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## WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA: CONFLICTING IMAGES PARALLEL LIVES

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he cultural history of India bears testimony to the fact that theoretically women have been accorded the status of *devi* (Goddess) in our country. In Hindu religion God is shown as 'ardhanarishvara' or 'God who is half woman'. However it is commonly agreed upon that high status of women of the early Vedic period went on to deteriorate during the succeeding ages. Deterioration in women's condition is apparent in all periods following 1500 B.C. and became most visible in the wake of the Muslim invasion and occupation of our country during the 13th century.

The Medieval period (13th century-18th century) marked a new low in the role and status of women in India. Evil practices like *sati*, child marriage, female infanticide, *devadasi* and *purdah* system adversely effected women's condition. Owing to Muslim influence *purdah* was strictly followed which further restricted women's free movement and confined them within the four walls of home. The birth of daughter came to be regarded as a curse. Though the medieval period produced many female heroes like Razia Sultan, Rani Durgavati, Mirabai, Andal, i, Nurjahan, Jijabai, Tarabai, Ahilya Bai Holkar etc who shaped their times in various capacities but these were exceptions rather than general rule.

When the batons of power changed hands from Mughals to the British in the mid 18th century the general condition of women in India was alarmingly distressing. The medieval age (13th-18th century) indeed was the darkest phase in Indian women's life and this was not specific to a singular religion, caste or region. Through the present paper it is attempted to discuss women's condition in India in the medieval context and to know that why and when the daughters of emancipated Vedic Brahmvadinis came to be physio-psychologically schooled to consider themselves as non-competitive and inferior to men, trained to be only good wives and mothers thus ignoring their mental capabilities and multi-tasking skills by limiting both their roles and choices in life.

**KEYWORDS:** Vedic Age, Smriti, Sultanate, Polygamy, Purdah, Ardhnarishvara, Deccan, English.

### INTRODUCTION

Medieval Period in the Indian context refers to the period between the 8th and the 18th century AD which is further sub-divided into two periods: The *early medieval* (8th-13th century) and the *late medieval* (13th-18th century). In the present paper we will be focusing on the late medieval period i.e. 13th to 18th century. This period marked steep deterioration in women's condition. Though we have numerous instances of women coming out of their shell and dominating their times in varying capacities but most of these women belonged to royal or aristocratic families hence their condition could not be a wholesome representation of either their sex or

times. Hence it is wise and prudent to look into the factors that not only worsened women's condition during this period but 'objectified' them also. It's interesting to note that while on the one hand honor was reposed in the female body and its chastity was to be maintained at all costs, leading to practices like *Jauhar* the same women were subjected to all kinds of cruelty and uncharitable treatment. It can be said with certainty that during this period women held a position subordinate to men in the eyes of both religion and law.

### ANCIENT LEGACY-WOMEN IN VEDIC AGE

It is accepted on all accounts that women held a very high position in ancient India, if we talk about the Indus Valley civilization they were worshipped as mother goddess so was the case with the succeeding Aryans who held their women in very high esteem. We have historical evidence to prove that Vedic women enjoyed greater freedom and respect as compared to their successors, more so during the early Vedic period as Vedic initiation was open to them and they were free to choose between the life of domestic bliss through marriage and that of intellectual and philosophical attainment through Vedic studies. It is mentioned in The *Harita Dharmasutra* that there are two kinds of women: the *sadhyavadhu* who marry, and the *brahmavaadini* who wear the sacred thread and read the Vedas. (Chaudhry,1941) Scriptures such as the Rig Veda and Upanishads do mention several women sages and seers, notably *Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Apala, Ghosha* etc.

Though the exalted position of women of early Vedic period went down during the later Vedic period itself but on the whole, women still commanded considerable rights and respect as compared to subsequent periods. Though they were not as free as during the preceding age but they still retained the right to *upanayan* ceremony, were the mistress of home and their say could not be over shadowed in family matters. Though birth of a daughter was not desired but once born she was raised with affection and care. Many learned women seers and teachers graced this period (Leslie,1995). We are aware that a woman's status in the society is usually measured vis-à-vis that of a man. Taking this fact into consideration it can be safely said that perhaps women were not *equals of men* in Vedic India but they were a productive and influential part of the society with considerable influence and had a voice of their own.

