CHAPTER - IV

SOCIAL STATUS OF ANCIENT INDIAN WOMEN

The cultural height of any society could be gauged by studying the norms it has set in its behaviour to treatment of its fair sex, opines the renowned indologist, A. S. Altekar. Since woman has been one of the main units of the cultural progress as well as decadence, any exhaustive study into the nature of a society calls for an analysis of the status of woman therein. The status and position of women in ancient Indian society has often been a matter of controversy. In fact this is a question to be addressed with a great social vision and understanding rather than with a mindset that goes to make everything controversial. Controversy can raise only smoke and cloud that would overshadow the realities and one had better make out what are the realities regarding this topic than be neck deep in the whirlpool of meaningless arguments and heated exchanges.

So far as India was concerned all the facets of its national life were the reflections of its all encompassing world view. This world view was so much holistic that it could not look at anything as an isolated entity cut off from life’s entirety. Hence the necessity to analyse the status of woman too, setting it against the backdrop the entire tapestry of the national culture. It is also interesting to note that Indian thinking connected it with the very
concept of cosmology. Creation itself began thanks to the rendezvous between the male and the female which lay together in a single whole, say the ancient Indian scriptures. While in the *Brahmanda* or the cosmic egg which was an undifferentiated whole or *Avyaktha* or a perfect synthesis there was neither male nor female. But when the primordial energy decided to manifest itself into manifoldness the cosmic consciousness saw itself as two. The idea of dividing itself into the male and the female thus dawned to the cosmic intelligence. That without the dual manifestation creation would be impossible was within the vision of this cosmic intelligence. Hence its dividing itself into two – the male and the female. Thus says Manu, ancient Indian law-giver: “Dividing his own body, the Lord became half male and half female; with that (female) he produced Virag.”¹

According to this verse Brahma, “the creator divided himself into two, half male and half, female”. The version of Manu is again supported by the Upanishads and the Vedas. According to *Brahdaranyaka Upanishad*, Prajapati, the primordial God divided himself into man and woman. Deriving sustenance from the same source, they became the symbols of the cosmic polarity.² In the cosmic scheme man represents *Purusha* and woman, the *Prakruti* or spirit and primordial matter respectively whose union sets the world in motion. Thus goes another Vedic verse.”³
That both male and female are two different entities that originated from the single ‘Cosmic Whole’ is thus established by the lore in its entirety. The lore has gone even further when it establishes that Parasakti or the supreme energy, usually ascribed with the female attribute, is the universal or cosmic energy which is the creating, destroying and sustaining power in the cosmic existence. Hindu mythology even gives the stories of Gods creating their spouses who were their sources of energy. Naturally the female deities represented all aspects of power and prosperity in Indian lore, the Ashtalakshmi and Dipalakshmi concepts being the best examples. If this is the theoretical aspect behind the very creation itself, the created world would naturally inherit both the masculine and feminine natures which would compliment each other to be the harmonizing dualities. And obviously this dual nature could well be seen in the creation of all living beings including the human. Man and woman were expected to supplement each other rather than supplant, and thereby to contribute to the integral growth of society

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIAN SOCIETY

India’s ancient literatures speak of rather a highly respectable status its women folk enjoyed. What was feminine was accorded a divine attribute and what was noble and good a feminine attribute. It would be interesting to note that all the powers in the nature were attributed a feminine sublimity, nature itself being personified as ‘mother nature’. The Srutis and Smritis
abound in many such examples wherein nature was adorned with a feminine grace. *Atharva Veda* hails Pavamani as the mother of the Vedas.

“*Sithutha maya varada vedamatha*

*Prachodayantham pavamani dvijanam*”

Again the Vedas mentions nature as Aditi, the mother of gods and men. Goddess Saraswathi is the deity of learning while Goddess Lakshmi is regarded as the deity of prosperity. Similarly all religious sacrifices of the Hindu tradition are supposed to have the presence of three female deities, namely Ila, Bharati and Saraswathi. The female deities thus occupy a place of predominance in Hindu mythology.

It may be noted that all the ancient societies which took woman as one of the basic cultural units have been particular on the ways to bring them up. With some rare qualities these societies liked to cultivate in her and the unusually high status to be accorded to her, they often strained to set some directive norms to breed them. Naturally the fair sex came to be looked as the embodiment of nobility and divinity whose birth the society always desired and craved. Despite the many burdens pertaining to a girl’s upbringing, education and marriage the Vedic society was desirous of getting a daughter. We find one of the early *Upanishads* recommending certain rituals to the householder for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. ‘*duhitha me panditha jayathe*’. This clearly shows that the birth of a daughter was much
desired in cultured families in ancient India. And once born, she was treated with all the hounors at par with the boys. The ancient law givers prescribed all the rituals for all the people irrespective of male-female difference. It all started with the naming ceremony or namakarana wherein the girl was treated with utmost tenderness, warmth and sublimity. Manu gives the following directives regarding how a girl was to be named: “The name of women should be easy to pronounce, not imply anything dreadful, posses a plain meaning, be pleasing and auspicious, end in long vowels, and contain a word of benediction.”

EDUCATION

The girls were initiated into the study of three R’s to make her fit for the mundane life. “It appears that in very ancient times, the status of women as to their education was much higher than in medieval and modern times in India.” The lore has it that the society had taken much care in educating its girls. Most of the ancient literatures of India stress the relevance and necessity of educating girls. Atharva Veda observes that a maiden can succeed in her married life only if she is properly trained during studentship. “Brahmacharyena anyanam yuvavindathepathim” Besides, the parents had to give more importance to educate their daughters properly since the learned brides were preferred commonly by the bridegrooms. The girls were thus given special training by her parents to cop with the situations in the
married life. According to Manu “For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; woman (who are) destitute of (the knowledge) of the Vedic texts (are as impure as) falsehood (itself). That is the fixed rule.”

Though Manu is silent about the type of education and the way it was to be imparted, it is evident that the Vedic teacher was so particular about the female education that may train her for all the walks of life, including the very education and upbringing of the children. *Atharva Veda* makes it obligatory on the girls to undergo the initiation ceremony or *upanayana* into Vedic studies. According to it they had to observe celibacy during the period of education and had to learn the very the same disciplines as learnt by the boys.

