

Women in Ancient India

In every society all around the world, there is a social differentiation in dealing with men and women. Both have different roles, males as resource provider and woman is doing the reproductive and home-making role. Women were recognized as wives and mothers. Not only in India, but also in the whole world, they hold the status of subordinate to men, limited only within the home spheres in ancient time. The patriarchal society never backed women to come out of the domestic area and they never treated women as equivalent to them.

In the ancient Indus valley civilisation of India, women were worshipped as Prakriti, the mother goddess, a very honourable position in the society. Women in ancient India, Matriarchy did exist in the early days of human civilization in many societies. The Indus valley civilization clearly bears the traces of the emergence of the Shakta ritual of Hinduism, which worshiped the goddess as the inventor, preserver and destroyer of the universe, which treats them subordinate. In early days of human civilization, women were the highest dais as a preacher of religion. But certain historians denies the fact and says that the Ancient India failed to establish women power and the later were deprived of equal opportunity with men not only in property rights but also in spiritual practices. Women have very low position in the family as found in the writings of Sanskrit literature and Indo-Aryan Languages. According to Jataks, women were considered as an obstacle in getting salvation. A survey by the historians says that all Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and Epics reveal the status of women and their struggle for power in ancient India. According to some historians' Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata have mentioned the names of several women who were great scholars, poets and philosophers of the time. Wife was regarded as 'Ardhangini', which means she is half of her husband. An unmarried man was considered to be incomplete man. The husband along with the wife in Ancient India performed all religious ceremonies. In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, dharmasalas not merely for the

welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well. Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. With 79.8% of the population following Hinduism (2011 Census), most texts are 'Hindu' texts, though texts belonging to various religions are found in our multi-religious Indian society.

Women in Pre-Vedic Period

Pre- Vedic period begins in 15th century B.C. with the arrival of Aryans in India when patriarchy came into existence. The status of women in this age is not very clear as the people at that time were living in old stone age or Pre-historic age and used to change their place always and gather food, rather than settling permanently in one location. In the long run they changed their behaviour of gathering food and started producing food. They started settling down on river valleys and here in 25th century B.C. Indus valley civilization, the first civilization of India born in which the worshipping of Mother Goddess (Prakriti) was started by the people. This presents the importance of maternal /feminine in that civilization. In pre-historic India, gender discrimination was non-existent. Polyandry was common in matriarchal communities of pre-historic India and mothers are the commanding authority in the family. Men and women had equal role in the economic life.

Women in Vedic Period

Vedas are the oldest, believed to be composed around 1000-500 B.C and transmitted orally. In Vedic period, the human civilization came into existence and started living stable life at one place. Vedas are the earliest texts composed in Vedic Sanskrit. Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva are the four Vedas. During this period, women had respect and opportunities to develop within their domestic spheres. She was the creator, protector, and educator of her children. In the Vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. The position of wife was honoured and women's position was acknowledged, especially in the performance of religious ceremonies. Without her, husbands could not do any yagna .It was believed that almighty gods were thought not to accept the materials

offered by a bachelor. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but women were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives.

Rigveda the first Vedic script which brings to light the culture and civilization of early invaders to India who were primarily nomadic. Family was a single economic unit where no gender discrimination was found. Both women and men could participate in all spheres of life, whether they are economic, political or religious. It is believed that Vedic period was a golden period for the women when they had full opportunities and freedom to access education and have having religious or activities. There was predominance of religious concern over the civil life. Vedic texts Brahmanas and Upanishads prescribed the limits of social, political and religious freedoms of women and they were supposed to live the life as prescribed by the religious codes of the texts. The Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures give numerous examples of women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators and saints. The Rig Veda says, “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 works, religious and secular.”

