CHAPTER – II
STATUS OF WOMEN

Women who have been seen as incarnations of both the highest good and the basest evil. Seldom have they been perceived simply as human beings. Rather, society has evolved myths to explain and reinforce their powers and weaknesses. Where the women are held in reverence there do the Gods reside is an old Sanskrit adage. A society grows if the women grow, if they partake of the spirit of progress, for they are the proverbial domestic legislators, they are the matrix of social life. The best way to judge the position of a nation is to find out the status of women. In reality the status of women is the measuring rod for assessing the standard of culture of any age. Thus the social status of women in a country represents the social spirit of the age. But, in ancient India, right from the age of the Rig Veda, as also in the Mahabharata, there are contradictory statements about women, statements of eulogy as well as of condemnation.

Humanity has advanced very far from where it had started. Many things have changed; the social position and rights of many groups have been subjected to the ebb and flow of the history. Many sections of the population, which had ruled, have been brought down with others, which were deprived, have risen to position of equality and even to political power. But the women who form nearly 50 per cent of the population are facing problems since ancient times, receiving only a small share of developmental opportunities. Their oppression is persistent and universal, and solutions are complicated. Woman’s present status is to a large extent the product of the past socio-cultural configuration. Every society, however progressive it may be is beholden to the past. The social system
and the culture of any given society bear the mark of the social system and the culture preceding it. The comprehension of the range of the contemporary variations in the attitude towards women and her place in society begs an understanding of the past feminine ideals, referents and prescriptions for female behavior.

There are different schools of thought. The one school believes that a woman is the best gift of God to man. She brings prosperity when she is properly treated and respected and has been called Lakshmi the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The holiest object in the world is a Virtuous woman a tear of sorrow rolling down from her eyes melts the heart of even a mighty tyrant. The second school of thought holds the view that the best way to reach God is to avoid women. Sage Agastya says as stated by A. S. Altekar “Women combine the fickleness of the lightning the sharpness of weapon and the swiftness of the eagle.”

Shakespeare has said, “Frailty thy name is Women”. They were of the view that “Women is the source of all evils, her love is to be dreaded more than the hatred of man, the poor young men who seek women in matrimony are like fish who go to meet the hook.”

Stephen Knapp on the other side said, “Among the many societies that can be found in the world, we have seen that some of the most venerating regard for women has been found in Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of women, and has retained the greatest respect within its tradition”

2. Dutt, R. C., A History of Civilisation of Ancient India, Based on Sanscrit Literature, 3 Vols. (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co.), 1890, Vol. 1, p. 28

34
Will Durant wrote, "Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there was no restrictions upon her remarriage."  

According to R. C. Dutt, "Women were held in higher respect in India than in other ancient countries, and the Epics and old literature of India assign a higher position to them than the epics and literature of ancient Greece. Hindu women enjoyed some rights of property from the Vedic Age, took a share in social and religious rites, and were sometimes distinguished by their learning. The absolute seclusion of women in India was unknown in ancient times."  

The status of women in Hindu society has changed from time to time. Their position in it has been variously estimated and diametrically opposite views are current regarding her place in different stages of civilization. On one hand she is considered little better then slaves or beast of burden, condemned to drudgery, bought as a chattel and treated as such.

On the other hand, those who have had anything to do with tribes reckoning descent from the mother are likely to view a woman as the

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8 Ibid.
undisputed mistress of the family\textsuperscript{9} if not of community life as well. Both concepts are "as far as the vast majority of the people are concerned, bound to be far away from the actual state of affairs."\textsuperscript{10}

**The Position of Women in the Vedic Period**

The position of women in a Vedic period be judged by the way in which the birth of a girl is received. The Vedic society was a patriarchal one, and hence father was the head of the family.\textsuperscript{11} All efforts were made to secure the birth of son. The birth of a daughter was looked upon with disfavor,\textsuperscript{12} but it certainly did not frighten the parents.\textsuperscript{13} Early marriage was not a rule, and girls in ruling families received administrative and military training and were entitled to the same education as boys and no limitations were put on their ambitions in this direction. In the choice of his or her spouse, both enjoyed equal freedom and equal opportunities.\textsuperscript{14}

There are numerous hymns in the Rig-Veda indicating, women were assigned a high place in the *Vedic* society. In many aspects the present-day Indian woman had to wait a long time to regain some of the rights the Vedic women enjoyed. Further, they enjoyed a kind of liberty that actually had societal sanctions, on certain issues, which are not available to today’s Indian women.

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\textsuperscript{10} Parmar, Y. S., *Polyandry in the Himalayas*, op. cit., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{11} Kapadia, K. M., *The Hindu Kinship* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot), 1947, p. 82
\textsuperscript{12} Dutt, R. C., *The Cambridge History of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co.), 1890, Vol. 1, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{13} Billington, Mary Francis, Women in India (New Delhi: Amarko Book Agency), 1973, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{14} Rai, Lajpat, *Unhappy India* (Calcutta: Banna Publishing Co.), 1923, pp. 70-80.
Vedic era was the golden period so far as the equality of status and personal freedom of women are concerned. It was free from many of the social evils that harmed the Indian society in the later eras. Child marriage and a harsh dowry did not then exist. Widows were free to marry. They inherited rights to the dead husbands’ properties. Seclusion of women or Sati was not practiced; nor was untouchability. No man or woman was locked into a trade by birth. Members of the same family took to different crafts and trades. The Rig Veda says: "A bard I am, my father a leech/ And my mother is a grinder of corn,/ Diverse in means, but all wishing wealth,/ Equally we strive for cattle." 15

Women were generally not discriminated against merely on grounds of gender. Men and women had equal status in matters of education, marriage, Re-marriage, in managing the household, right to property, intellectual pursuit, participation in public debate and some women even participated in battles along with their men folk. There is a mention of a certain warrior Queen Vishpla who lost her leg in battle and was fitted with a metallic prosthesis; she returned to battle and continued to fight.

Women shared an equal standing with their men. They not only studied with men in Gurukuls but also participated actively in religious and philosophical discussions. There were women teachers, scholars, Brahmavadins and highly respected Rishis. There were women warriors with bows. There were also the prostitutes who made a living and followed certain regulations. The system of polygamy was confined o rulers and alone. Similarly dowry meant gifts given to the bride with pleasure but was never demanded by the groom side. The wife occupied a respectable place in the family protocol and she, in turn, played a

15 The Rig Veda (IX, 112)
respectful role as a devoted friend, wise philosopher and an able guide. They inherited and possessed property; they took share in scarifies and religious ceremonies; they attended the assemblies and state occasions.

On the whole, she was considered as a human being in the real sense of the word and enjoyed an enviable prestige at all occasions. But this high status of woman started becoming lower during the Smritik era.

Let me also say, Rig Vedic society was not a perfect society. I wonder if there ever was a perfect society. Even Plato’s idealized Utopia was not perfect. Rig Vedic society too suffered from poverty, destitution; slavery and exploitation of the weak. There are references in Rig Veda to women rendered poor and destitute by their husbands’ addiction to gambling and liquor. There are poems sung by luckless gamblers in their drunken stupor lamenting the fate of their helpless wives and aged parents. The drunken gambler, poor and ever thirsty sinks deeper into debt as a stone into a ditch. The destitute wife of the gambler is distressed and so too is the mother of a son, not knowing where her wayward son had gone. There are scenes of roguish creditor pestering the wife of an insolvent gambler.

The sorrows and suffering that women endure in their day to day living do not subjugate and suppress women into weakness or male domination. They have an inherent strength. The inequalities the women of that age were subjected to were not directed against them for mere reason they were women.

The social life portrayed in Rig Veda reveals a tolerant and moderately unbiased society characterized by sanctity of the institution of marriage, domestic purity, a patriarchal system, an equitable position in the society for men and women and high honor for women. The women
did receive a fair and an equitable treatment and they were empowered to deal with issues that mattered in the life around them.

In spite of the attitude of indifference towards the female child and marked partiality for the male child, once born, the daughter was, it is very probable, entitled to all the privileges given to a son. In the matter of education the daughter was not distinguished from the son. No less than twenty women were among the composers of the Rig Vedic hymns. Gargi and Atreyi were the leading philosophers of the times. One also finds a class of women known as Brahmavadinis, endorsed with acclamation of birth of a daughter for which they prescribe certain rituals to be born. So it can be presumed that the position of a girl was not very low, though it cannot be said that she was regarded as equal to a boy.

Rigveda (RV) is the only scripture among those of all religions in which the divine Truths are revealed to women sages also and some of these hymns describing the revelation find a prominent place in the RV Samhita like the hymn 10.125 (tenth mandala, 125 sukta or hymn) attributed to the women sage Vak Ambrini. There are more than thirty women sages in RV with specific hymns associated with them. In all the Semitic religions like Christianity, Islam etc. there is no mention of any revelation to women and no woman is listed among the prominent disciples of the founders or prophets of those religions.