This having been the social attitude to female education, ancient Indian society produced a host of highly educated ladies and scholars. The *Ramayana* says that Sita was educated in the Vedas, and refers to her as hurrying to the riverbank for her evening prayer to the accompaniment of the Vedic chants. The Vedic women, as presented by the lore, were educated in all the branches of knowledge. Women had received trainings in cottage industries and were well versed in many fine arts including the performing ones. We come to hear of the lady dancers like Urvasi and Menaka. Mandodari, wife of Ravana, apart from being a morally chaste woman who
knew the laws of Dharma, was an expert on the lyre. According to Satapata Brahmana ladies were specialists in melodiously rendering the Sama hymns.\textsuperscript{12} Also \textit{Mahabharatha} refers to the lotus-faced girls of the city of king Nala of whom the swan introduces itself as the dance tutor at its maiden meeting with Damayanthi, the princess of Ayodhya. The science and art of developing the portrait of human faces out of the character-sketch seems to have been familiar to the girls as evident from the story of Usha and Aniruddha wherein Chitralekha, having heard the characteristics of the youth Usha met in her dream, stroked with her brush up to the picture of Aniruddha through the successive portrayal of the faces of the Yadu family. Women received training in arms and guard duties. \textit{Ramayana} speaks about the sthidhyakshas or women chiefs who guarded the entrance and harems.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Tathra kashayino vriddhan vethrapanin svalankrithan}
\end{quote}
\begin{quote}
\textit{dadarsa vishtithan dvari sthiridhyakshan susamahithan}\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Even ordinary women folk seem to have had general education that made them conscious of many things including polity and statecraft. The ladies who served in the palace at Ayodhya, the \textit{Ramayana} says, were endowed with a sense of political consciousness. These women, the epic says, opined that Rama is not hot tempered though amidst mental strains, he renounces the anger and pleases those in anger and the agony.\textsuperscript{14} That patience is the foremost of the qualities a king calls for was known to these ordinary
women. And they condemned king Dasaratha’s banishment of Rama to forest as an act as foolish (abuddhir) as leaving all the beings (sarvabhuthanam) to trouble. The women excelled in spiritual knowledge too. Ladies were of great regard in the field of Vedic knowledge. There were Brahmavadins who aimed at high excellence in scholarship; and the lady scholars, specialized in mimamsa, a subject more abstruse than mathematics. Being specialists in the Mimamsa work, the Kasakritsni written by the theologian named Kasakritsna, these lady scholars were called kasakritnas.\textsuperscript{15} Many of the learned women who excelled in grammar, philosophy and logic were engaged in teaching profession.

The girls were given enough freedom to choose the period of their education. Haritasmrīti mentions two types of girl students in ancient Indian society. The life long students of sacred texts were called Brahmavadinis and the girls who opted to study till their marriage were called Sadyovadhus. While the Brahmavadinis with their austere spiritual disciplines catered to the spiritual well being of society the Sadyovadhus dedicated themselves to the welfare of their families performing the routine domestic duties. But both continued to enjoy the same status in society even after centuries as evident from the writings of Panini who calls the Brahmavidinis as Upadhya, Upadhyayi and Acharya and Sadyovadhus as Upadhyayini and Acharyani.\textsuperscript{16}
The main purpose of education for girls in ancient society was to help her to develop her intellectual ability to participate in religious sacrifices and for other mundane activities. Thus the girls during the short span available, learnt by heart the Vedic hymns prescribed for daily prayers, rituals and sacred rites they took an active part in. But along with the intellectual uplift, the girls were given special training in household management and to augment the economic status of the family.

Vedic literature bristles with the names of women scholars who composed vedic hymns. Rig veda mentions twenty Brahmavadinis or Rishikas who were Vedic poets. In Rigveda we come across a host of such poetesses. Viswarava who composed 6th mantra of 5th mandala of Rigveda, Ghosha who composed 39th and 40th mantras of 10th mandala of Rigveda, Apala who composed 91st mantra of 8th mandala of Rigveda, Atreyi who composed 28th mantra of 5th mandala of Rigveda, Aditi who composed 5th mantra of 10th mandala of Rigveda, Yami who composed 1, 3, 7, and 11th mantras of 5th mandala of Rigveda, Urvasi who composed 7th and 95th mantras of 10th mandala of Atharvaveda, Lopamudra who composed 12th and 197th mantras of 1st mandala of Rigveda, Romasa who composed 7th and 126th mantras of 1st mandala of Rigveda were only a few of the long list of Vedic poetesses.

There are good examples of women considering spiritual knowledge as more enduring than any material possession. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad
mentions the interesting story of a woman asking her husband to give her knowledge of the spiritual instead of the mundane treasure. The story has it that Yajnavalkya, the metaphysicist at the court of king Janaka Videha of Mithila, prior to his leaving for the ascetic life asked his wife Maitreyi about what part of the material property she wanted from him. He wanted to divide his material possessions between his two wives-Maitreyi and Katyayani. Maitreyi, his first wife refused to accept his property and asked him to grant her everlasting wealth of knowledge or ‘Atmajnana’. She asked, *yadeva bhagavan veda thadevame bruhi*ti. “What alone is the ultimate knowledge teach me that alone”, 17 she said. Gargi’s intellectual accomplishment was unsurpassable that she could make many towering heads in the world of metaphysical knowledge bow down. Gargi Vachakhnavi even challenged, Yajnavalkya the doyen of spiritual knowledge, engaging him in a hairnailing metaphysical tournament at the court of Mithila. Her arguments with YajnjaValkya which constitutes India’s early knowledge on cosmology were noted for their high scholarship both in spirituality and the science of logic. Honoured to be the spokesperson of the distinguished philosophers of the royal court of the illustrious Janaka who graced many ascetics of the time with Brahmajnana, Gargi with her erudition and ruthless logic put many heavyweight philosophers out of the arena. Once it was YajnjaValkya, the one who made yajnja or the highest disciplines of spiritual life his mantle and the questions of Gargi were on the ultimate realities regarding the origin
and evolution of the universe. To yajnjavalkya who said that on the eve of creation there was *apa* or water as the warp and weft Gargi asked about the origin of water because for everything there must be a cause behind or the source of origin.

Thus one after the other she dragged Yajnjavalkya through many scientific speculations and perceptions until the latter spoke about the ultimate reality which can’t be subjected to scientific experimentation but something divine to be experienced. Only after having heard that the problem she asked is the divine itself that is beyond speculation and no subject to be put to a mere analysis of the mundane science and logic and that it is to be experienced through *agama* and not *anumana* that Gargi left.\(^{18}\) Vadava Prathiteyi was another scholar celebrity referred to in the *Upanishad*. Atreyi was another lady student of the Vedanta who was reading under the sages Valmiki and Agasthya. This shows that at least a considerable number of women were educated.