### From Epic Age to Pre medieval Era: A cursory Look on Women's Condition

Before we move forward and discuss women's condition in the medieval age it is necessary to peep into the world of those women who inhabited many centuries that passed between the Vedic and the medieval age so that we get a broad overview of the women's condition. While the epic age saw women being both idealized and insulted for example we see that while in Ramayana *Sita* is glorified as the ideal of Indian womanhood the same *Sita* had to live in banishment for no fault of hers (Sugirthrajah, 2002). Likewise *Draupadi*, the female protagonist of Hindu epic *Mahabharata* suffers public humiliation and insult at the hands of her own kinsmen. But the relieving factor lies in the underlying positivity shown towards women as the injustice and ill-treatment done to *Sita* and *Draupadi* lead to vanquishing of clans and empires. In Mahabharat's *Adi Parva* it is mentioned that no man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife. All in all a woman's chief duty lay in being a good mother and wife. In her husband and children's happiness lay her happiness. Jainism and Buddhism remained indifferent to women in the beginning. In fact *Gautam Budha* was not ready to give entry to women in the Buddhist Sangha, it was only after much persuasion that he agreed to do so.

In *Smritis* position of women is contradictory; they are both appreciated and criticized. For example in *Manusmriti* while it is mentioned at one place that "gods dwell where women are worshipped; but where they are not, no sacred rite bears any fruit" the same text declares elsewhere that a woman should be subservient in all stages of her life- "in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and to the son when widowed." (Majumdar&pusalkar, 1951) By the pre-medieval age strict control of men was established on women, during the Rajput period condition of women was similar to the one in smriti period. Primary focus lay on protecting and guarding women. Monogamy was the general norm prevalent in the society but polygamy was also practiced. During this phase of our history women took active part in religious rituals like earlier times, many royal ladies took charge of administration like queen *Suryamati* of Kashmir who managed her state as also many Chalukyan princesses who administered provinces.

### **Life of Women during Medieval Age:**

In the eleventh century Mohammad Ghazni invaded India close on his heels came Muhammad Ghori which ultimately led to the establishment of Islamic rule in the form of the Delhi Sultanate in India. From this time till the mid-eighteenth century drastic change in the existing social and political structure of this country took place, the new emerging politico-cultural influences on our society had far reaching consequences on the social life especially on the women of this country. In the succeeding pages the condition of women during the medieval period will be studied under three heads, viz. the Sultanate, Mughal and the British period.

### **Sultanate Age and Women**

With the Muslim conquest and establishment of Delhi Sultanate during 13th century the condition of women in India underwent great change. Without any trace of doubt it can be said that during the medieval period social status of women was very low among the two majority communities i.e. the Hindus and Muslims. (Gulati,1985) Purdah was strictly followed among the royal and aristocratic families that enormously restricted women's free movement. It is ironical to observe that while women were expected to be devoted to their husbands, men could be polygamous in fact kings maintained big harems to house as many women as possible. Since great value was attached to the chastity and purity of the female body in the medieval society, it had to be protected at all costs. It is worth mentioning that sultan *Firuz Shah Tughluq*, (1309-1388) had prohibited women from even visiting holy shrines, for the fear of immoral and indecent behavior. The practice of *Jauhar* was observed by women and female relations of defeated Rajputs to protect their honor. (Srivastava,1953)

While the ordinary women worked and moved more freely (women helped their men in the fields and other places) royal and upper class women were bound to live a secluded life but they enjoyed certain privileges also like education as the rich could afford private tuitions for their daughters. We have such examples from the period where women got to play important roles in political and administrative affairs. *Razia Sultan* who became the first and only woman to be seated on the throne of Delhi is a glaring example of women empowerment in the medieval period.

### **Mughal Age and Women**

With the defeat of Ibrahim Lodi by Babur in the second battle of Panipat the sultanate period drew to a close and their rose the mighty Mughals on the political scene of India. On the whole the condition of women did not alter or change much with this political change of guards-they remained as lowly placed as they were earlier. Due to the fear of abduction and molestation by Muslim invaders child marriages became rampant among the Hindus to ensure the chastity of girls. Thus Hindu women were robbed of any chance of education. *Purdah* came to be more stringently practiced among upper class Hindus of north India thus further restricting women's free movement and negating their chances of getting educated.

Hindu women suffered on account of evil practices like polygamy, child marriage, Sati, female infanticide, sorry condition of widows etc however the lower class women remained more or less unaffected by most of these social handicaps. In fact there was no purdah among them, they were free to divorce and remarry. Though *Shankaracharya* had tried to improve the lot of Hindu women during the 8th century by preaching equality of the sexes, it is to the Bhakti saints that the credit of opening the avenue of religious equality to women goes. Bhakti saints helped popularize the concept of man-woman equality among the masses; another important contribution of Bhakti movement was related to propagation of education among women as reading of religious books brought them closer to the world of letters. But economically women were still dependent on their men, the lords and power-wielders both at home and outside and as per the norms of patriarchal society females were supposed to be subservient to their male counterparts.