There are numerous hymns in the Rig Veda indicating the high status accorded to women in the Vedic society. For instance the hymn 10.85, the so called marriage hymn, explicitly states that the daughter-in-law should be treated in the family as a queen, samrajni, by all members especially the mother-in-law, husband, father-in-law etc. Thus the

statement that 'women were oppressed in Hindu society even from the Vedic times' made orally and in popular writings by some moderns is nothing but a patent falsehood. Some of the quotations given by these critics are from the period of the sutra books which are dated more than two thousand years later than the Rig Veda. Naturally these critics suppress quotations which speak of the high status of women in the society of Rig-Vedic period and the period of Upanishads.

Literary and historical researchers have established beyond that the women held a position of quality with man during Vedic period. Both the girls and boys were imparted Vedic studies. The importance of woman education is described in the Atharva Veda. It states, “The success of woman in her married life depends upon her proper training during the BrahmaCharya”.17

In the Upanishadic period there were a large number of Brahmvadnis who devoted their life in the study of philosophy. Gargi and Maitraye were two philosophers of prominence of that period. There were also great woman scholars during Buddhist period. Sanghamitra, the sister of the great emperor Ashoka, went to Ceylon to spread Buddhism. Ten married and 32 unmarried women were among the authors of Theragatha. Even in the Jainism period, the woman had an access to the education. Yayant, princes, remained unmarried and received ordination from Mahavira himself. Based on these facts, Altekar writes. “We may therefore conclude that many girls in well-to-do families used to be given a fair amount of education down to about 300 B.C.”18

The marriage was looked upon as a religious and social duty and an unmarried person was also taken in the same way. The unmarried person

17 Atharva-Veda, XIV, 44.
was not eligible to participate in Vedic sacrifices which were not even compulsory for every girl. The matrimony was not compulsory for a woman and there was no limitation on the age of marriage. The women who remained unmarried and grew old in the house of her parents were called Amajur, a girl who grew old at her father’s house. The Vedic woman being grown up and educated had a voice in the selection of their husbands. Love marriages- Gandharva Vivaha were also common in Vedic period.

Re-marriage of widow was permitted. The brother of the deceased husband could marry the widow with the permission of the elders. Some scholars are of the opinion that the widow could marry any person, not necessarily the brother of the deceased husband. According to Shakuntla Rao, the Rig-Veda does not mention anywhere where the practice of the burning or burial of widows with their dead husbands.

During the Rig Veda period certain specific issues such as the status of the girl child, her education, her marriage and married life, her right to property, Widowhood and remarriage has been discussed in detail.

*Girl child*

Many hymns in Rig Veda express desire to beget heroic sons. There are no similar prayers wishing for a girl child. This perhaps reflected the anxiety of a society that needed a larger number of male warriors to ensure its survival. Sons were preferred to daughters, yet, once a daughter was born, she was raised with tender care, affection and love.

In the Rig-Veda, there is no instance where the birth of a girl was considered inauspicious. The celebrations and others *samskaras* were
conducted with enthusiasm. In a particular case, twin daughters were compared to heaven and earth. The daughters were not unpopular. They were allowed Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifice to gods. The son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose.

There is reference to the birth of an only daughter, who was assigned the legal position of a son; and she could perform funeral rites of her father and could also inherit the property. It indicates that the position of a girl in Rig Vedic times was not as low as it was to become in medieval times.19

**Education**

Education was an important feature in the upbringing of a girl child. Education was considered essential for girls and was therefore customary for girls to receive education. The girls with education were regarded highly. Vedic literature praises a scholarly daughter and says: "A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care" (*Mahanirvana Tantra*). The importance of a girl’s education is stressed in the Atharva Veda which states,”” The success of woman in her married life depends upon her proper training during the *Brahmacharya* (student period)”

The girls were entitled to Upanayana (to receive sacred thread) and to the privilege of studying Vedas; just as the boys. Women performed religious rites after completing their education under a Guru. They were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods. The son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose.

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According to Shrauta and Grihya Sutras, women chanted mantras along with their husbands while performing rituals.

There were eminent women in the field of learning and scholarship. These highly intelligent and greatly learned women, who chose the path of Vedic studies and, lived the ideal life of spirituality were called Brahmavadinis; and the women who opted out of education for married life were called 'Sadyovadhus'. Co-education seems to have existed in this period and both the sexes got equal attention from the teacher. As many as about thirty Brahmavadins of great intellect and spiritual attainment are immortalized in the Rig Veda and are credited with hymns. They participated in philosophical debates with men and were highly respected. To name a few of those significant women rishis (rishikā) who figure in the Rig Veda Samhitā: Goshā Kakshivati, Lopamudra, Romasha, Sarama Devasuni, Yami Vaivasvathi, Rathir Bharadwaja, Apala, Paulomi and others. Needless to say they were held in high esteem for their work to be included in the important religious text of the era.

The Shatapatha Braahmana lists some 52 generations of teachers, of which some 42 are remembered through their mothers. The teachers were males. This list acts like a bridge between the end of the Rig-Veda time and the Shatapatha Braahmana time. It is remarkable that a patriarchal society should remember its teachers through their mothers. The preference over the names of their fathers indicates the important position of women as mothers in Vedic society. Their mothers were considered that valuable, as their sons were recognized through their names.20

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20 http://www.surichat.nl/forum/index.php?topic=14696.65;wap2
Marriage

There is very little evidence of child (or infant) marriage in the Rig Veda. A girl was married at 16 or more years of age, when her physical development was complete. Marriage was solemnized soon after marriage. The Vedic rituals presuppose that the married pair was grown up enough to be lovers, man and wife, and parents of children (marriage hymn 140 and 141). These go to show that a girl was married after she attained puberty. Surya, the daughter of Surya (the Sun), was married to Soma (the Moon), only when she became youthful and yearned for a husband.

The Rig-Veda refers to young maidens completing their education as brahmacharins and then gaining husbands. The Vedas say that an educated girl should be married to an equally educated man. "An unmarried young learned daughter should be married to a bridegroom who like her is learned. Never think of giving in marriage a daughter of very young age".

Young women of the time could exercise their choice in the matter of their marriage. "The woman who is of gentle birth and of graceful form," so runs a verse in the Rig Veda, "selects among many of her loved one as her husband. The term for the bridegroom was vara, the chosen one. "The happy and beautiful bride chooses (vanute) by herself (svayam) her own husband". The swayamvaras of the princesses are of course well documented.

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21 R.V, 7, 9
22 RV 3.55.16.
23 RV 27.12.
Many marriages, as in the later day Hindu society today, involved the intercession of the families on either side, but a maiden was consulted and her wishes taken into account when the matrimonial alliance was discussed. The marriage hymns 6 9 in the Rig-Veda and the Atharvaveda indicate that the parties to marriage were generally grown up persons competent to woo and be wooed, qualified to give consent and make choice.

Young girls had the freedom to go out to attend fairs, festivals and assemblies'; the seclusion of women was not practiced. There is a reference to certain occasional festivals or gatherings called Samanas organized to help young boys and girls to get together. Rig Veda described Samana as where: Wives and maidens attire themselves in gay robes and set forth to the joyous feast; youths and maidens hasten to the meadow when forest and field are clothed in fresh verdure to take part in dance. Cymbals sound and seizing each other lads and damsels whirl about until the ground vibrates and clouds of dust envelop the gaily moving throng. A girl often chose one of the suitors whom she met in these Samanas as her husband.

Rig Veda talks of the seven steps and vows based on mutual respect, taken during marriage

A friend thou shall be, having paced these seven steps with me. Nay, having paced the seven steps, we have become friends. May I retain thy friendship, and never part from thy friendship. Let us unite together: let us propose together. Loving each other and ever radiant
in each other’s company, meaning well towards each other, sharing
together all enjoyments and pleasures, let us join our thoughts.\textsuperscript{24}

The bride was given by her parents’ gold, cattle, horses, valuables,
articles etc. which she carried to her new home. She had a right to deal
with it as she pleased. No doubt the dowry a girl brought with her did
render her more attractive. “How much a maiden is pleasing to the suitor
who would marry for her splendid riches? If the girl be both good and fair
of feature, she finds, herself, a friend among the people.”\textsuperscript{25}

There were also the woes of a father,” When a man’s daughter hath
been ever eyeless, who, knowing, will be worth with her for blindness?
Which of the two will lose on him his anger-the man who leads her home
or he who woos her?”\textsuperscript{26}

Marriage was an established institution in the Vedic Age. It was
regarded as a social and religious duty; and not a contract. The husband-
wife stood on equal footing and prayed for long lasting love and
friendship. At the wedding, the bride addressed the assembly in which the
sages too were present.\textsuperscript{27}

A woman, if she chose, could marry even after the child bearing
age. For instance Gosha a well known female sage married at a late stage
in her life (her husband being another well known scholar of that time
Kakasivan) as she earlier suffered from some skin ailment. Monogamy
normally prevailed but polygamy was also in vogue. Some scholars say
that polyandry and divorce were also common. There are no direct
references to that.