Having seen the girls undergo education till they were mature, it was now time for society to get them married. Getting the daughters married in time determined the social status of the father. According to Ramayana King Janaka became anxious, his mind tense, when Sita attained the marriageable age. His state is compared by the author of the Ramayana to that of a man
who lost all his money. This must surely have haunted King Janaka however reputed he might have been. Thus says the Ramayana:

_The father may be equal to Indra [God of the celestials] in every respect, position, power, wealth, honour. Nevertheless if he has a daughter not yet married, from his equal and from his inferior he gets humiliation, censure of the worst kind._

**MARRIAGE**

Rig Veda has it that the girls were to be married only at a mature age. But once at the threshold of youth women had the right to choose their life partners with the consent of their parents. However both seem to have insisted on a right choice since the Dharmasasthra made it obligatory on society to give them in marriage only to suitable husbands. This may well be vouched from that Manu had permitted the fathers to keep their daughters unmarried even to the end of their life, if she did not get any suitable alliance. “(But) the maiden, though marriageable, should rather stop in (The father’s) house until death, than that he should ever give her to a man destitute of good qualities.”

Quiet often the role of the parents was reduced to the level of mere facilitator since the society made it obligatory on them to have all the necessary arrangements done for the daughter’s marriage with the grooms they selected. This system was accepted among the elites of society,
especially among the ruling class which preferred the system of *swayamvara* or self-choice wherein the girls of the princely houses set out to select their grooms. Here they were permitted to marry the most qualified from a long list or array eagerly awaiting the bridal garland. “Kshatriya circles in society even conceded to grown-up brides the exclusive right of selecting their own consorts, as is proved by the custom of *swayamvara* or self-choice”.

The story of Savitri given in the Mahabharata proves an interesting example. The groom she selected was the scion of an ousted dynasty with his days numbered according to astrological predictions. Notwithstanding, the desire of Savitri prevailed. It was her adamant stand that compelled her father Aswapati to send her in marriage with Satyavan whom fate had decreed to be a forest dweller. Competence was always considered to be the masculine eligibility as is revealed from the *swayamvara* of Sita which her father Janaka declared would only be with the groom capable of breaking the weighty bow dedicated to Lord Siva. Not different is the case of the marriage of Draupati. She would not be sent in marriage with those who fail to dart at the goal through the narrow hole of a fast revolving disc. Interestingly King Drupada threw open the contest to non-princely contestants too when he saw all the Kshatriyas failing to win the hands of Draupadi and it was only at this juncture that Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin, turned up at the contest, winning Draupadi’s hand. The case was more or less the same among the princely class. Likewise was the case of
lovers, who without any fear of social ostracism, carried on their affair and got married either with or without getting the social imprimatur. In many cases one could see the girls eloping with their loved ones braving all the social and family odds. The Mahabharata story of Subhadra eloping with Arjuna or the Puranic incident of Srikrishna taking away the princess Rugmini braving the might of her kith and kin prove fitting examples. According to certain versions of the Ramayana Sita herself had developed pleasant feelings about Rama at her first glance of his handsome figure treading the street of Mithila in company of the sage Viswamitra to attend the sacrificial ceremony there. The pairs falling in love and getting married were thus not unoften. Even in cases wherein the bride lost her male guardian the lore permits her to see the marriage performed with herself making all the necessary arrangements with the help of the elder members of the family and society.

Marriage being one of the important factors that determined the status and position of women as well as the entire family and social system, ancient Indian law-givers accorded to it as much sublimity as possible and took much caution to see to it that once performed, it would last for good adding to the overall socio-cultural accomplishment. Marriage according to the belief of the land is the reunion of the couples of the previous births. The greatest prayer between man and wife, it was symbolic of the perfect union between the male and female energies, yet another instance of the idea of the
ultimate unity for the working out of the divine Dharma or the cosmic order. Hence the terms *sahadharma* and *sahadharmini* or the divine duties the tradition expects of the couples and the wife who performs all such duties in company of her man respectively. They are expected to be the instruments through which the divine will executes its cosmic principles or the *Rita*. Marriage was therefore to the Hindus the greatest sacrament. Naturally the cultural background of womanhood was something to be greatly emphasized in the opinion of the Smritikaras in whose views, as a modern writer opines, “The home and family constitute the bedrock of society and women is that figure on whom the stability and sanctity of the home and household life depend.”

The above mentioned types of marriages apart, literatures speak of the regularly practiced eight kinds of marriages. They were ‘Brahma’, ‘Daiva’, ‘Prajapati’, and ‘Arsha’ forms which were approved by all ancient scriptures and Paisacha, Rakshasa, Asura and Gandharva which the ancient law givers proscribed for the Brahmins. The Smritis continue to detail on the different types of marriages to be performed by men of different levels. “(They are) the rite of Brahman (Brahma), that of the gods (Daiva), that of the Rishis (Arsha), that of Prgapati (OPragapatya), that of Asuras (Asura), that of Gandharvas (Gandharva), that of the Rashasas (Rakshasa), and that of the Pisakas (Paisaka).”
Manu thus prescribes the first four marriages as desirable to Brahmanas and condemns the rest as fitting only to other segments. “The sages state that the first four are approved (in the case) of a Brahmana, one, the Rakshasa (rite in the case) of a Kshatriya, and the Asura (marriage in that) of a vaisya and Sudra.”

The marriage wherein the father of the bride invites the groom who is educated in the Vedas and of noble conduct and character and gives him the daughter spruced up in costly garment and gold ornaments is called the *Brahma* rite. “The gift of a daughter, after decking her (with costly garments) and honouring (her by presents of jewels), to a man learned in the Veda and of good conduct, whom (the father) himself invites is called the Brahmana rite.”

The gift of a daughter decked in gold ornaments to a priest who duly officiates at a sacrifice during the course of its performance is the *Daiva* rite. “The gift of a daughter who has been decked with ornaments, to a priest who duly officiates at a sacrifice, during the course of its performance, they call the Daiva rite.”