Among Muslims practices like polygamy, unilateral divorce, purdah and lack of female education blighted women's chances at growth and progress. Though remarriage was not a taboo among Muslims besides practice of *mehar* gave them some relief. Theoretically all religions accorded very high status to women for example in Hindu dharma they were worshipped as *devis* besides God is portrayed as '*ardhanariishvara*' or 'God who is half woman', wife being considered *ardhangini* (*better half*) who fulfilled her male



counterpart.(Londhe,2008) Islam recognizes both men and women as equal and both being created from *nafs wahidah* (a single soul), first Sikh Guru Nanak preached man-woman equality. Thus all religions have placed women on a high pedestal but when it comes to practicing this, women fall short of getting their rightful due.

Despite these limitations medieval age produced many women of outstanding ability,who succeeded in carving niche for themselves through their exemplary deeds in the male-dominated society. How can one forget the cool courage of Nurjehan, emperor Jehangir's queen consort who so successfully held the reins of power from behind the veil; or valorous *Chand Bibi* who stood up against the mighty Mughals; or heroics of *Rani Durgavati* of Gondwana; or female saint-poet *Mirabai* who spread message of love and peace through her poetry to name just a few (Pandey & Norman,1965). *Maham Anga, Jija Bai, Jahanara, Roshanara, Zebunnisa* are but a few names in the long list of celebrated ladies belonging to this period.

But these were more of exceptions rather than the general rule as most of these women came from royal families hence their lives can't be truly representative of their times. It can't be denied that both Hindu and Muslim women suffered because of evil social practices.

### WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL DECCAN

During the medieval period women in south India were much better placed as compared to their north Indian counterparts. We have many instances of women ruling over villages, towns and principalities. For example *Mailalladevi* ruled over province of Banasvi and *Piriyaketaldevi* headed three villages. The *Devadasi* system was a distinct feature of contemporary south Indian society. It was the ancient practice of dedicating girls to temple which later took an ugly form leading to exploitation in the name of religion. The practice of *Sati* (sahagamana) was not compulsory in the Deccan though many women opted for it. However widow remarriage was not prevalent in medieval south Indian society. (Kamat,1980)

### BRITISH RULE AND WOMEN

In the middle of the 18th century power center once again changed, with the rise of British and decline of Mughal power a new era began in the history of Indian sub-continent. It decidedly impacted the socio-political structure of the Indian nation. More so because the British were Europeans and their religion, culture and lifestyle was very different from that of Asian races and cultures. During the initial phase of their contact with Indians English adopted a non-interference policy in the social matters of our country but passive though positive British influence could be felt on diverse areas more so on women's condition.

The middle of the 18th century saw social prejudices increase tremendously though much like the preceding centuries upper class women enjoyed privileges like access to education which were unrealizable to ordinary women, Indian society being patriarchal both Hindu and Muslim women remained subjugated to their husbands and their word meant the world to them, ladies did not have any say in public matters, their job was to rear children and do the household chores however they were respected as homemakers. Denial of education to them had limited their worldview; Indian society was deeply engrossed in superstition and backwardness. Evil practices like polygamy, child marriage, purdah, dowry, sati etc troubled Hindu women, unilateral divorce added to the miseries of Muslim ladies. While strict Purdah was observed by upper class women lower class women were free from this obligation as they ventured out of their homes and worked alongside their men folk to earn a living.

Women heroes like *Tara Bai, Ahalya Bai Holkar, Begum Samru, Bibi Sahib Kaur* (Eaton & Richard,2005)displayed exemplary courage and conviction both in the matters of statecraft and battlefield. But again these were exceptions, the general condition of women greatly differed from that of aforementioned names, they were lodged behind the four walls of home with negligible role in the public domain, their lives were meant more for people around them with little or no place for personal choice and opinion.

### CONCLUSION

A careful perusal of textual and literary evidence enlightens us that how the freer Vedic women became more and more dependent on their male counterparts through the succeeding ages getting oriented towards a

restricted life and with their education getting almost banned they came to be regarded as meager tools of pleasure for men with no intellectual merit and decision making capacity. In the beginning of their relationship with India, the British adopted non-interventionist attitude towards the socio-cultural milieu of the country yet positive though reflexive British influence was felt on diverse areas of Indian social life like women's condition. In the long march of history and civilization Indian women have come a long way through. In this long and eventful journey they have come across many obstacles and crisis but the human will to survive has been too strong a force to bow down before adversities. Talking about the medieval women we see that they were not only burdened by the vestiges of the past but the uncertainty and chaos of medieval age had left them in precarious condition. Still the daughters of *Gargi* and *Apala*, *Ghosha* and *Lopamudra* resolutely stood for their cause, paving way for many generations of yet unborn women to reclaim their status.

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