\textsuperscript{24} Taittiriya Ekagnikanda, I iii, 14. ; Sastri, 1918.
\textsuperscript{25} Rig-Veda X .27.12
\textsuperscript{26} RV 10.27.11
\textsuperscript{27} Rig Veda 10.85.26-27
Widows were allowed to remarry if they so desired; and faced no condemnation and ostracization socially.

**Married life**

A girl when she marries moves into another household where she becomes part of it. Her gotra changes from that of her father into that of her husband. She participates in performances of *yagnas* for *devas* and *pitrsv* of her husband’s family. The bride takes charge of her new family that includes her husband, his parents, brothers and sisters; and others who lived there for some reason.

The Rig Veda hymn, the wedding prayer, indicates the rights of a woman as wife. It is addressed to the bride sitting next to bridegroom. It touches upon few other issues as well.

"Happy be you (as wife) in future and prosper with your children here (in the house): be vigilant to rule your household in this home (i.e. exercise your authority as the main figure in your home). Closely unite (be an active participant) in marriage with this man, your husband. So shall you, full of years (for a very long life), address your company (i.e. others in the house listen to you, and obey and care about what you have to say)."

The famous marriage hymn (10.85) calls upon members of the husband’s family to treat the daughter in law (invited into the family 'as a river enters the sea') as the queen *samrajni*.

She is welcomed in many ways:

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28 Rig Veda: 10, 85.27
29 Ibid.

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"Come, O desired of the gods, beautiful one with tender heart, with the charming look, good towards your husband, kind towards animals, destined to bring forth heroes. May you bring happiness for both our quadrupeds and bipeds."\textsuperscript{30}

Over thy husband's father and thy husband's mother bear full sway. Over the sister of thy lord, over his brothers rule supreme\textsuperscript{31}

"Happy be thou and prosper with thy children here; be vigilant to rule thy household, in this home .\textsuperscript{32}

The idea of equality is expressed in the Rig Veda: "The home has, verily, its foundation in the wife." The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular."\textsuperscript{33}

She was \textit{Pathni} (the one who leads the husband through life), \textit{Dharmapathni} (the one who guides the husband in dharma) and \textit{Sahadharmacharini} (one who moves with the husband on the path of dharma). Here one can say that the bride in the Vedic ideal of a household was far from unimportant and weak. She did have an important position in the family and yielded considerable influence.

\textit{Property Rights}

The third chapter of Rig-Veda, considered its oldest part (3.31.1) commands that a son-less father accepts son of his daughter as his own son i.e. all properties of a son-less father shall be inherited by son of his daughter.

\textsuperscript{30} Rig Veda 10.85.44  
\textsuperscript{31} Rig Veda 10.85.46  
\textsuperscript{32} Rig-Veda 10.85.27  
\textsuperscript{33} RV 5, 61. 8
Rik commands that if parents have both son and daughter, son performs *pindadaan* (after death of father) and daughter be enriched with gifts. Rik also attests share of a daughter in property of her father. Married women inherited and shared properties. A widow too was entitled to a share in the properties of the dead husband.

*Widowhood and Remarriage:*

Rig-Veda does not mention anywhere about the practice of the burning or burial of widows with their dead husbands. Rig Veda commands the widow to return to her house, to live with her children and grand children; and confers on her the right to properties of her deceased husband. Rig Veda clearly approves marriage of the widow. Such women faced no condemnation or isolation in the household or society. They had the right to property inherited from the dead husbands. There are Riks blessing the woman and her new husband, with progeny and happiness. Rig-Veda praises Ashwin gods for protecting widows.

Ambassador O P Gupta, IFS has made an excellent presentation of the status of widows in Rig Vedic times. According to him, “None of the riks in Rig Veda calls for the burning or burial of widow with body of her dead husband. A set of 14 Riks in 18th Mandala of the 10th book deal with treatment of widows.” Rik is recited by the dead man’s brothers and others, requesting the widow to release her husband’s body for cremation. The Rik also commands the widow to return to the world of living beings, return to her home and to her children and grand children, “Rise, woman, (and go) to the world of living beings; come, this man near whom you

34 R.V (3.3(2.17.7) 1.2)
35 Ibid.
36 R. V., X. 40.8.
sleep is lifeless; you have enjoyed this state of being the wife of your husband, the suitor who took you by the hand."38

This Rik also, confers upon her full right on house and properties of her deceased husband. [It was only in the year 1995 the Supreme Court of India interpreted Section 14(1) of the Hindu Succession Act to allow Hindu widow full ownership rights over properties she inherits from her deceased husband]

Rig-Veda not only sanctions survival of a widow and her right to property; but also approves her marriage with the brother of her dead husband; and to live with full dignity and honor in the family. Rig Veda therefore expressly sanctions widow-marriage. Some scholars say the widow could marry any person, not necessarily the brother of the deceased husband or a relative.

Rik blesses a woman at her second marriage, with progeny and prosperity in this life time: Go up, O woman, to the world of living; you stand by this one who is deceased; come! to him who grasps your hand, your second spouse (didhisu) ,you have now entered into the relation of wife to husband.39 In Rik the new husband while taking the widow as his wife says to her: let us launch a new life of valor and strength begetting male children overcoming all enemies who may assail us. 40

Women during the Atharva Veda Period

That a husband and wife constituted an indivisible unit in society, and the duties of each towards the other, can be inferred from he nuptial hymn as depicted in the Atharva Vedic passages. ‘Be thou supreme

38 R. V. X.18.8.
39 R. V. X.18.8
40 R. V. X.18.9
among fathers-in-law, supreme also among brothers-in-law, be thou
supreme over sisters-in-law, supreme also over mother-in-law’.

The above passage indicates the supremacy of woman. She was at the helm of
affairs, and partook in the sacrifices performed by her husband and was
ultimately a helper in the path of virtue. That the practice of Sati was in
vogue even during this period is amply clear in the Vedic statements. In
the Atharva-Veda, cremation and not burial was accepted way of disposal
of the dead.

It is further stated that women were capable of going through the
Brahmacharya stage of life and entering the last stage. ‘Be Vedic
studentship a girl wins a young husband.’ There is nothing to show that
women during this period did not move freely in society. ‘The presence of
charming ladies added much to the luster of social life. They were
agreeable at festivals.’ Gradually we find that women’s position became
markedly inferior to her partner in many respects, although giving
respectful treatment to her in her various capacities is enjoined upon men.

AV blesses the widow to have a happy life with present husband ::
O ye inviolable one! (the widow) tread the path of wise in front of thee
and choose this man (another suitor) as thy husband. Joyfully receive him
and may the two of you mount the world of happiness.

The Buddhist Era

In the 6th Century BC, the teachings and practices of the Vedas had
been thrown into the background. There was much priest-craft
everywhere. The insincere priests traded on religion. They duped the

41 Atharva-Veda, XIV, 44.
42 Ibid., II, 5. 18.
43 Ibid., 11,36,1.
44 AV, XVIII.3.4
people in a variety of ways and amassed wealth for themselves. In the name of religion, people followed in the footsteps of the cruel priests and performed meaningless rituals.\footnote{Sivananda, Swami, Lord Buddha, in Lives of the Saints, Divine Life Society, http://www.sivanandalshq.org/saints/buddha.htm}

Buddha’s teachings had a revolutionary impact on women’s status as in many other aspects of Hindu social and religious life. He preached to all without expectation, men and women, the high and the low, the ignorant and the learned – all alike. All his first disciples were laymen and two of the very first were women. This had a liberating influence on women. Buddha established an order of female ascetics (nuns) as also of male sanyasins (monks). Many women oppressed in their families found solace in the Nunneries. Women’s contributions to Buddhist literature give evidence of their access to education. Although the status of husband was superior to his wife, the relationship was of mutual respect. Age of marriage was higher and the birth of the daughter was not considered a calamity. During the lifetime of Buddha and later, the patriarchy had got strongly entrenched in the society. After the Buddha expired the Order of the Buddhist Monks and the Nuns interpreted his teachings in such a manner as to make participation in the practice of the path and Nirvana, many Jatak stories claim that the Buddha had a very low view of women’s capabilities. Women were acknowledged to be temptresses; and nuns came to be subjugated to the monks. Despite the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha, the later Buddhist teachers perceived women as physically weak and dependent. Despite intellectual parity, woman was definitely considered as inferior to man in monastery as well in society. In
fact, Buddhism leaves most are of worldly life to be managed by the people according to their customs and traditions.46

Women in Jainism

Jainism as its own long and noble tradition and claims a great antiquity. Mahavira Vardhamana, the twenty-fourth and last of the Tirthankaras, organized the community of Jains, to which he admitted all aspirants irrespective of caste or sex and established a system of peaceful proselytization. Jainism spread throughout the country. Jainism spread throughout the country. Mathura in the North and the Shravanabelgola in the South formed the chief centres of Jaina culture, as is proved by a large number of inscription, images and other monuments discovered at both places.