*Arsha* type of marriage with the groom paying the bride’s price (*kanyasulka*) in the form of a cow and a bull or two pairs (*gomidhunam*) appears to be queerer than the other ones and has evoked criticisms as well as admiration. Scholars of Indology, commenting on the system often had it that in ancient India the girl was a much priced one and the system was symbolic of socio-
cultural value she held in the land’s ancient tradition. Though it has also been negatively criticized as ‘purchase’ of the girl any sensible thought could never construe that the bride with all her costly dowry and ornaments would be as costly as to be compared in value with a cow and bull. Perhaps the *gomidhuna* betokened the high socio-economic value the bride possessed or symbolic of a perfect union, a creative unity which the society expected of the marriage. It might also be indicative of the hope the groom offered to the bride’s father that their married life would be a perfect harmony which the in-laws naturally expects of a daughter’s husband. Again the Smruti itself warns the father against taking even the smallest gratuity for his daughter since social laws of the time would disparage such a man as the seller of his offspring. The *kanyasulka* ceremony could thus be taken as a token of respect and kindness towards the maidens and in-laws.\(^{29}\) Hence the negative view regarding the bride purchase untenable. The fourth one is the *Prajapatya* marriage. According to this system the bride’s father invites the groom and after honouring him gives his daughter as a gift asking the couple, “may both of you perform together your duties” \(^{30}\) Since these types of marriages are graced with the touch of nobility and cultural aristocracy becoming of pious and the learned, the law givers of ancient India prescribed them for the learned i.e. the Brahmins. Performed in accompaniment of the Vedic chants and religious rites and hailed the
commonly noble systems, they continued to be performed right down the time of the Vedas and Smritis.

The lore also refers to the other four systems of marriage which it did not seem to have recommended for the most pious group. They were *Gandharva, Paisacha, Rakshasa* and *Asura* in which the bride had to suffer both mental and physical pain from the bridegroom since they through hook and crook noosed the bride into the nuptial knot. True, the *Gandharva* and *Rakshasa* types of marriage were approved by some scriptures including Manu though majority of the scriptures did not approve it because of the arbitrariness involved as well as the lack of spiritual serenity. “The voluntary union of a maiden and her lover one must know (to be) the Gandharva rite, which springs from desire and has sexual intercourse for its purpose.”³¹

“The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home, while she cries out and weeps, after (her kinsmen) have been slain or wounded and (their houses) broken open, is called the Rakshasa rite.”³²

But the Smriti writers proscribe the last two, *Paisacha* and *Asura*, they being heinous of all. The undesirability involved in the both is clear when the *Dharmasastras* describe their barbaric nature. “When (the bridegroom) receives a maiden, after having given as much wealth as he can afford, to the kinsmen and to the bride herself, according to his own will, that is called the *Asura rite*”³³
Here the statement ‘according to his own will’ is to be specially noticed because it is not the one performed in line with injunctions of the laws or socially accepted norms. Indeed this system never got the social or scriptural imprimatur. It is to be noted that this was the general attitude of the society as well as the Dharmasastras as inferred from the writings of Medhatiti, Narada and Kullukabhatta. “When (a man) by stealth seduces a girl who is sleeping, intoxicated or disordered in intellect, that is the eight, the most base and sinful rite of Paisacha.”

These are indeed systems which even the most modern societies with people addicted to consumerism and colonial mindset whom one may call civilized barbarians would abhor, leave alone the ancient Indian society adhered to spiritual and ethical culture. It is thus clear that the ancient Indian society had some noble ideas regarding marriage. Deemed the most sublime of all the social institutions, it was to be performed like any other sacrament of life. The greatest prayer between man and wife for the observance of the Dharma or the sacred law required to maintain the rita or the social as well as the eternal law or order, marriage in ancient India was not merely personal but social too. Performed for the upkeep and progress of culture, it was a social institution which formed one of the corner stones of human civilization. Marriage was indeed the Dharma itself, as may be noted from sahadharmini another word for wife i.e. one who is partner to man in all the observance of his dharma or duties of life. It was expected to spiritually discipline man, to turn the
gruhastha or the householder into an *asrami* or a man of discipline, and hence the word *gruhasthasrama* for the household life.

Marriage being the ceremony to ensure the safety and welfare of the fair sex and to maintain the social harmony and equilibrium the law givers prescribes marriage from the same caste. Thus says Manu, “Having bathed, with the permission of his teacher, and performed according to the rule the Samavartana (the rite on returning home), a twice-born man shall marry wife of equal caste who is endowed with auspicious (bodily) marks”. But in exceptional cases marriage from other castes were also permitted. Manu having fixed the standard and duties of each varna would not support the degrading of a high born by marrying the low born. Take for instance the definitions the Indian thinkers including Sri Krishna that the four *varnas* are created according to the tastes and duties of a person (*Gunakarma vibhagasa*) Therefore deteriorating in *Guna* and *Karma* by marrying the low born was something inadmissible to these law makers of ancient India. Hence their becoming averse to the *anuloma* marriage wherein the high born marries the low born woman. Yet society seems to have crossed the caste barriers and inter-caste marriages have been in vogue for a long time. The literature itself refers to the existence of such marriages in context of the legal ones dissuading it. After all this is a question to be discussed in connection with the caste scenario of ancient India wherein people crossed the caste barriers on many occasions giving importance to capabilities. One
could take the instance of Sri Krishna himself who though was born of the community of the cowherds became the king of Dwaraka and the kingmaker of Kurukshetra. Though not born in the Brahmin community Krishna became the greatest philosopher of all the times to come. Similarly Veda Vyasa was the son of a fisher woman, but proved to be the greatest scholar of the Vedas who collected the Vedic literature lying at random and divided them for the first time. That the caste itself having thus proved a mere phantom on many occasions, it was relegated to tertiary importance was a fact testified to by many inter-caste marriages. Parasara marrying Matsyagandhi, the king of Panchala as mentioned already readying to send her daughter in marriage with groom of other communities when all the Kshatriyas seemed to have lost the chance in the archery test are good examples to illustrate this point. Naturally in a society wherein people often threw the caste laws to wind the dictates against the anuloma marriage too must have certainly been a thing of unimportance. Yet it is again to be noticed that Manu was dead against the Pratiloma marriage in which the highborn maiden was married to a lowborn groom. Anuloma is in any way better than Pratiloma, Manu seems to have believed. This system of the prathiloma marriage might not elevate the mental and temporal status of the girls. Indeed it could only make her plummet in standards. But a girl married to the highborn man who is above her in mental faculties and material planes would get the chance to be elevated to the planes of the husband. Manu must
have believed that it is the husband who influences the life of the wife rather than vice-versa and sets her standards. Probably this is why he prescribes the Anuloma marriage instead of the prathiloma. He also proscribes the blood related marriages. Marrying a sapinda is an unpardonable sin, which would entail consequences of grave dimensions, Manu believes. “A (damsel) who is neither a sapinda on the mother’s side, nor belongs to the same family on the father’s side is recommended to twice-born men for wedlock and conjugal union.”

