to have exerted some influence restricting the incidence of the practice of Sati in Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Bihar and different parts of South India, where the Tantric cult had spread.
Some ancient Indian thinkers like poet Bana, the court poet of Emperor Harsha Vardhan (606 to 647 A.D.) condemned the custom of Sati, that also might have been instrumental in putting restriction by some degrees on the practice of the customs of Sati in the ancient Indian society.¹⁹

The Practice of Niyoga (Levirate):

This practice also must have worked against the custom of Sati as it resolved the problem to satisfy the natural desire of a childless widow or a married woman, whose husband was sterile, to have a son by introducing the practice of Niyoga (Levirate). According to Niyoga a childless widow or a wife of a sterile husband was permitted to beget a son from other person than her own husband in the ancient Indian society. From the date of the Rigveda it appears that practice of Niyoga existed in the life of the members of the Rigvedic society. The ancient Indian society, through the agency of the practice of Niyoga allowed a childless widow to conceive a son by her brother-in-law. That practice was also allowed to be followed by a married woman whose husband was sterile or who had become impotent due to disease and was unable to beget children. Such a person, who was struck by that misfortune, was permitted
by the ancient Indian law-givers to have progeny by appointing his close relative, mostly his brother to produce offspring on his behalf. The practice of Niyoga was also sanctioned by the early Hindu law books. According to those law books such an unfortunate person was given the facility to have only one son by following that practice. 20

Widow Remarriage:

The data of the Rigveda points out that the remarriage of widows was fairly common in the Rigvedic or the early Vedic society. The story of King Nala and his queen Damayanti stated in the epic Mahabharata also points out that the remarriage of widows was existent in the ancient Indian ways of life. In that story it is stated that King Nala, who had parted from his wife Damayanti, again won her, in the Savyamvara, which she held presuming that he was dead. Additionally, the Arthashastra of Kautilya or Arya Chanakya or Vishnugupta, show that under different circumstances the women of the ancient Indian society could remarry the person of their choice. The ancient work like the Narada Smriti, the Parashar Smriti, the Agni Purana etc. allowed the remarriage of a woman in the ancient Indian society, if her husband had disappeared, or if he was impotent, or if he had lost his caste due to his improper and
evil undertakings. But the Manu Smriti whose composition period is thought to be 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. and whose main purpose was to settle the castes well regulated. Since the matters stated in the Manu Smriti were adhered to by the later authorities of the Hindu Law, gradually the practice of widow remarriage and many other healthy old customs disappeared. Due to that the lot of the women of the higher castes became very bad, generally in the closing period of ancient Indian history. 21

Position of Women in Mediaeval India:

The Bhaktas, in the field of religion stood for right of women to religious worship. One, however, feels that their total conception of woman's status was not quite free from the admixture of the then prevailing attitude of womanhood. It is true that they endorsed Grihasthashram. However, many of them often declared that woman was a great obstruction in the way of achieving final beatitude. For instance, Saint Eknath said, "An aspirant must therefore keep himself aloof from the influence of woman". Saint Tukaram also expressed the same view when he declared, "give me not the company of women ... for by them I forget god's worship and my mind goes beyond my control". Though such an evaluation
of the role of woman is not made in the case of one's wife, even regarding her, Saint Eknath remarked, "One should call and talk and speak to her only as much as is necessary. But we should never allow mind to be filled with the idea of even our own wife". It is said about Chaitanya that he refused to see the face of man of his sect if he was habituated to talk with women. This is, in spite of the fact that he admitted women to his own sect. Shyamsunderdas, while editing the poems of Saint Kabir wrote that the saints looked down upon women from a different angle. Their conception of women relates only to the sex aspect of both man and woman.

Barthwal also describes the same feature as follows:

Women alone are a race injured by these saints. With a view to evoke detachment, which the Nirgunis also followed, Saint Kabir calls the woman a hellish well. Palato would not believe even a woman of seen only the sex in women and shut their eyes to her spiritual significance which they seemed quite near realising when they conceived of themselves as wives of the eternal lover. No doubt they must have described only the sex aspect in woman but the sex in her is not the whole of woman. They bore no illwill to woman as a person, for according to them, like man
she is also a creature of God.