In Rig Vedic period, young girls had equal power to get educated as boys. They were called brahmavadinis who were the products of educational discipline of brahmacharya. Till their marriage, they were eligible to read Vedic theology and philosophy. Yajur Veda says, “The scholarly woman purifies our lives with her intellect. Through her actions, she purifies our actions. Through her knowledge and action, she promotes virtue and efficient management of society.” (20.84). The Yajurveda also states that a daughter who has completed her bramhacharya should be married to the boy who is similarly learned. The Rig Veda identifies many learned women rishis like Maitreyi and Gargi who who composed several vedic hymns. The discussion between Gargi and Yajnavalkya is well known in Ramayana. The name of Lopamudra who was the wife of rishi Agastya , Vishwawara, Sikta were the example of the state of education among women. Women in those times were considered as prophets with whom numerous hymns are linked. Prominent women like Ghosa, Apala, Visvavara can be seen that they are on the same footing with their male seers. Certain Vedic

mantras make the glorious position, accorded to a woman in the household very clear. Married and single women alike were acknowledged authorities on the Vedic wisdom. Women enjoyed considerable liberty in the Vedic Period. The Vedic texts there are references to women publicly attending feasts, dances, and other festive gatherings. Women were also wearing sacred threads named Yajnopavitini as a woman whose upper garment was placed like a sacred thread. The Atharvaveda also justifies brahmacharya, the disciplined Life of studentship, fit for married life in the second ashram i.e. Grihastha ashram. Atharva Veda also endorses that the women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society. When a bride enters a family through marriage, she is to “rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family.” (14.1.43-44)

Education was considered as an important qualification for marriage. In Kshatriya society, girls had privilege to choose their husbands in ‘Swayamvara’. We can see the examples of Swayambara in Ramayan and Mahabharat. Rigvedic society was based on monogamy and was patriarchal. Monogamy is the recognition of the high social status of women. Remarriage of widows were allowed under certain condition. She could marry the brother of her deceased husband. Morality of women was of paramount importance but the same was not mandatory for the husbands. No practice of divorce is found in that period. Unmarried girls had their share in their parent’s property but married daughters were exempted.

During the Vedic period itself, the birth of the daughter became a source of anxiety. Being the patriarchal family, the birth of a son is bliss incarnate, while that of a daughter is root of family’s misery. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. In Rig Vedic society, dowry was not known but people were used to give gifts. It was also believed in Hindus that only son could help in getting salvation to their parents and perform the last rites. Atharva Veda also did not endorse the birth of daughters but there are certain matrilineal elements are apparent in this period also as kings performed Rajsuya Yaga with his wives.

The system of Sati existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Atharva Veda shows that the Sati was customary for the women. There was no forced child marriage. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off in the passage of time and a transition from matriarchal to patriarchal order of the society is seen. However during this period, we see the growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. In the Vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence.

Women in Later-Vedic Period or Epics Age

In the Epic Age or in Later Vedic Age, women enjoyed a respectable position as a mother, wife and friend to the men. Dishonouring them means disregard to Goddess Laxmi. Ramayana and Mahabharata were two important epics of that time, which have great effect in today's life too. The social lifestyle presented in those epics is relevant in today's society too. That was the hindu's way of life which is exemplary for us.

The practice of Swayamvara was a characteristic of marriage in that time, especially in higher castes. Women were enjoying greater freedom and autonomy to choose their husbands in ancient time. But in the age of epics, although the Swayamvara of Sita and Draupadi was held, but the freedom to choose the husband was limited at that time. They were compelled to choose to the winner of the contest as their bridegrooms.

In the Ramayana, on the two places, the Sita's Agni Pareeksha and her deportation to the forest, which is described in Uttar Ramayan, shows the conquest of a woman. To maintain the social status even, her Agni Pareeksha was held to prove her purity and chaste while living in Ravana's captivity, but she did not liked that. Sita was well known to her dharma and well versed in Vedic tradition, which taught her to stay always by the side of her husband. So, she refused to stay in Ayodhya in the absence of Rama. When Rama went in search of golden deer to fulfil her desire and entrusted Lakshmana with the protection of Sita but she told Laxmana to go for the help of Rama. She was told by Lakshmana not to cross the Lakshmana Rekha, but she crossed the line to feed the guest Ravana in disguise of Sadhu because feeding a hungry man is the Vedic tradition.

Again the deportation to the forest, although only Valmiki Ramayan says about this deportation, both are towering states of the royalty, which punishes a woman only after questioning of any one person or to show their high social standard to others. No one saw the cry of a woman's heart. But this time, she refused to go back to Ayodhya with Ram and embraced the earth lap because she was a self-respective woman. She knew dharma very much and this can be seen in her words to Hanuman about forgiveness, "Kindness is to be shown by a noble person either towards a sinner or to a virtuous person, or even to a person who deserves death, for there is none who never commits a wrong." (8.113.46).