Jaina women enjoyed equal privileges with men. Women are given full facilities for the highest kind of education which was spiritually oriented. These women of eminence undertook to preach their faith of universal love and brotherhood. This is substantiated by the fact that Mahavira the last and most celebrated of the twenty-four Jaina Tirthankaras was very liberal in his outlook and never hesitated to admit women to the Order. It is stated that Mahavira organized his followers into four categories – monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. The Digambara School of the Jainas does not believe that women are capable of attaining salvation (moksa) and so they did not admit women into the Order. The Shwetambara sect, being liberal admitted women aspirants into the Order and they even outnumbered the Jaina monks. These Jaina nuns, included rich and respectable ladies, even queens like Paumavi,

were held in great reverence. Thus, it is evident that Jaina nuns attained a high standard of religious education, even at such an early age.

Acharya Sri Tulsi observes: “women should not think in terms of competing with or excelling men. The ideal for women is conduct. Let women think of independent development without trying to compete with me.” 47

The Position of Women in Post-Vedic Period

The post Vedic period is characterized by a strong ambivalence towards women. Traditional representations of women have tended to locate them within bi-polarities. During the post-Vedic period, woman lost the high status she once enjoyed in society. She lost some of her independence. She became a subject of protection.

During the Puranic, Epic and later times (period of Dharma Shastras, Manu Smriti and Samhitas) women suffered a severe slide in their social position in society. Principles of caste and gender ranking, evolved over a period of time, instituted mechanisms of social control – the ideology of ‘pativrata’, complicity of upper caste women and brahmanical law and custom to control deviant women. 48

The period after 300 B.C witnessed a succession of invasions and influx of foreigners such as the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthian, the Kushans and others. The political misfortunes, the war atrocities followed by long spells of anarchy and lawlessness had a disastrous effect on the

47 Jain, Simi, Encyclopaedia of Women in India (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications), 2007, pp. 34-40.
society. Fear and insecurity haunted the common people and householders. Sons were valued higher than the daughters because of the need for more fighting males, in order to survive the waves of onslaughts. It was also imperative to protect women from abductors. It therefore became necessary to curtail women’s freedom and movements. Early marriage was perhaps employed as a part of those defensive measures. The education of the girl child was no longer a priority. Sastras too compromised by accepting marriage as a substitute for Upanayanam and education. The neglect of education, imposing seclusion and insecurity that gripped their lives, had disastrous consequences upon the esteem and status of women. The society in turn sank into depravity.

The most important religious/legal texts of classical India were written in the age which followed the Vedic Period. These books include the Shastras or legal texts such as the Manu Smriti c. 200 BC, the Yajnavalkya Smriti c. 300 AD, and the Narada Smriti c. 400 AD, as well as treatises on administration such as Arthashastra by Kautilya, and Nibandhe or commentaries on individual legal texts which were written between 700 and 1700 AD.

Smriti-meaning what is remembered (as opposed to what has been heard/revealed in the Vedas) - is considered to be secondary and changeable in nature. It is neither as old as Shruti and nor is it entirely religious; it speaks of secular matters as well and includes folklore. It is authoritative only as far as it conforms to Shruti:

Also, custom or Sadachar was, in Ancient India, as in the rest of the world, an important source of law. There were different types of customs which were recognized: Kulachar or family customs, Lokachar or local customs and Deshachar or national customs. Although a great deal of
Hindu law has been codified today, customs are still accepted as a source of law to a limited extent provided they are not illegal, immoral or opposed to public policy.

For example, one of the conditions necessary for a Hindu Marriage to be valid under the Hindu Marriage Act is that the intending spouses are not within the degrees of a prohibited relationship as defined in the Act.\(^49\) However, this does not apply if a custom or usage governing them permits their marriage.

Moving back though, it was during the age of the Smritis that a society firmly based on the caste system was established. And the caste system itself no longer affected merely a person's occupation; its effects spilled into every other sphere of life, and there was no mobility worth mentioning within it at all.

Marriage became almost entirely within one's own caste although marriages of men with women belonging to castes lower than theirs were accepted by society and their children were considered legitimate. Such a marriage was called an Anulobha Vivaha. However, the reverse was not true: a woman could not legitimately marry a man of caste lower than hers. Such a marriage was called a Pratilobha Vivaha and children born of it were considered illegitimate.

The legal texts also said that although intending spouses had to belong to the same caste, a man and a woman of the same caste belonging to the same Gotra could not marry. It was believed that Brahmmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were the descendents of seven ascetic Rishis, and that the descendants of each of the Rishis formed a separate Gotra. A man and a woman could get married only if they did not share the same

\(^{49}\) Section 3 (g); The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.
Gotra for up to seven generations on the paternal side (Sapinda) and five on the maternal side of their families.

And if that wasn't enough, there were also eight different types of marriage\(^\text{50}\) which were mentioned in the texts:

1. **Brahma**: The father gave his daughter (wearing jewellery) as a gift to a Brahmin whom he had invited.

2. **Daiva**: The father gave his daughter (wearing jewellery) as a gift to a priest who had duly officiated at a sacrifice while the sacrifice was in progress.

3. **Arsha**: The father gave away his daughter after receiving a cow and a bull or two pairs of cows from the bridegroom.

4. **Prajapatya**: A contract was signed with the intended husband and the bride's father said, "You two shall now practice your householders' duties together."

5. **Asura**: The bridegroom received a maiden after giving as much money as he could afford to the kinsmen of the bride and to the bride herself.

6. **Gandharva**: The voluntary union of a woman and her lover.

7. **Rakshasa**: The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home by the man who intended to marry her.

8. **Palshacha**: A man stealthily seduced a sleeping, intoxicated or mentally disabled girl and later married her.

The first four types were the approved forms of marriage although the others existed as well. Manu said that even if a man had married in

\(^{50}\) First published in Shades of Grey; catharticnemesis.blogspot.com, January 2006.
due form, he could legally abandon his wife if she was blemished, diseased or deflowered, and had been fraudulently given to him.51

Today's 'love marriage' is similar to the Gandharva form of marriage which was spoken of in ancient times (and is still often looked down on). Kalidas wrote about it in his play Shaktintala in which a curse by the sage, Durvasas, caused Shakuntala's husband, the king, Dushyant, to forget her and therefore refuse to recognize her as being his wife. And since their marriage had been in the Gandharva form, she could not produce any witnesses to support her story.

Women also became less able to fend for themselves during this period because their lives changed in the educational arena: they were no longer either encouraged or-in many cases - permitted to study. In fact, the scriptures specifically said that women are unfit to hear the Vedas.52 Although, even then, there were occasional instances of people speaking out against the control of women by men; for example, sometime between 100 and 200 AD, Tiru-Valluvar questioned the use of 'that purity which is brought about by physical restrictions and isolation to which women are subjected'.53

And to make matters worse, patriarchy was, by this time, so deeply entrenched in society that the Smritis not only declared that women had no property of their own but also that they were property themselves-the wealth which they earned was deemed to have been earned 'for him to

51 Manu IX.72
52 Bhag. Pur. 1.4.25 (900 CE)
53 Rajagopalachari, C. (tran.), *Tirukkural c. 100AD* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan), 2002.
The Position of Women during Medieval Period

The position of women in the early medieval period changed gradually. The joint family system had an attitude of moral and spiritual degradation towards women. The social conditions deteriorated rapidly during the medieval period. For nearly 2000 years from 300 B.C. to A.D. 1800, truly the dark ages of India, the development of woman steadily stuttered though she was affectionately nurtured by the parents, loved by the husband and cared by her children.

The social institution of the joint family on the whole discouraged the independence and initiative of its members. It has limited the freedom of action even of its members to such an extent that a man may be said to have led not his own life of his family. The concentration of the authority in the head of the family, while making for discipline, reverence for age and obedience, left an unhealthy influences, for younger members lived in a state of subordination which obscured personal liberty and prevented development of character. This is especially marked in the case of women. “The mother, or in her absence the wife of the eldest male member, is the virtual ruler of the household. She is one of the final granite strongholds of orthodoxy and preserver of outworn customs and for a little daughter-in-law to defy her is almost unthinkable. Every female member is bound to implicit obedience of her regulations, directions or orders. These extend not only to household matters but even

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54 Manu VIII. 416.
to the daughter-in-law's intimate relations with her husband and children."