In short, the attitude of the saints towards woman as a personality was not at all different from the prevailing one, which might perhaps be due to the fact that they considered Moksha as the basic objective of life and called on men to eschew whatever obstructed the attainment of that objective. In spite of this limitation the new opportunities gave a different purpose to the life of woman.

Unlocked the Gate of Religion to Women:

With the method of approaching God through Bhakti, women also could worship God and attain Moksha. Such a right conceded to women made it possible for them to achieve freedom from the torment of rebirth, the cardinal conception of Hindu religious philosophy. The Smriti and Puranic ideal contemplated that they could secure Moksha only if they, as subservient wives (Pativrata), obeyed and ideally served their husbands. Now in contrast to this even a prostitute or a deserted woman could attain salvation through pure devotion to God. Thus equality of man and woman in the religious field was once again re-asserted due to the rise of the Bhakti Movement.
It was only because of the crusade of the Bhaktas to secure this right of freedom of direct worship of God and thereby attain salvation for women, that a galaxy of women saints appeared in the Hindu social world during the phase of the Bhakti movements. In every province of India, women saints leading a life of deep devotion to God emerged. Incidentally, these very women saints were great women poets which India produced in her history. During this period of the dominance of the Bhakti movement women, married and unmarried, beautiful as well as ugly, Hindu as well as Musli, all women in fact, secured the opportunity to propitiate the deity, and express their boundless love to God in literary creation. Mira, who refused to live a married family life, could not have been the leader of a religious mass movement, by the Bhakti movement. Same is true for other women saints like Sant Janabai and Sant Muktabai, Ksema and Gangubai.

There was no Purdah system among the Hindus before the arrival of the Muslims in India. The Muslim observed Purdah system very rigorously and so its influence on the Hindu subjects was somewhat natural. But the Hindus adopted it more because of the changed circumstances rather than in imitation of the Muslims.
order to save their women from the covetous eyes of
the Muslims the Hindus adopted the Purdah system. Although
the women enjoyed respect and influence at home they
were completely dependent on their husbands or male
relatives and had to live in seclusion behind the Purdah.
Some of the aristocratic Muslim families adopted the
Hindu custom of Sati and Jauhar. Most of the Muslim
rulers and nobles married Hindu women by force but
they spared married women as a convention not as a
rule. The Hindus began to marry their daughters at
a very early age. So, child marriage became popular.
The Muslims did not like to give liberty to their women­
folk. Firoz Tughlaq, a great protagonist of Islam,
had formulated certain rules prohibiting women even
from visiting the tombs of pirs and holy saints outside
the city. The prophet had also said "Those people that
make women their ruler will not find salvation".

The position of women was determined largely
by Smriti rules relating to marriage and succession
to property. Intermarriages among the three upper castes
were forbidden. The Sikh-Gurus themselves Khatriyas
did not marry non-Kshatriya girls. Early marriage of
girls recommended. The general age limits were seven
and twelve. The remarriage of widows forbidden. Ibn­
Batuta, who gives an eye witness account of Sati in
Malva, says that the custom was highly esteemed but
obligatory. He adds that, under a law made by the Sultans of Delhi, permission had to be obtained before burning a widow. Women had legal right to property within certain limits and they were treated leniently in respect of punishment for crimes. They were subjected to religious disabilities such as disqualification for Vedic studies and sacrament in accordance with Vedic Mantras. Their position in their own families was regulated by the old Smriti rule which prescribed their perpetual subjection and life-long tutelage under their male relations - father, husband, son at successive stage of their lives.  

A man like Ibn-Batuta married more than four times in a most irresponsible manner and abandoned his wives one after another. The education of women was not altogether neglected, the traveller writes that when he reached Lahor, he found there 13 schools for girls and was looked upon as an inauspicious event, as it is illustrated by Amir Khusrau's lament over the birth of his daughter. Seclusion was recommended for women, and Amir Shusrau in his advance to his daughter asks her not to leave the thread of the spinning wheel and always to keep her face towards the wall of house and her back towards the door so that nobody might be able to look towards the doors so that nobody might
Purdah and child marriage had become common on account of influence of Islam and the conduct of Muslim rulers and nobles. Except those of the lower classes, Hindu women did not move out of their house. The Muslims observed Purdah much more strictly than the Hindus.