Along with the physical and physiological problems such marriages are likely to result in Manu takes this as an unnatural relation too which is sinful, entailing inordinate social and moral disorders. Therefore he says:

“He who has approached the daughter of his father’s sister, (who is almost equal to) sister, (the daughter) of his mother’s sister, or of his mother’s full brother shall perform a lunar penance.”

“A wise man should not take as his wife any of these three; they must not be wedded because they are (Sapinda)relatives, he who marries (one of them), sinks low.”

Manu was thus dead against the blood related marriages or the marriages between the sapindas or relatives, both paternal as well as maternal. Both he believed would bring in physiological as well as moral disorders to the
posterity. Hence his dictate against this barbarous practice which has been almost universally condemned.

Though the lore makes mention of the wealth the women were to legally inherit they do not allude to the existence of the system of dowry. With the brides themselves having been socially reckoned as an invaluable wealth, the bridegrooms. If to quote an illustrious indologist, “In prehistoric times women were regarded as chattel and so it was regarded as justified in demanding a payment at the time and deprived her family of her service. He could not have dreamt of demanding a further dowry or donation.” It is true that in the affluent families the bride’s father voluntarily used to give gifts in the form cows, horses, elephants and ornaments as a symbol of love and affection towards his son-in-law at the time of marriage. For instance Draupati, Subhadra and Uttara brought to their husbands’ houses rich presents of horses, elephants and numerous types of jewels. Sita is mentioned of in the Ramayana as decked in gold ornaments at the time of marriage.

**ECONOMIC FREEDOM**

As usual in ancient Indian society men themselves administered the family property. But there is nowhere in the Vedic literature any evidence that go against women administering the financial matters. In fact the law givers of the time do mention women’s property rights. Manu in his Dharma sastra
has it that the women in the absence of male members, for instance a girl who has no brother, should take care of the family property and finance. After all, Manu believes that since the daughter is equal to son, (putrena duhita sama.\textsuperscript{39}) in the absence of son no body else could inherit the family property. He believes that the very creator himself had created women for the continuance and prosperity of the family or vamsa. He again says that the wealth of the mother belongs to the daughter. “Matustu yautakam yatsyat kumari bhaga eva sa.”\textsuperscript{40} Also it should be noticed that according to the law givers if the girls remain unmarried they had the right to inherit the paternal share. Simply speaking, Manu makes it obligatory on the male folk to administer the property of the women on behalf of them. The legal right he leaves with the women so that she could directly undertake the financial management in the absence of the male members. Indeed the law givers accept the property right of the woman and all her wealth totaled they called Stridhana or the wealth of the woman which included her share from the father’s and mother’s properties, gifts given by the parents, ornaments and gifts given by her other relatives and property acquired by her through purchase and earnings from her own labour. Thus says Manu:

\begin{quote}
What (was given)before the (nuptial) fire, what (was given) on the bridal procession, what was given in token of Love, and what was received from her
\end{quote}
brother, mother or father, that is called the six-fold
property of a woman. 41

‘Stridhana’ was thus the private property of the woman of which she was the
sole owner. And Manu considered it a sin to appropriate the woman’s
wealth. “But those (male) relations who, in their folly, live on a separate
property of women, (e.g.appropriate) the beasts of burden, carriages and
cloths of woman, commits sin and will sink into hell.” 42

From this it is clear that women in ancient Indian society had enjoyed as
much economic independence as that of men and that the concept of
stridhana or wealth of the woman was something the laws of the day
recognized. But it should not be construed that the stridhana of the Vedic
times could be equated with the horse-trading in connection with the
prenuptial financial negotiations between the groom and the girl’s father.
What she had was her wealth or the stridhana and did not connote anything
further. After all in a society wherein woman herself was deemed an
invaluable wealth there was little chance of it thinking in terms of money
based bargaining. Wealth was to it welfare and woman was the basis of all
the welfare. Woman really betokened welfare and prosperity in the ancient
Indian society. Naturally even in modern Indian society one can hardly
imagine of taking an unchaste and incorrigible bride though unimaginably
wealthy. That wealth won’t make woman but woman is the wealth and light of the family is a sublime idea as old as the genesis of civilization in India.

**PERSONAL RIGHTS**

There were also provisions for divorce and remarriage for women in ancient society. But it was always conditional. Divorcing and remarrying at will was not freely allowed. Divorce was permitted to the women in such cases where the husband is impotent, insane or suffering from incurable or contagious diseases. She could remarry on her becoming a widow, or when the husband lives separately from her or remains untraced for a long time or turns an ascetic or even misbehaves. Having been separated from the first husband she could either select a lonely or an ascetic life or remarry and lead a settled life. The early literatures make mention of the system of Niyoga according to which the widow could lead married life with the brother of her husband and beget children. The Niyoga is mentioned in early literatures, especially the Mahabharata. Several heroes of the Mahabharata and Puranas were the born of the Niyoga. According to Mahabharata,. “If a woman loses her husband, she marries the brother-in-law”.’ But this was permitted only to those without an issue from the deceased husband. “On failure of issue (by her husband) a woman who has been authorized, may obtain, (in the) proper (manner prescribed), the desired offspring by (cohabitation with) a brother-in-law or (with some other) Sapinda (of the husband).”
But a woman with issue was not permitted to have recourse to Niyoga. Baudhayana strongly comes out against a woman with children taking to this practice.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly it should be noticed that recourse Niyoga depended fully on the likes and dislikes of the widow, and if she was unwilling she could not be coaxed and compelled to submit to Niyoga. Here the woman’s freedom was fully recognized by the law makers. But that the Niyoga was only for begetting children and not for the fulfillment of any financial or carnal pleasure is well attested by the laws which prohibit the parties after the conception takes place.\textsuperscript{46} While Narada is very much particular about this Manu enforces even physical austerity too. “He (who is) appointed to (cohabit with) the widow shall (approach her) at night anointed with clarified butter and silent, (and) beget one son, by no means a second.”\textsuperscript{47}