Generally speaking, before the advent of the Muslims, the status of the Hindu women was certainly better. There were many factors directly and indirectly responsible for the continuous deterioration in the status of Indian woman in medieval times. Early marriage became a rule – to safeguard the honour and chastity of girls. The Hindu law gave unequal and indifferent treatment to woman. They were discriminated against in marriage, marital status, divorce, widowhood and inheritance.

In a joint Hindu family the father was the head of the family. Sons acquired rights in the family property as soon as they were born. Daughters had none and were entitled only to maintenance, but a widow without a son had a share in the property until her remarriage or death. The father could not alienate property without the consent of the male agnates who would naturally succeed except in case of necessity, for example to save the whole by selling a part. "He [father] is subject to their [sons] control simply because the rule of agnatic succession would not operate if he had absolute power of alienation."

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During the period from about 300 B.C. to the beginning of the Christian era drastic social change took place, which led to the curtailment of the freedom of women. Students of the Indian social history are of the opinion that the sons were valued more than daughter because the Aryans had a tough time of fight with tribal people who inhabited the Gangetic plains when the Aryans moved eastward from Punjab. In this way a desire for sons was created so that they could participate in the wars against the local tribals. Another thought is that there was great importance to ancestral worship than in the rig-Vedic days. And as such, the sons were more valued than the daughters. Some scholars are of the opinion that Upanishadic, Buddhistic and Jaina influence of asceticism is responsible for neglecting the daughters. The monks in search of the self alone relinquished all rites and renounced their homes. They also renounced their desire for sons, for wealth and for the worlds. They simply lead a life of beggar wondering from place to place. Consequently many young women renounced their homes and joined the Buddhistic and the Jaina monasteries. The one of the reasons of early marriage of girls was perhaps to prevent them from entering the monasteries as nuns. In due course of time the Aryans managed to overpower non-Aryan people, i.e., local tribals. The Aryans married the non-Aryan women. There was no objection to such marriages but the non-Aryan women were prohibited from participating in the religious rituals. Initially non-Aryan wives were denied the right of religious scarifies as they were not educated and the Sanskrit language was unknown to them. As time passed, all women whether Aryan or non-Aryan was denied the right of Vedic studies and religious duties. The Upanayanam for girls became a mere formality. In the absence of education in the childhood, the girls were married soon after puberty. The Dharam Sastras declared
that marriage was a substitute for Upanayanam, the neglect of education and lowering of the marriage age produced disastrous consequences upon the position and status of women.

Among the middle and the lower classes their position has been found unsatisfactory. The literature of early medieval India contains instances of protest against the exclusion of women from equal opportunities. Examples of protests for not allowing them to participate in the religious practices, are available too. The political condition also appears to have had their impact on the status of women. There were invasions during the period 300 B.C. to A.D.300 by the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthian and the Kushans. The political reverses, the atrocities due to war and the decline of prosperity, produced a detrimental effect on the society. The preaching of Upnadi shism, Buddhism and Jainism started spreading and the status of widow was badly affected. Remarriage of widows was stopped and they were asked to devote themselves to and ascetic life at home. The tonsure (shaving of head) of the widow was enforced by about the eighth century A.D. the purdah system was widely used in the middle class families. Altekar summarizes the pathetic condition of women as, “Thus for nearly 2000 years from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800, the position of woman steadily deteriorated though she was fondled by the parents, loved by the husband, remarriage, the spread of purdah and the greater prevalence of polygamy made her position very bad.”64 The honoured position which the women enjoyed before the advent of Muslims in India gradually deteriorated during the Turkish rule. While the older tradition of high respect for them continued in a section of society.65 There were some people who looked down upon

65 The Laws of Manu, Tr. By Buhler, p. 85 (Shlokas, 55-59).
them and denounced them as the root cause of the ruin of men. A girl in Hindu house was taught to respect the members of the family, especially the elders, from her very childhood. She was supposed to worship her husband like God and obey his commands. She was expected to be true to her husband and serve him even in the time of adversity. She was to follow her pativrata dharma (complete loyalty and devotion to husband) and lead a very chaste life. There was a marked deterioration in the status of woman in the medieval period.

Segregation of women is enforced by Islam. Women according to the Holy Quran should be confined to homes and if forced to go outside of her home, they should strictly observe purdah. Further, their dress and conduct should not attract the male passers-by. Thus complete seclusion came to be a rule for all Muslim ladies of the word. In India among the Hindus, however, the purdah system existed long before the advent of the Muslims. S.M. Jaffar writes, "Seclusion of women could be traced back to all ancient communities and it was particularly so among the aristocracy during the palmy days to Hindu civilization." In ancient India ladies were truly excluded from mixing with males and they observed purdah by moving lapel of their saris or other head dress slightly over their face when passing by a stranger. Thus undoubtedly purdah is an ancient indigenous institution and has been existing in India from time immemorial. Truly with the advent of Turks in India strict purdah system

66 Tulsi Das, Ram Charitmanas (Gorakhpur: Gita Press), 2000, p. 778
67 Ibid., pp. 631-632
68 Keshav, Ram Chandrika, Part I (Delhi: Banarsidass), n.d., p. 135.
70 The Holy Quran refers, 'O Prophet I speak to thy wives and to thy daughters and to the wives of the faithful that they let their wrappers fall low.' Chapt. XXII Surah XXXIII.
71 Jaffar, S. M., Some Cultural Aspects of Muslim Rule in India (Peshawar: S. Muhammad), 1939, pp. 200-201.
became very common, and new plans about the purdah was introduced in this land from Persia.

In Mughal India, purdah was mainly observed by classes of Muslim ladies with slight differences. Hamilton writes, “The Mohammedan women always go veiled when they appear abroad.” Hamilton writes, “The Mohammedan women always go veiled when they appear abroad.”\(^\text{72}\) Ladies of the upper class society strictly observed purdah none could notice the toes of their feet. In fact purdah came to be considered as a dimension of respectability among higher classes. Della Valle remarks, “For these unless they be dishonest or poor never come abroad.”\(^\text{73}\) Caeri writes, “The Mohammedan women do not appear in public except only the vulgar sort, and the leud ones.”\(^\text{74}\) No Muslim could tolerate his wife noticeable in public at any cost. Once when a soldier was travelling with his wife and daughter, the tax collector and also wounded his several attendants. He also felt himself dishonoured as his wife and daughter seen by the tax collector and so he killed them too.\(^\text{75}\)

It was regarded dishonour if a Muslim lady of high family discarded purdah to save her life even temporarily. Manucci writes: “Among the Mohammedans it was a great dishonour for a family when a wife is compelled to uncover herself”\(^\text{76}\). Amir Khan felt much degraded and decided to divorce his wife when she had failed to observe purdah in

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\(^{72}\) Hamilton, The Fontana of Economic History of Europe, Volume 1 (London: Hamilton), 1900, p. 163
\(^{74}\) Surendernath Sen (ed.), Travels by Thevenot and Careri (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 1949, p. 248.
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
an effort to save her life by leaping from the back of the elephant who had run amuck.\textsuperscript{77}

Purdah was so strictly observed that even doctors, being males, could not see and touch a woman patient. Manucci writes that the Mohammedans are very touchy in subject of allowing their women to be noticed and even touched by hand.\textsuperscript{78} A curious procedure was adopted by doctors for diagnosing the malady as best as they could, without seeing her face or feeling her pulse. A handkerchief was rubbed all over the body of the female patient and then it was put into a jar of water. The doctor afterwards judged the course of illness by its smell and prescribed the medicine\textsuperscript{79} accordingly.

In case of illness of a woman of a royal harem the physician was taken to the patient covering his eyes with a coarse cloth, so that he might not see the retired ladies. The physician remained outside the door behind the screen and the patient presented only that part of the hand un-wrapped so that pulse could be felt. He, thus, diagnosed the disease by feeling the patient's pulse from behind a curtain.\textsuperscript{80} But like Razia Sultan, Empress Nurjahan also defied the purdah convention, and showed her extraordinary personality in the public. On state occasions, she appeared in public and always insisted to see personally the things and the people whose conditions and whose affairs she was called upon to regulate and rule.\textsuperscript{81} However, face was covered upto the lips.