Another woman character of the wife of Lakshman, Urmila had a great example of supreme sacrifice and love. She was the real partner of her husbands, who was far from her husband but gave full co-operation to her husband. Even all the sisters of Sita had played their role in Ramayana were example of ideal women full of love and dedication.

In Mahabharata, Gandhari was considered as most ideal wife as she tied a bandage on her eyes for the sake of her blind husband Dhritarashtra. Although this type of action taken by Gandhari is a matter of debate whether she was willing to do so or not. According to another noble character of Mahabharata, Bhishm Pitamah, mother was considered the greatest guru for a child. In this way he glorified the women in the role of mother. Again the character of Draupadi who was shared among five husbands whatever the reason was is not showing the worth of a woman. In spite of the unbearable grief of loosing her five sons by Ashwathama at a time, she did not want to another woman suffer the loss of a child. This shows her moral strength to not accepting wrong action by her husbands.

Different scholars have different views on these female characters of Mahabharata. Some thinks that Gandhari knew that her husband's wrong doings and she revolted too. But instead of covering her eyes, she could help him to take right decisions. Another character, Kunti is the embodiment of patience, perseverance and self-sacrifice. The most important character is Draupadi was very courageous, dignified and believing in justice. She could face any disaster with full spirit of self-sacrifice, morality and a brave, lustrous ideal of women. Both

the epics had many examples of great women. During this period, a woman was considered to be a commodity, which could be kept on bet and could be sold or purchased as we saw the incidence of gambling in which Pandava staked Draupadi and defeated.

But we also get quite contrary views from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Sita is regarded as one of the five ideal and revered women in India, the other four being Ahalya, Draupati, Tara, and Mandodari. There are references in Mahabharata, which reflects that women used to guide men on religious and social questions.

Daughter's birth became a source of disaster for the father during the post-Vedic phase. Sati became popular during the later Vedic period where the widows either chose for themselves or were forced to jump into the pyre of their husbands so that they may not be spoiled afterward by others. Gradually it became an acceptable custom to safeguard the purity of the tribe.

Although religion manifest the idea of equality among men and women, but had little impact on rural society. Intellectuals had supporting the caste system strongly. Till the arrival of the Muslims, the Hindu philosophy was the guiding force for the masses in India. Society was following the patriarchal descent, which produced gender discrimination in economic, political and social life of traditional communities in India. Women had freedom to get educated in Vedic period but latter on education to the girls were totally refused. The position of women gradually deteriorated not only in the society but also in the family. The discontinuance of Upanayana, the neglect of education, and lowering of the marriage age had a negative consequence upon the position and status of woman.

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. There was gradual degeneration in the status of women in India after the Later Vedic age. Caste system and ritualism began to take deep root in the lives of common man. Child marriage and Sati became popular. Buddhism and Jainism emerged as alternative religious orders devoid of caste-based social order. Hindu scriptures are of two classes. Sruti is revealed

scripture—the Vedas and the Upanishads. The smriti comprise lesser scriptural texts, composed by human beings—the Itihasas, Puranas and Dharmashastras.

Women in Dharmasutras

Sutras, a contemporary to the Upanishads were a type of texts found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (ancient and medieval Indian texts) from 600 BCE to 200 BCE. These are a special type of literary compositions; a compilation of short philosopher talks like teachings of rituals, philosophy, grammar or any field of knowledge. . Every school of Hindu philosophy, Vedic guides for rites of passage, various fields of arts, law and social ethics developed respective sutras, which help teach and transmit ideas from one generation to other. One of the Sutra, 'Grihya-sutras' depicts the knowledge of season of marriage, required qualities in bride and bridegroom. According to Sutras, marriage is not a contract, but it is a holy union where a bride is honoured and enjoyed freedom in life. To be responsible housewife, she should be matured enough. They uttered Vedic Mantras, along with her husband at religious ceremonies. Jaimini's Purva – Mimamsa endorses the equal rights of women with men to perform religious ceremonies. Child marriage and Sati were not in practice. Remarriage was rare and in very under certain circumstances.