On account of early marriage there were many widows and they were not allowed to remarry. Polygamy was common among Musalmans who could according to Sunni tradition, marry four wives at a time. A Shiya could marry more than four. Divorce was permitted both for Muslim men and women. Although Hinduism did not prohibit polygamy, monogamy was the rule with the Hindus on account of habits and economic necessity. Rarely did a man of average means and status marry more than one wife. Only Hindu ruling classes indulged in this pastime. In spite of these handicaps, women exercised great influence at home and some of them helped their husbands in their avocation. There were many Hindu women of outstanding ability during this period, notably Rani Durgawati of Gondwan (who was a brave soldier and a capable administrator), Rani Karmavati, Mira Bai, Tarabai etc.. Among Muslims, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Chandbibi, Jahanara, Raushanara, Zebunnisa and Sahibiji (wife
of Amin Khan, Governor of Kabul) played an important part in the affairs of that time.

Muslim women received better treatment than their Hindu sisters in the matters of inheritance; they had the privilege of divorce and they were not subjected to the cruel practice of Sati. But polygamy was more widely prevalent in the Muslim society than in Hindu society.

As a result of their permanent residence in this country, the social life of the foreign Muslims was to some extent Indianized in some of its essential features. Something like the caste system developed among the Muslim aristocrats in respect of marriage.

The Purdah system was universal in the Muslim society although it was less rigid among the lower classes in rural areas. Akbar issued an order that if a young woman was found unveiled in the streets she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession. Polygamy was a common practice though the poor section of the Muslims could not afford to marry more than one wife. Akbar ordered that a man of ordinary means should not have more than one wife unless the first proved to be barren. The emperor
maintained large harems and their example was followed by the nobles. The Shariat law permits a Muslim to have four wives at a time but in Akbar's reign the theologians (Ulema) decided that a Muslim might marry any number of wives by Mutah but only by Nikah. The strict enforcement of the Purdah system and the general prevalence of polygamy seriously affected the social position of women but they had the privilege of divorce and widow remarriage was permitted. In the Tantric Hindu cult the object of worship was the Mother Goddess (Shakti) and the rights of women were recognised in the spiritual sphere. In Vaishnavism Radha was the inseparable associate of Lord Krishna. Hindu widows could not be married. Akbar's attempt to abolish Sati and child marriage had little success. The Purdah system had found a recognized place in the Hindu society. The birth of daughter was considered inauspicious. The dowry was oppressive and in Rajasthan it led to horrible practice of female infanticide.

As the history of pre-British Indian society experienced periodic modifications it always retained certain fundamental characteristics. These persisted throughout its long period of existence commencing with the Vedic phase. The Indian society throughout the period remained a patriarchal society. Within the
family, the authority of the father was sacrosanct. As time went on position of woman went on more and more deteriorating. She lost whatever little rights she possessed in Vedic society. In Smriti period there took place an increasing curtailment of her religious privileges as evidenced by the conception of Sanskaras. Her freedom of movement became more and more restricted.

The rigid caste system with endogamy as its fundamental feature, the practice of Niyoga which treated women mainly as mere begetter of male children, the growing significance of the Shraddha ceremony signifying the importance of the male child, the denial of rites like 'Upanayan', the double standard of morality which not only pardoned the lapses of the male but sometimes even approved of them, severely penalising the woman for even the slightest deviation from the legal and moral norms, the idea of 'Pativratya' which demanded one-sided fidelity and marital love and duty from the woman without imposing a counter-obligation on the part of the male, the sinister custom of deforming the widow through such compulsions as tonsuring and similar other means, so that she would look drab if not hideous and therefore not prove attractive to man, the branding of the mere presence of the widow as inauspicious, relegating her to the humiliating position of
an unpaid lifelong domestic servant, socially shunned as a sight of ill-omen and excluded from all festivities and functions - all these contributed to the increasing subjection of the Indian women. With the emergence of the most inhuman custom of Sati which forced a widow to ascend the funeral pyre of her deceased husband and consume herself in fire, the oppression of the Indian women reached its climax.