\textsuperscript{81} Introducing India Pt. I Pub. R.A.S.B. 1947 Art No. 9, p. 92.
Whenever, the honourable ladies of the higher section moved about, they were carried in 'dolls' with men in attendance. The ladies of middle class also strictly observed purdah and always appeared abroad in 'chadar'\textsuperscript{82} and 'burgas' or long garments covering their heads\textsuperscript{83} and bodies down to their ankles.\textsuperscript{84}

But no such strict purdah system was observed among the people of lower classes like Peasants and working class women, working in fields. They moved about freely without any veil or 'burros' and observed only 'ghunghat',\textsuperscript{85} like their Hindu sisters, and hid their faces from men while appearing in public. Thus to some extent they followed this Quranic rule, "Women can move about and earn their living but they have to cast down their eyes and to conceal those parts of their body that are apt to excite passions and not to display their ornaments."\textsuperscript{86}

In Muslim society purdah was observed so strictly that it was considered a great dishonour even to address a respectable lady by her name in the assembly of men. Even in her own household she was forbidden to talk or laugh loudly lest other men hear her voice. Association with any male relatives other than her husband or such male relatives as are forbidden in marriage by reason of consanguinity, was

\textsuperscript{82} Abdul Qadir Badauni refers to a lady who filed for separation (Khula) from her husband on the ground of his absence from her, Muntakhabaul-Twarikh, Vol. III, Tr. (G. S. A. Ranking, W. H. Lowe, and Sir Wolseley Haig) (Calcutta), n.d., p. 503.

\textsuperscript{83} Surendernath Sen (ed.), \textit{Travels by Thevenot and Careri}, op. cit., p. 240.


\textsuperscript{86} The Holy Quran, Chapt. XXIV Verses 30-31
prohibited. Della Valle remarks, 'the Mohammendans would not allow their wives to talk even to their relatives except in their presence'.

There was no such complete seclusion of Turkish women from the outside world as in India. Mughal ladies could receive their male relatives from abroad more liberally than Indian Muslims. Monrique also records that on one occasion he dined with the minister Asaf Khan and met the Emperor and various members of the imperial family. In this feast, many unveiled ladies of rank took their seats at the table. Thus all these show that, the prohibition regarding 'Purdah of the Mughals of that time was never severe.

Domestic sphere was the most important field of a woman’s activities. She had to do all the household work. In the early morning she used to grind the corn. Then she prepared food and served it herself. She went to fetch water from the well. She would mud-plaster the floor and sweep the house. In leisure she would spin for making garments. Thus, her whole day was occupied with the domestic affairs which formed the usual routine.

89 Manrique, Jorge, *Coplas por la muerte de su padre don Rodrigo* (Verses on the Death of his Father (Spain: Don Rodrigo), 1476, p. 52.
Social Ills

Dowry: The marriage of the girls was sometimes a difficult problem because of the custom of dowry (Oahe/). It was given at the time of the marriage of the girl by her parents. It consisted of presents like jewels, ornaments, furniture, elephants, horses, maids and other articles of luxury. It was an old custom and gradually it became rigorous. This system was prevalent more among the rich than among the commoners. It also appears that it was absent among the Brahmans. The nature of dowry differed with the economic standards of the parents. The foreign travellers also took notice of the system of dowry prevalent in India.

Usually it was the bridegroom's side which received the dowry. But the reverse cannot be ruled out and in some cases the parents or guardians of the bride also received the dowry. This custom was prevalent mostly among the lower classes in the region comprising today of the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It was particularly followed in cases of aged and moneyed grooms who wanted to marry young girls. In this connection references to the practice of purchasing brides are also found. It appears that the evils of dowry system prevailed with greater rigour in Bengal. There was also a curious custom of giving away a younger sister of the bride to the bridegroom as a part of dowry.

Child Marriage: Child marriage had become a popular feature of the social life in the Mughal period. Girls were generally married before

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99 Ibid., p. 3.
they reached the age of nine or ten years. Both the Hindus and the Muslims had fallen prey to this evil practices. Among the Hindus sometimes daughters were married even before they had learnt to talk. Among the Muslims, daughters were generally married at a very young age.

Child Birth: Another noteworthy thing which is observed by the foreign travellers too was that childbirth was taken by the common Indian women very easily. After the birth of the child the very next day the mothers would be found moving about and doing work. If they gave birth to a child on their journey, the next day they would ride on horseback carrying along their child. But this was true only in the case of the poor women of labour class.

Sati: The greatest tragedy in the life of a Hindu woman was the death of her husband. Unlike the Muslims, widow-remarriage was not permitted among the Hindus in the Mughal period except among some lower classes. A widow had to burn herself with the dead body of her husband or had to lead a life of suffering and misery and was treated with contempt by the other members of the family. Society looked down upon the widows who did not perform Sati. They were not allowed to

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100 Withington, Nicholas, Early Travels (London: Oxford University Press), 1908, p. 221.
101 Manucci, Niccolo, tr. by William Irvine, Storia do Mogor; or, Mogul India 1633-1708, op. cit., pp. 54-59.
105 Manucci, Niccolo, tr. by William Irvine, Storia do Mogor; or, Mogul India 1633-1708, op. cit., p. 60.
grow their hair long or to put on ornaments and good dresses.\textsuperscript{107} Widowhood was considered a punishment of the sins of previous lives.\textsuperscript{108} The practice of performing Sati voluntarily was an ancient custom,\textsuperscript{109} but gradually emphasis was laid on becoming Safi after the death of her husband even against her wishes.\textsuperscript{110} It was mostly performed by the ladies of the Brahmin, Kshtriya and Bania community. Almost all the foreign travellers who visited India during the Mughal period mention that women used to burn themselves with the dead body of their husbands.\textsuperscript{111} Still there were many ladies who refused to perform it.\textsuperscript{112}

Just like Sati, Jauhar was also performed by ladies particularly in Rajputana. When a Rajput Chief and his soldiers became sure of their defeat in battle, they either killed their women and children or locked them and set them to fire; thereafter they went to battlefield and gallantly died fighting.\textsuperscript{113}

Some of the Mughal Emperors tried to ban this practice. Akbar is said to have issued an order that a woman should not be forced to be a Sati.\textsuperscript{114} Jahangir is also said to have prohibited Sati. It could not be performed without the permission of the King especially in case of young

\textsuperscript{107} Withington, Nicholas, \textit{Early Travels}, op. cit., p. 219.
\textsuperscript{108} Della Vale, \textit{Landscape of Anglo-Saxon}, op. cit., p. 435.
\textsuperscript{109} Surendernath Sen (ed.), \textit{Travels by Thevenot and Careri}, op. cit., p. 250.
\textsuperscript{111} Hawkins, Stephen, \textit{Early Travels} (London: Oxford University Press), 1909, p. 119.
widows. In the year 1663 A.D. Aurangzeb issued an order banning the Sati system. Still those widows who did not have children were allowed to perform Sari while those who had, were not. In spite of all these efforts Safi could not be altogether suppressed under the Mughals.

_Parda._ Parda was observed mainly by the Muslim ladies and was not so rigid with the Hindu ladies. The practice of strict veiling was common among the Mohammedans. With the advent of Turks in India it was also adopted by the Hindu women as a protective measure to save their honour at the hands of the foreign invaders. It appears that the tendency to imitate the ruling class also gave impetus to the parda system. Abundant references of the observance of parda are found in the accounts of contemporary foreign travellers. Parda was mainly confined to the rich and well-to-do classes. Poor women, especially in villages, worked in fields and could not afford to observe Parda.

**Property Rights**

Some of the ladies held Zamindaris (villages), Milkiyat-rights, and lands. They had the liberty of inheriting, selling and disposing of their properties. A lady named Sabhanu, who was the sister of one Mahan

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116 Manucci, Niccolo, tr. by William Irvine (1907) *Storia do Mogor; or, Mogul India 1633-1708*, op. cit., p. 97.
117 Ibid., p. 156.
120 Chopra, P. N., *Society and Culture in Mughal Age* (Agra: Agra Publishers), 1955, p. 104
Singh sold her village Debidaspur in about 1681 A.D. 123 Another lady named Bhikan was the owner (proprietress) of two villages, Baidaura and Baidauri in the year 1672 A.D. 124 Other similar references are also found in various contemporary records. 125

Many farmans issued during this period confirm the possession of lands, gardens and sarais by women. Inayatullah 'v'akil, on behalf of his wife Bibi Rakhi, sold a plot of land to Mir Ghulam Haider. 126 Bibi Sukhi sold a plot of land outside the Qila in Kol for two hundred rupees. The transcription on her behalf was done by Abdur Razzaqq. 127 Sheikh Sadullah, on behalf of his mother Bibi Saba sold a garden of five biswa for rupees one hundred and one of Sheikh Mohammad Yusuf of Kol. 128 Abdul Razzaq, on behalf of his mother Sakhi, sold a sarai for two hundred rupees. 129

Some women also received grants of lands in form of Madadi-Maash 130 Seventy bighas of and was measured by 1/ahi yard in pargana Kol and was given to Khatoon as Madad-i-Maash in the forty-first regnal year of Aurangzeb. 131 Again forty-five biswas of land was conferred on Mahan; in the same pargana. 132 Achhi Bibi possessed eighteen bighas of Pukhta land as Madad-i-Maash (1739 A.D.). 133 During the reign of

123 U.P. Records Office, Allahabad, Accession Register of the U.P. Records Inquiry Committee Records Nos. 1215 and 1216 as quoted in Habib, Irfan, Agrarian System in Mughal India, op. cit.
124 Ibid., p. 155
125 Ibid.
126 Farman No. 2 (1737 A. D.) in the Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University. It is a Sale Deed.
127 Farman No. 22, Ibid.
128 Farman Nos. 47, 57, Ibid.
129 Ibid., No. 15
130 Habib, Irfan, Agrarian System in Mughal India, op. cit., p. 707
131 Farman No. 212 in the Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University
132 Ibid., Nos. 213 and 220.
133 Ibid., No. 176 (1739 A. D.)
Farrukhsiyar eighty-five bighas of land in pargana Kol was confirmed as Madad-i-Maash to a lady named Aisha. Many such references are found in the Mughal farmans which bear out that women used to hold and in form of Madad-i-Maash.