But this should be only after the elapse of one year after the husband’s death. The Niyoga however was not wholeheartedly entertained even by the very law givers who set the required the regulations for it. Even Manu condemned it as a beastly arrangement, something “fit for cattle” (\textit{pasudharma}) which was started during the reign of an immoral and heinous king called Vena, and no longer permissible to be followed. \textsuperscript{48} Along with Niyoga remarriage too seems to have prevailed though not on a large scale. Atharva Veda for instance refers to a woman getting remarried, and “lays down a ritual to secure the union of the new couple in heaven”.\textsuperscript{49} But these are only a few instances of the widow remarriage and do not seem to have
been commonplace. However the remarried women whether of the Niyoga or the usual category, never felt any social ostracism. On the other hand they enjoyed all kinds of freedom just as in the case of other widows who were the sole controllers of the estates of their deceased husband as well as of her son. The society never barred her from acting independently and the customs like ‘Sati’ and Tonsure was not practiced in ancient India. On the other hand the social laws of the time emboldened her to face the future with the required courage. There are Vedic hymns, directing the widow to accept the death of the husband and resume her place in the world and carry out her functions in her social life. 50

SOCIAL AND MORAL VALUES

The most important unit of socio-cultural progress of human civilization as was conceived by the Indian world view, married life was expected to preserve, promote and propagate the social and moral values descending down the tradition. It was for the observation of Dharma or the greatest truth the marriage was solemnized. Hence the words Sahadharma and Sahadharmini, greatly highlighted in the nation’s moral tradition. Dharma according to the Hindu tradition is the manifestation of the divine and the married life was expected to uplift the world of the mortal to that of the divine through the observance of the socio-cultural norms and the natural order or the rita. Again “marriage is one of the major institutions around
which interpersonal relationships tend to crystallize for the purpose of continuance of the society by bringing up children and the uplift of the two by self-restraint, self-sacrifice and mutual co-operation.”  

Family system having been the hub of the all-round progress of civilization, the Indian tradition regarded marriage as a socio-cultural necessity which promotes the material and spiritual life of the couple resulting in the overall social progress. Marriage was the sacred and indissoluble union, an inherent spiritual bond between the couple, refreshing their relation through the cycles of birth and death, reuniting their souls in their never ending journey to realize their creative unity in the unbearable ecstasy of eternity. It was thus symbolic of the highest principle. At the time of marriage, the couple took mutual vows and prayer for the harmonious spiritual unity between them in the presence of the sacred fire which is symbolic of purity. After the marriage, the couple was known as ‘Dampati’ or the joint owners of the family with equal rights and privileges.

Literature has it that woman had enjoyed great freedom, receiving a respect from all the members of her husband’s family. Regarded as the symbol of economic, moral and spiritual prosperity within the home, she exercised considerable sway in the household management. The very hub of household life, she had an equal position and participation in the household affairs like men. Smritis turn highly favourable to woman when it allows even physical union only when desired by the wife. The following verses of
Manu Smruti infer us on the purity and nobility of the man and wife relation.

“The husband, who wedded her with sacred texts, always gives happiness to his wife, both in season and out of season, in this world and in the next.”

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Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. 55

A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead. 56

At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by (living on) pure flowers, roots and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died. 57

Until death let her be patient (of hardships), self-controlled, and chaste and strive (to fulfill) that most excellent duty which (is prescribed) for wives who have one husband only. 58

Manu’s advise to woman to be faithful to her husband even if he is “destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities” may not however be taken as license for the husband to indulge in immoralities since he makes it obligatory on him “who wedded her with sacred texts” to give her happiness always, “both in season and out of season, in this world and in the next”. It is also to be noticed that Manu always preferred a life of
chastity for the widow to remarriage since the man and wife relation is something transcendental, a relation existing “in this world and in the next”. It was a spiritual union and this law giver of ancient India wanted to preserve it with all the serenity and purity it called for. Of course to have to a second husband is a material necessity which the society may not oppose just because the woman’s life without male help would only be a hell. It is true that the literatures including the spiritual mention the systems of niyoga or any other type of second marriage. But taking the lofty ideal regarding the man and wife relation which they deemed a great prayer for the fulfillment of ultimate Dharma they did not give the final imprimatur to polyandry. Consequently all such practices they declined as unlawful and undesirable. It is in this context that one must ponder over the issues of polyandry and polygamy referred to in literature. It is interesting to note that even as various stories are found woven around how such practices came to vogue or how such incidents were justified by the leading figures of the time the law givers openly proscribed them. Mahabharata gives the story of Draupati becoming the wife of the five Pandava brothers by chance. That the words of the mother though uttered unknowingly could not be anything but true and it was accordingly that Draupati became the wife of the five is the apology Swami Vivekananda gives here though the Swami too speaks of this as “evidently a glimpse of the past polyandrous life”. Even Vyasa judged it as definitely running in contrast to the then existing laws and disparaged it as
*adharma* though to satisfy Drupada he said that it was pre-ordained and narrated how Draupati in her former life prayed Lord Siva for a good husband, repeating the prayer five times and the lord promised her five husbands. Kunti too was taken aback when she came to know of how much heinous it would be to see Draupati becoming the wife of the five, a system never practiced in her tradition. And even when Yudhirishtira tried to justify the polyandry, illustrating the marriage of Jatila with seven rishis and citing it as a part of the Pandu tradition the system was still widely condemned. It is again interesting that this tradition, even if there was such a one, was widely condemned. According to Mahabharata King Drupada opposed it though he finally heeded to the circumstance. Protest against the polyandry came from Karna too. Again Vyasa himself disparages the country of Madra with which Pandu had matrimonial alliance, as a land of matrilineal descend and loose sexual relations. The Epic writer thus definitely condemned this tradition of the Pandu which Yudhishtira cited to justify polyandry. However it is also to be noticed the literatures give only a few examples to polyandry which can’t be generalized and be taken as a commonly practiced system. But Polygamy, unlike polyandry, was widely practiced as seen from many stories of the Itihasas as well as the *Puranas*. But this too was never the social ideal and was always condemned by the law givers of ancient India. The ideal regarding the *Pativrata* was highly hailed and the authors of the *Itihasas* come waxing eloquent when they pass by such aspects. Manu certainly opposes
both Polyandry and polygamy when he upholds the spiritual character of man and wife relation which according to him, as already pointed out, was the bond that bound them together through the cycles of birth and death. *Ekapatnivrata* was the highest ideal in married life. Ramayana, though speaks about many stories related to polygamy never admire the system as ideal. But he eulogizes Sri Rama as the symbol of morality. The Epic writer designates Rama alone as gem of all social morals, the *Maryadapurushottama*. Rama had only one wife and even after his having banished her to the forest he would not recourse to a second wife. His life still belonged to Sita, this gem of Indian manhood firmly believed. Thus among all the characters of the Ramayana Only Rama with his ‘Ekapatnivrata’ or having only one wife proved to be the ideal man in the narrations of the epic bard. Certainly he was the ideal man of the ancient Indian tradition who satisfied all the required criteria. It is thus clear that whatever systems the people might have practiced, the laws never allowed the evil ones because the ideal they upheld and envisioned were always lofty.