All these forms of woman's subjection and oppression as we saw did not develop suddenly, but in course of the downward march of Indian society. As they emerged historically, they were systematised by ideologues of social reaction into a visible body of principles which could not be infringed and the observance of which was enforced by religious and secular sanctions.

Buddhism endeavoured to improve the position of woman by providing her with another alternative of life. But it itself subsequently deteriorated losing slowly its democratic features. This was inevitable since in absence of a fundamental change in the society (in its very foundations) such democratic socio-religious movements as Buddhism could only be short-lived.

The law-givers also sometimes in their own way made efforts to secure for women some part of inheritance but since the demand for such concession was not made in the name of any democratic principle, that of equality
of man and woman, it could hardly yield stable and solid result, much less could it result in any elevation of the general status and position of woman.

One more heroic effort to remove or at least substantially reduce the oppressive character of the Indian society and thereby also free the Indian woman from her subjection was made by the mediaeval saints. This attempt, too, proved futile in the absence of any simultaneous fundamental change in the socio-economic structure of society.

Dr. D.P. Mukherjee rightly describes such movements as mirror revolutions. For a fundamental change in the status of woman such patchwork was of no use. A basic transformation of economic and social relations was vital. This background was supplied by the British conquest.  

Position of Women in Modern India:

In the nineteenth century, due to western influence there started a number of movements to reform Indian society by removing its ugly and degenerating socio-religious customs, usages and traditions which might have been good once upon a time but had become most useless and harmful to Indian society, particularly in Hindu society though other sections, too, had come
under their evil influence. Some of these ugly and cruel customs and bad practices, blind-faiths, superstitions, social and religious traditions were Kulinism, racism, casteism, untouchability, slavery, child marriage, child sacrifice, child widowhood, forced widowhood, permanent widowhood, Niyoga, divorce system, dowry system, polygamy, polyandry, Devadasi, Vaghya-Murali, prostitution, prevention of widow remarriage, Jouhar, Purdah system, Sati system etc..

All these came under attack in the nineteenth century and some of them were prevented by legislations while others were mitigated through spread of modern education and propaganda by the social reformers.

The pioneers of all our progressive movements including that of the liberation of women may be divided into two groups. Both the groups recognized the reactionary and coercive character of social institutions and customs. One group struggled against them because they contradicted the democratic principles of the liberal philosophy. The other considered them as deviations from the customs and institutions of the ancient vedic society of the Hindus. Though spurred on by democratic urges, the second group demanded the democratization of the social relations and removal of harmful practices not in the name of the liberal
philosophy but on the basis of the programme of the 
revival of the Vedic society in modern India, which 
they declared, was democratic. The second group is 
generally known as the Revivalists.

The enlightened liberal Indians who were known 
as the reformers recognized the principle of the liberty 
of the individual. They were permeated with western 
liberal culture and hence invoked such liberal principles 
as individual liberty, equality of all human beings 
irrespective of sex and other distinctions, respect 
for the personality of the individual and others when 
they attacked reactionary authoritarian hierarchic 
social institutions and launched social reform movements 
including that of the liberation of the Indian women.

As regards the nationalist approach, Justice 
Ranade remarked that it was wrong to revive old 
institutions if they were unable to meet social needs.