**Religion**

Religion was predominant in the lives of the ladies whether they were Hindus or Muslims. A Hindu lady kept various fasts, visited temples, and read religious books, while a Muslim woman similarly read Quran, offered prayers called Namaz and also kept fasts. Both celebrated their religious festivals with great enthusiasm.

There were some women who devoted themselves wholly to religion and became saints or mystics. Bibi Fatima Saiman, the sister of Sheikh Fariduddin, and Bibi Zulekha, the mother of Nizamuddin Aulia, were among them. Another lady named Bibi Nauni, who used to sell tobacco, later on attained the highest degree of mysticism. Mata Sundari, a lady in the harem of Guru Govind Singh, established a monastery of her own and many Sikhs came to join her monastery. Thus, it appears that women also took to asceticism and sometimes became Joganis (lady ascetics).

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134 Ibid., No. 195
135 Ibid., Nos. 198, 201, 205, 207, 209, 216-221, 223-225, 238, 246 and 255.
136 Kayatha, Chattarman, Chahar Gulshan, f. 28a.
138 Kayatha, Chattarman, Chahar Gulshan, ff. 36b, 37a.
139 Ibid., f. 150a
Education

As regards the education of common women, girls belonging to middle-class family did not receive much education. Some of them visited schools, run in private houses by some elderly ladies. Girls of the poor family were almost left illiterate except a few who were collected and sometimes given instructions by the Mulas of the mosque or by some Pandits in Pathshalas. The subjects of studies were mainly domestic-science such as needle work, embroidery, cooking and household work.

On the whole, the education of common women was not widespread. There were no regular and separate schools for them. Boys and girls in the early years studied together, but even that seems doubtful due to the strict parda system prevalent in those days. Moreover, their studies were hampered due to the practice of early marriages.

Literary Activities

During the Mughal period though the education of the common women was ignored, yet there were many ladies who took keen interest in literary activities. They were not only the inspiration of the poets of that

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141 Hussain Yusuf, Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture (Bombay: Asia Publishing House), 1947, p. 93.
143 Ibid.
145 Manucci, Niccolo, tr. by William Irvine (1907) Storia do Mogor; or, Mogul India 1633-1708, Vo. III, op. cit., p. 55.
146 Jaffar, S. M., Education in Muslim India (Lahore: Ripon Publishers), 1936, p. 200.
147 Juddhith, Sarkar, History of Aurangzib, Shivaji and His Times, Studies in Mughal India, op. cit., p. 301.
period but they also enriched the contemporary literature by their own works.

A close examination of the contemporary Hindi literature reveals that the contribution of ladies is fairly rich, qualitatively as well as quantitatively. For the sake of convenience the women writers of the Mughal period can be divided into three major groups—those who were influenced by Bhakti Movement and composed verses devoted to Rama or Krishna; those who were influenced by the contemporary Reeti kavya devoted to rhetorics and prosody and the physical beauty of women; and finally those who composed verses on various diverse subjects. However, most of them derived their inspiration from religion and composed verses devoted to their favourite form of God.

**Saint Poetesses**

The Nirgun aspect of Bhakti (devotion) also influenced a number of poetesses. The subjects which they usually dealt with were the importance of teacher (Guru), praises of renowned saints, importance of knowledge, etc. They excelled in expressing their emotions and feelings, but usually wrote didactic poetry. Among the saint poetesses, the earliest reference is found of Indra Mati, the wife of Pran Nath who flourished in the sixteenth century and composed some Dohas in 1549 A.D.\(^{148}\)

During the reign of Akbar a number of saint poetesses flourished. Ganga and Jamuna, the two disciples of Hit ji, belong to this period.

Others of the same school were Kaimashi Devi, Rani Rar Dhari and Navla Devi\textsuperscript{149} but the details about them are not available.

The tradition continued even afterwards and some of them flourished in the eighteenth century. Among them, mention may be made of Daya Bai, the disciple of Charan Das. She composed her poems about the-middle of the eighteenth century. Two of her works which are available today are 'Daya Bodh' and 'Vinaya Malika'.\textsuperscript{150} A contemporary of Daya Bai was Sahjo Bai who was also a disciple of Charan Das. One of her works, known as 'Sahaj Prakash', is available, in which she has written about the importance of a good teacher and the qualities of a saint.\textsuperscript{151}

Whereas the earlier invaders of India merged with and became absorbed in the life of the sub-continent, incorporating their gods into the Hindu pantheon, the Muslims who came in the eleventh century A.D. were very much the rulers, whom the Hindus could not accept. The first comers, Turks and Persians, looked upon Indians "as an inferior race" while Indian Muslims who proved worthy were, at times, given positions of trust. Hindus as a class were generally made to feel that they were a subject race whose salvation lay in absolute obedience to the Muslims."\textsuperscript{152}

Hinduism, tolerant as it always is credited to be, could not include Islam. Neither could the Muslims extinguish the Hindus. This must have angered the rulers, for their militancy had so far crushed the countries which they had conquered, and annihilated the original religions which existed in Egypt, Asia Minor and Syria. Zoroastrianism had also been

\textsuperscript{149} Rasal, Sahityua Prakash, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., pp. 51-52.
crushed. And here were the Hindus unshakeable and adamant as far their faith was concerned. The Muslims did not so openly condemn Christianity or Judaism as these two religions were mentioned in the Book, which made their adherents Kithabias.\textsuperscript{153}

But the cultures of the two countries did to a certain extent mingle, and such Islamic customs as Purdah enveloped Indian women with all its force. The first five hundred years of Muslim rule were particularly oppressive but changes for a better understanding between the people took place when Ibrahim Lodi was defeated at Panipat in 1525 by Babar, the founder of the Mughal Empire. Though the new rulers brought the laws of Chengiz Khan with them, and Mongol culture, they were far more civilized and less aggressive than their predecessors. The first three hundred years, however, were ones of dark despair for India, especially for its women, for the Muslims not only ruled and looted the land, desecrated the lovely temples and mocked at the Indian way of life; but it threatened the very sanctity of Hinduism.

The Muslims practised Polygamy, but the Prophet himself, though he married and indulged in many pleasures, had a deep respect for women. The position of women in the Muslim world, nevertheless, deteriorated. In the Caliphate at Baghdad, Arab sodomy was combined with Byzantium and Persian vices. Great orgies of sensual pleasures were the order of the day. This life of ease and luxury nevertheless made the men jealous of their women, whom they considered as their own precious possessions. "With such flaming vices running in their veins, men were insisting on the fidelity of their women; and what they could not get by love they decided to force by the cudgel; the development of the Purdah,

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
particularly its more undesirable features, was in no small measure due to this masculine effort to break the spirit of women."\textsuperscript{154}

When purdah was first introduced in Arabia it is said that a niece of Ayesha, the Prophet's wife, refused to wear the veil. She said: "On me God has set the seal of beauty, and I rejoice when my beauty is seen and the mercy of God therein acknowledged. Never shall I cover my face for no flaw or fault finds a place in God's work."\textsuperscript{155}

Such was not the good fortune of her sisters of the Islamic faith. Women were not allowed to show their faces in public and even to attend mosques. Any women who did not veil her face were taken to be a shameless hussy, and because she exposed herself to the public gaze, she was often molested. When such a form of purdah was introduced in India, naturally Indian women also could not appear in public and took to the veil, not covering themselves entirely with the Burkha but with the end of their saris. Hindu kings introduced the Muslim harem in their palaces, and even till a few decades ago, royal Kshatriya ladies strictly observed purdah. Ladies of high caste in the medieval period never went out into the streets except in palanquins and litters.

Apart from purdah, other evils seemed to have prevailed more extensively. New cultures and habits were introduced by the conquerors. There was an upheaval of economic, social and political life and for many years the people were unsettled, and afraid, for they seemed to have lost their old morale, which had existed before the decadence of Hindu India set in about the eighth century and left the country free for the Muslim conquest. Evils such as polygamy, sati, child-marriages and the


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
prevention of widows from re-marrying considerably lowered the status of women.