It is always thus an ideal woman the lore and laws of ancient India envisaged. It is interesting to note that though the *Itihasas* of India bristle with woman characters, all noted for their aristocracy in their birth as well as character, it is always the women of chastity who got plaudits of the Valmiki and Vyasa. Naturally Sita and Savitri of high chastity proved to be the gems of Indian womanhood.
Indian literature is always eloquent on the principle of chastity and chaste women were hailed as the gem of womanhood. Indian tradition deemed woman as the very bedrock of the society’s cultural progress and as such expected more from her than man. Forbearance and tolerance were the hallmarks of Indian woman and she was expected to tolerate up to the hilt to maintain the traditions and social values unbroken. With multifarious roles as wife, mother, sister, daughter etc she was to light up the entire family which was the potential unit of the society which in turn make a nation or people. She was the mother or preserver of all moral values and hence the mother of the entire society. In ancient India she was a great corrective force in many respects.

All the Puranas, Itihasas and Smritis wax eloquent on the role of Indian woman as wife who is the eternal companion of her husband and the sahadharmini or his spiritual companion in his pilgrimage to the Dharma or the ultimate truth. The author of Ramayana highlights this aspect with Sita telling the following to Rama who was about to leave the palace for the forest.

A woman given by her father with holy water into the hands of the bridegroom belongs to him and cannot be separated from him in this world or in the other. I am not going to leave you
knowing this dharma. Even after death, she is his... I am yours, to share your joys and your sorrows...\textsuperscript{62}

This role the woman in the life of man and her duties to him as given in Ramayana are further illustrated by a modern Indian thinker putting the following on the lips of Sita who stood her ground against Rama’s standpoint to douse her longing to accompany him to forest.

\textit{A fine speech you have made, O knower of Dharma. It is to me a strange doctrine that a wife is diverse from her husband and that his duty is not hers, and that she has no right to share in it. I can never accept it. I hold that your fortunes are mine, and if Rama has to go to the forest, the command includes Sita also, who is part of him. I shall walk in front of you in the forest ways and tread the thorns and the hard ground to make them smooth for your feet. Do not think me obstinate. May father and mother have instructed me in Dharma. ... To go with you wherever you go – that is my only course. If you must go to the forest today, then today I go with you. There is no room for any discussion. Do not think that I cannot bear forest life. With you by my side it will be a joyous holiday. I shall not be a source of trouble to you. I shall eat fruit and roots like to you and I shall not lag behind as we walk.\textsuperscript{63}}
Firm in her becoming the very virtual self of her lord, she said “Separated from thee, I should not wish to dwell even in heaven.”. That wherever the husband is, is to the wife her real heaven, was what this doyen of Indian women firmly believed. Even to the death she would follow him and if possible retrieve him from mortality. This is what Vyasa tells through his story of Savitri whose life was the very example of chastity. Savitri, proving herself to be the practitioner of the eternal law regarding the man and wife relationship, the Mahabharata says, retrieved the soul of Satyavan, her husband from the God of death. The story has it that when Satyavan died even the emissaries of Yama, the God of death could not reach his body which was resting on the lap of Savitri. And even when Yama came and took away the soul of Satyavan, Savitri followed him in grief. She could not remain a single moment away from him, and to the Yama’s question, “Savitri, daughter, why are you following me?”, she replied, “I am not following thee, Father, but this is also the fate of the woman, she follows where her love takes her, and the eternal law separates not loving man and faithful wife”. And she returned only after the Yama gave back the soul of her husband. Thus through the stories of these gems of Indian womanhood the authors of the Itihasas bring out the role and duties of an ideal woman and her power which went up to the level of helping her husband transcend even death. Chastity, the ancient Indians believed, was a spiritual gift that could immortalize the mortals.
The companion throughout, wife was a source of his happiness and relief in pain and a real friend in his life who consoles him in his misfortunes and congratulates him in his victories. She was truly the corrective force in husband’s life. How Sita took this role is well narrated in Ramayana when she warned her husband against the constant use of arms, a habit that may naturally make any one, even a peace-loving man, war-like. She reminds Rama thus:

*I am not teaching you anything, I only remind you of what you already know. (smaraye thvam na sikshaye) Unfortunately in life some circumstances occur and drive some fruitful thoughts away from the mind. They go to the corner as it were, of your mind, and it is necessary to bring them to the centre. I do that service.*

The very half of man’s life, wife had the entire moral and legal rights in his life, and without her his life would be imperfect. She accompanied him in all religious sacrifices and public functions. Any religious function, the Vedas ordained, the husband should do in company of his wife. It is interesting that when Rama was to be anointed as the King of Ayodhya the royal priests insisted that Sita be on his side during the ceremony. Wife was thus the companion of man in all walks of life and her absence would lead to all imperfections in his life, India’s tradition believed. She was the *ardhangini*.
or one half of the husband without whom his life would be incomplete, says *Satapatha Brahmana.* Wife was her husband’s valued partner whose cooperation was indispensable for happiness and success in family life and was the source of inspiration for husband in all material and moral pursuits of life. “Offspring (due to performance of) religious rites, faithful service, highest conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and oneself, depends on one’s wife alone.”

Manu again says: “In that family, where the husband is pleased with his wife and wife with her husband, happiness will assuredly be lasting.” She was also to be a good manager of the family affairs including the money matters which she should control well.

“She must always be cheerful, clever in (the management of her) household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economical in expenditure” Manu also advises the woman who has only one husband to be patient of all hardships as: “Until death let her be patient (of hardships), self-controlled, and chaste and strive (to fulfil) that most excellent duty which (is prescribed) for wives who have one husband only.”

Man and wife relation was thus complimentary, both sharing the spiritual and material prosperity and was marked with mutual respect and sincerity. It was another expression of the spiritual and moral monism when Manu declares that “the husband is declared to be one with the wife”. Family life
was thus a *sadhana* or preparation for a higher life transcending the world of mere erotic and material love.