When we are asked to revive our institutions 
and customs, people seem to be very much 
at sea as to what it is they seem to revive. 
What particular period of history is to be 
taken as the old. Whether the period of the 
Vedas, of the Smritis, of the Puranas or 
of the Mahomedans or modern Hindu times. 
Shall we revive the old habits of our people, 
when the most sacred of our castes indulged 
in all the abominations, as we now understand 
them of animal food and drink which exhausted
every section of our country's zoology and botany? The men and the Gods of those old days ate and drank forbidden things to excess in a way no revivalist will not venture to recommend. Shall we revive the twelve forms of sons, or eight forms of marriage, which included capture and recognised mixed and illegitimate intercourse? Shall we revive the Niyoga system of procreating sons on our brother's wives when widowed? Shall we revive the old liberties taken by the Rishis and by the wives of the Rishis with the marital tie? Shall we revive the custom of animals sacrificed from years to years and in which human beings were not spared, as propitiatory offerings? Shall we revive the Shakti worship of the left hand with its indecencies and practical deboucheies? Shall we revive the suttee and infanticide customs, or the flinging of living men into the rivers or over rocks or bookswinging or the crushing beneath the Jagannath cart? Shall we revive the internecine wars of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, of the cruel persecution and degradation of the aboriginal population? Shall we revive the custom of many husbands to one wife or of many wives to one husband? Shall we require our Brahmins to cease to be landlords and gentlemen, and turn into beggars and dependents upon the king as in old times? These instances will suffice to show that the plan of work of our salvations, was not practicable. If these usages were good and beneficial, why were they altered by our wise ancestors? If they were bad and injurious, how can any
claim be put forward for their restoration after so many Ages? Besides, it seems to be forgotten that in a living organism as society is, no revival is possible. The dead and the buried or burnt are dead, buried and burnt once and for all and the dead past cannot, therefore, be revived except by a reformation of the old materials into new organised beings. If revival is impossible, reformation is the only alternative open to sensible people.

The Revivalists also not only appealed to scriptural authorities but also recognized the convincing method of appealing to reasons. They invoked the ancient Vedic society to defend their programme of the liberation of the Indian women not because the Vedic society was ancient but because, they said, it was rational since it was based on the equality of man and woman. They exhorted the Indians to reconstruct the existing Indian society on the Vedic method because equality to sexes is a rational principle guaranteeing individual liberty and social progress and Vedic society was based on principle of social progress. As to the approach of the Revivalist group, Swami Vivekanand says:

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason through which every science justifies itself? Are the same methods
of investigations which apply to the sciences
and knowledge outside, to be applied to the
science of religion? In my opinion, this
must be so, and I am also of opinion that
the sooner this is done the better.

Dyanand Saraswati the founder of Arya Samaj
said, "Though I was born in Aryavart (India) and still
live in it, yet just as I do not defend the falsehoods
of the religions prevailing in this country but expose
them fully in life manner, I deal with the religion
of other countries and their supporters".

While arguing in favour of equal rights for
women the social reformers appealed to logic, reasons,
history, the principle of individual freedom and the
requirements of social progress. In the Indian National
Social Conference Dewan Narendra Nath said, "In claiming
equality for our women we do nothing more than push
by one more step, the principle of equality, which
you have seen, has been making successive inroads on
the opposite, one of the dominion by physical force
and to which all the civilized nations of the day have
yielded and yielded with immense benefit of human race.  

By the end of the eighteenth century, women
were reduced to the most lamentable plight, child
marriages were common, with the result that education
of girls was totally neglected. Widow remarriage was
out of question, polygamy was widely prevalent and the plight of widows was very sad. Even female infanticide was practised in some communities. Among some communities Sati was practised. During the days of the Company reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy were able to persuade the Company’s Government to pass legislation towards social reform. Practice of Sati, infanticide, forced labour etc. were made illegal.

The British rulers looked for precedents. The Sultan had tolerated the horrible customs. Akbar had tried to attack it by prohibiting Sati of the widow was unwilling. But this loophole caused his legislation to be virtually void. The Portuguese, the French, the Dutch had banned it, but then they ruled over tiny areas. However, their position changed considerably due to the social reform movement launched by the Indians themselves starting from Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Special schools for women were started and propaganda to educate women was seriously launched. The marriage age and the age of consent were also raised. Their legal equality was also accepted by law in the courts. Education brought some awakening to them also. By the close of the first quarter of the twentieth century they were enfranchised in a limited way.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

15 Ibid., p. 38.
16 Ibid., p. 39.
19 Ibid., pp. 41-42.
20 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
21 Chaurasia, R.S. History of Mediaeval India, Delhi, 1988-89, pp. 107-108.
22 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 149.
27 Ibid., pp. 446-448.