Sati became much more widespread, even though the law made it optional whether a widow wished to burn herself or not. "A strong convention had risen among high caste Hindus that a widow unencumbered by pregnancy, infant-in-arms or old age should voluntarily announce her intention to become Settee immediately on the death of her husband; in most cases, the decision so announced was genuine as the woman was in extreme distress. And once the decision was announced, it was irrevocable."\(^{156}\)

Bernier and other Europeans relate harassing and heroic experiences of Suttees, and also some incidents when priests and onlookers forced a Suttee, whose courage failed her at the last minute, into the funeral pyre.

Women were not educated in the medieval period, and apart from the Bhakta poetesses, we know little of the educational system for girls. It must be remembered, however, that this may not entirely have been the fault of the rulers. As has been seen, at the end of the Hindu period, child marriages virtually stopped girls' education. The Muslim conquest was but the final push into further retrogression. The education allowed to girls and the sanction of nuns by the Buddhists now disappeared. Ashrams and monasteries and forest universities were uprooted. Parivarajikas or wandering nuns who had become a part of India and had free access to rich and poor homes were now no longer seen. After the sixteenth century, general change for the better seemed to have occurred, especially when Akbar became the Emperor, but five centuries of the

\(^{156}\) Ibid., p. 263.
darkest period of the story of women had not left the country with any of its former buoyancy. The occasional alliance between a Muslim prince and a Hindu lady helped to raise the standards of the latter, but they were still very afraid of their rulers. Education after the sixteenth century, however, did seem to be possible, and even the teaching of Sanskrit was allowed to women. They blossomed forth into classical Sanskrit poetry, and like the earlier Bhakti poetesses wrote mostly in praise of Krishna. For this reason they can be classed with spate of religious women singers who started in the early part of the medieval India and continued in a sense the religious songs of the Buddhist Bhikkunis.

**The Position of Women in Modern Period**

During the nineteenth and twentieth century’s, the status of women was improved by the untiring efforts of the following social reformers among others:

i. Ram Mohan Rai (1774-1833)
ii. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820—1871)
iii. Dayanand Saraswati (1827-1883)
iv. Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884)

The important reason of the change in the social status of women in the nineteenth century is the acceptance of the tenets of liberal philosophy from the Western civilization. It emphasized the principle of contract not the status, a rational outlook of life and its problems, freedom of speech, criticism of authority, authenticity of dogmas and insistence on the rights of man as opposed to his duties.

For the first time in India, social legislation was enacted by the Government in nineteenth century. Rammohan Rai, informed Lord William Bentinck, the then the Governor-General of India that there was
no mention of sati in the ancient Hindu religious books. Accordingly, in 1829, he abolished sati and made it a crime. Ram Mohan Rai established Bramasamaj and advocated the principle of freedom of women and equality of sexes. The untiring effort of Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar promulgated the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and thus widow remarriage became legal. The great leaders of the nineteenth century saw the pathetic condition of thousands of child widows because of the practice of early marriage that was prevalent throughout the society.

In nineteenth century, Civil Marriage Act of 1872 was passed on account of courage and perseverance of Kasha Chandra Sen. This act made marriage a secular ceremony. The registration of marriage was compulsory; the age of marriage of girls was raised to 14 years. It also permitted widow remarriage and intercast marriage which was illegal up to that time the most significant feature of civil marriage Act was the enforcement of monogamy. The Hindu society accepted these great social changes of inter-caste marriage and monogamy in 1956, after a three-fourth century.

The social reformers of nineteenth century also attempted to educate Indian girls. During the period from about 300 B.C. there was practically no education for women. Few women of the upper castes and upper classes had some education at their homes. The Dharam Sastra writers made women along with Shudras ineligible for Vedic studies.

American Mission started a school for girls in Bombay in 1824. In 1851 an Indian Society were formed to start girl’s schools. The National Committee on Women’s Education, 1959 says, “It cannot be denied that the general picture of the education of women was the most unsatisfactory and women received practically no formal instruction whatever, except
for the little domestic instruction that was available to the daughters of the upper class families”.

According to the Charter Act of 1813, the East India Company was entrusted with the responsibility of the education of the Indian people. Its efforts were restricted to the education of Boys and no effort was made for the education of girls as the Hindu society at that time prohibited it.

The famous Wood Dispatch of 1854 reports.

i. There were 65 girls’ schools with 3500 pupils in Bombay Presidency.
ii. There were 256 girls’ schools with 8000 pupils in Madras Presidency.
iii. There were 288 girls’ schools with 7000 pupils in Bengal Presidency.

The rest of the country had very few schools. The Christian missions and the voluntary Indian bodies made a significant progress for the girl’s education by the middle of the nineteenth century in comparison with hardly any education at the beginning of the century. The upheavals of 1857 as a result of the Indian War of Independence restarted the progress of education because the government adopted the path of religious as well social neutrality. In 1870 Municipalities were established, which helped to developed the primary education in India. In 1870, training colleges for women were established for the first time for imparting training to the women so that they could become teachers in girls’ schools. In 1882 the Education Commission recommended to open more schools for girls and to attract girls above twelve to the school education. It also recommended the appointment of women as teachers and inspector of girls’ schools. The stipends were granted to widows who enrolled themselves for teacher training.
By the end of the nineteenth century the women not only became teachers in girls’ schools, they also entered the profession of nurses and doctors. The entry of women in professions indicated the marked change in the outlook of men and women in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Considering the progress made by the girls; education, it is beyond any doubt that the credit goes to Rammohan Rai who advocated for the women education in the beginning of the century. The nineteenth century may be called as a period of social change. In the beginning of the century, sati was prevalent and thousands of women were burnt at the funeral pyres of their husbands whereas by the end of the century, parents willingly sent their daughters to schools and also to work as teachers, nurses and doctors.

There were several Indian women who worked for the betterment of the status of women. Pandita Bai (1858-1922) belonged to a learned Brahmin family in Karnataka. She attained the proficiency in Sanskrit language and she addressed many learned groups in different parts of the country, after the death of her parents she along with her brother traveled in the society, in 1880. She showed her boldness by marrying a man of a different caste and different language in 1880 after the death of her brother. After the Aria Mahila Samaj with the help of other leaders like Ranade and Bhandarkar. Hunter Commission, after seeing the progress of Samaj in 1882, sent her to England where she was baptized as a Christian; She went to America in 1886 and returned to Bombay in 1889. She started a Sharda Sadan for the destitute high cast widows. The Hindu leaders objected to the conversion of Hindu widows to Christianity and as a result of which Ranade and Bhandakar left the Sadan; she shifted to Khedgaon near Poona and established Muktisadan where she gave general education and vocational training to thousands of women. There
were many more outstanding women who contributed to the emancipation of women in the nineteenth century.

In the last decade of the century, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) also gave a great impetus for the liberation of women from seclusion and bondage. He said, “That country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in the future.” He advocated the liberation of women and equality on the basis of the vedantic ideals that state. “One and the same self is present in all beings.” According to him, the helplessness and dependence of women on man are due to the training given to her by men. In case she is not governed tyrannically her hidden power will make her a lioness. He emphasized that proper education will enable her to solve her problems and having independent thinking.

In 1917, Annie Besant (1847-1933), enlightened British women who settled down in India since 1803, launched the Home Rule agitation for the liberation of women. She was elected the President of the Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress. In 1918 The Calcutta Session opined that the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with the local Government and Education.” In 1919 the Nagpur Session was attended by about 200 women delegates. This was also a striking evidence of the political awakening of the Indian women. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged thousands of women to participate in the political movement. Gandhi’s fundamental faith in the equality of women was based, “on non-violence, women have a much right to establish her own destiny as man has to establish his.” He contradicted the preaching of Dharama Sastras for the injustice done to women. He expressed his opinion about the religious texts written after 300 B.C. that they advocate social inequality, promotion of child marriage and widowhood till death. According to
Gandhi only the preaching of the Dharmasatras need be followed that advocate social equality and social justice, between man and man and between man and woman. He openly said, “I passionately desire utmost freedom of our women.”

The great campaigner and leader of social and political movements, Gandhi could see and realize the importance of the participation of the women who constitute 50% of the Indian population. He declared that no nation can prosper without participation of the women and men together.

The most important event after Independence has been the drafting of the Constitution of this country enshrining the principles of equality, liberty and social justice. The framers of the constitution were aware of the sociology of the problem of emancipation of the sex. They realized that equality was important for the development of the nation. It was evident that in order to eliminate inequality and to provide opportunities for the exercise of the human rights it was necessary to promote education and economic interests of women. It became the object of the state to protect women from exploitation and provide social justice. All these ideal were enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, it was directed to take a path of social change by guaranteeing formal equality, economic justice and making the State a welfare State. We may summarize that the efforts of the nineteenth century leaders and untiring work of Gandhi liberated the women who now take rightful place in the society in the same way in which women of Vedic period used to participate. The women now enjoy equal rights with men in social, political and religious activities.