However in family her greatest role was that of the mother. Suffice it to cite Swami Vivekananda who held Indian womanhood as the divine motherhood. Reflection of the female energy, the half of the cosmic energy, she was considered *parasakti* or the supreme energy concealed in human form. Naturally it was believed that womanhood would become perfect when only it attains the motherhood. Woman was mother to the ancient Indians and was always addressed respectfully with words like *ma* or mother or *bhavati* or respected one. Even to the beggar girl who knocks at the door an ancient or a modern Tamilian would only say, *onnun ketappillamma po* or nothing is with me mother, please go! The culture of the land would not permit an Indian to address even a beggar girl nothing but *amma* or mother. Even the custom of sending woman for begging itself was discouraged and seldom practiced. Woman thus mothered the entire family and it is interesting that the Indian families were mother ruling ones. She was the supreme teacher. It would be relevant to note how the law giver of ancient India comments on this aspect. “The teacher (acharya) is ten times more venerable than a sub-teacher (upadhaya), the father a hundred times more than the teacher, but the mother a thousand times more than the father.”\(^7^2\)
Woman taught her children spiritual and material lessons. She was the educating and intellectualizing and enlightening agent who disciplined the young ones. Evidences are enough to prove the role they played as teachers in the all-round uplift of their children. The *Itihasas* and *Puranas* mention mothers who trained them in morals and values of life. Indian mothers not only influenced their children and all household affairs, but their grown up sons also to whom their word was law. While studying this long drawn maternal influence one comes across the advice Sumitra gave her son Lakshmana who was to accompany his elder brother Rama and Sita to forest. Her instruction to Lakshmana to look to Sita as mother is indeed the Ramayana culture condensed, the repetition and reassertion of the message the lore of India has been carrying down the millennia that the elder sister-in-law is equal to mother and that she should be treated with as much respect and reverence as one does to the mother. It would be appropriate to cite the story of Madalasa and her son Vikranta to illustrate the position of Indian woman as mother. According to Markendeya Purana Madalasa taught Vikranta knowledge of the self as he grew up by ministering to him even in sickness. Caressing the baby crying on her lap, she would say:

> My child thou art without a name or form, and it is but in fantasy that thou hast been given a name. This thy body, framed of the five elements, is not thine in sooth, nor art thou of it. Why dost thou weep? Or may be, thou weepest not; it is
the sound self born that cometh forth from the king’s son…. In
the body dwells another self, and therewith abideth not the
thought that ‘This is mine’, which appertaineth to the flesh.

Shame that man is so deceived!73

Woman was thus mother, teacher and monitor of the house whose interests
and preferences seem not to have been interfered with by anybody including
her husband since her doings were always on the right path. Naturally she
turned out to be the most cared wealth of the family and society, a potential
unit of the socio-cultural progress who should be petted, protected and
promoted. And it is no surprise that the lawgivers of ancient India made it
obligatory on men folk to protect the fair sex. Thus ordains Manu: “Her
father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and
her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.”74

It may appear surprising that this law giver who accords all kinds of
importance, reverence and respects to the fair sex bars freedom to them by
saying in his manual that *na stri svatantryamarhati* or woman deserves no
freedom. Manu emphasizes this aspect repetedly: “In childhood a female
must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead
to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” 75

Surely Manu makes it obligatory on men to protect women. It is after all a
biological and natural necessity and any kind of unnecessary freedom could
only bring in disorders. It is to be noticed that not only in case of woman but for men too the Smritis set some disciplines as in the case of students, householders, etc. It cannot be that woman alone should be exempted from the limitations of the society. The Smritis thus while fixing certain disciplines to each segment of the society had extended the same to the fair sex too. It is illogical to argue that the Smritikaras of ancient India while disciplining all the other sides of the social life should have left the woman alone to indiscipline. It was thus only a part of the common social ethics the law giver applied in its wider aspect. The problem again is with the lack of contextual interpretation. One may notice that word arhati bore different contextual meanings in Sanskrit and other languages. Take for instance how the word is used by Srikrishna in the ‘Sankhyayoga’ of the Bhagavad-Gita where he repeatedly tells “Arjuna, na tvam sochitumarhasi or naivam sochitumarhasi”. Here discoursing on the immortality and indestructibility of the soul Krishna convinces Arjuna the meaninglessness of the delusions that are birth and death and that it is unnecessary to be grieved at death. Therefore he says, na tvam sochitumarhasi which could very sensibly be translated as “you need not be worried”. If to take the word arhat for ‘deserving’ it should be argued that it requires certain criteria or qualification to grieve! Therefore the meaning is simply “you need not be worried” rather that you do not deserve or qualify enough to be worried. Again in Buddhist lore the word arhat bears an entirely different meaning
when it was applied to a true seeker of the ultimate truth or *nirvana*. One-sided rather than a holistic explanation of the word meaning would not suffice to understand the actualities of things and events. It could thus be well construed that Manu never meant to impose ‘slavery’ on woman as argued by the modern feminist theorists and the disparagers of ancient Indian culture. Inordinate freedom Manu proscribed to woman lest it should hamper them. By doing that he was drawing a *saumitrirekha* (circular line Lakshmana drew around Sita in *Ramayana* so that nothing and none could cross the circle and do any harm to her) or the line of protection. It was always the chastity which unlimited freedom may do away that determined womanhood and Manu wanted to see this sublime aspect of womanhood preserved as the bedrock of culture, a belief common throughout India across time and place. Thus Manu always wanted to preserve woman and womanhood as the foundations of culture rather than a mere object of sensual pleasure. To the law giver of ancient India womanhood betokened a higher ideal not to be approached in a dilettantish manner. She was the divinity incarnate, the manifestation of culture or the highest principle and was to be treated like that. Hence his firm conviction that

*Where woman are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but
where they are not honoured there all works turn fruitless.*
Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are happy ever prospers.  

Womanhood was thus something to be much valued according to Indian tradition. There might of course be instances of women having been ill-treated or harassed. But they were not commonplace and also not in line with the social ideals. The laws never gave their imprimatur to such aspects. And generally speaking, woman enjoyed a respectable social status in ancient India which continued down the centuries with the system’s vestiges seen even today.

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71. Ibid.,p.195, (Manu, V. 150)

72. Ibid., p.196, (Manu, V. 158)

73. Ibid., pp.56-57, (Manu, II,145)


76. Ibid., p.152, Manu, V. 148

77. *Gita*. II. 26, 27