Dharma- sutras were lenient than Smritis, which came in later age. In the Age 600 BC to 320 AD, marriage between the same caste was preferred although inter caste marriages were prevalent. Of the eight forms of marriage prescribed by the Dharma-sutras, the Arsha form of marriage was most popular in which the bridegroom has to give some gifts to the bride's parents.

The 'Apastamba' a Dharma sutra in Sanskrit language, which is considered the oldest dharma related text of Hinduism advised penalty for the husband who leaves his wife. The wife can forgive her husband only when he goes for penance or worshipping God. Men were not allowed to abandon his wife at a slight provocation or at his will. Except in the case of adultery on the part of the woman, the complete dismissal of the marriage-tie was not allowed. The separation due to any adultery in case of the wife, she has the right to get maintenance. In the event of the death of the husband she is allowed to marry another

person. The same authorities allow a widow to be remarried if the marriage was not consummated.

A grownup girl could choose her husband if she was not married on proper time by her parents. There were women teachers having high spiritual knowledge too who impart education among the society.

Dharma Sutra was known as extension of the Grihya Sutras, which treats Agni as the supreme reality. The marriages were solemnized before Agni. In these days also we follow the same ritual by taking “Sat phere” around the Agni and take seven promises. It is thought that in the presence of Agni, women and men are being united for the whole life with full devotion and faith for each other. Agni is treated as most sacred in our life.

Dharmasastras (Smritis)

Smritis are one of the traditional Hindu texts other than Srutis. Earlier the lessons of Hinduism were given verbally by the Sages. There were Gurukuls in which people were getting knowledge of Vedas. These lessons were preserved in Vedas and Upanishads. Smritis were written as itihās, manasmṛiti and Puranas. Manusmṛiti or Manava Dharmashastra, were ancient legal text, though historians have different views about the time when Manusmṛiti came into existence. It influenced the Indian society, varnas like Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra and their life very much. Brahmins elevated to the highest rank followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Dharmashastras are Brahmanical collection of rules of life and family laws of Hindus. It is of three categories Sutras, Smritis and Nibandhas (juridical works intended for legal advisors). In Smritis, Manu Smṛiti is well known to all. Manu at one side says, “Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased. Where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards,” and “Strike not even with a blossom a woman guilty of a hundred faults.” He advocated the inheritance rights to women. He had an opinion to keep women always in controlled and confined environment under the supervision of male members of the family, in childhood with father, in young age with husband and in old age, she should be protected by her sons. According to him a woman cannot live independently because of her weaknesses for worldly things like love for

ornaments, illicit relations with other people, drinking, dishonesty, separation from husband, extra marital relationship, irregular living style etc. according to Manu, husband is God and he has every right to have another wife if he is unsatisfied with his present wife. Even if a husband possessing bad habits or having illicit relations with other woman, he must be worshipped by his wife. Husband could leave his wife if she is barren, gave birth to only daughters or having quarrelsome nature. An young unmarried menstruating women was a threat to the society. In a translation of Manusmriti, Patrick Olivelle states that married women had to obey her husband in any case and she should never do anything displeasing to the man who took her hand, whether he is alive or dead. After the death of her husband, she had to consume pure flower, roots, and fruits and she should be faithful to her dead husband until her death. An unfaithful woman was considered disgraceful.

Marriage was compulsory for all women and she was bound to be faithful to her husband. During the period of Smritis, women lost their right to read Vedas and uttering the mantras and even performing Vedic rituals. Manu provides that for women the rites are to be performed without Vedic mantras. According to the Manu Smriti, wife was considered as the better half, the best friend and real partner of the husband as a source of dharma, artha and kama. Manu banned Upanayana or sacred thread ceremony for the women and Shudras and so on the educational opportunity for the women was ended. Manusmriti was held responsible for the derogatory position to the women in the Post-Vedic Period. Women are only for bearing and rearing the progeny. Hinduism assigns four ashramas for the men to follow – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyas, but a woman has to participate only in Grihastha ashrama. Manusmriti promoted child marriage and dowry system too including gender and caste discrimination in the society. In the view of Shree Krishna the gunas like sattva, etc (prevalent at birth) and the actions like self-control corresponding to the gunas, only God has created the four castes. According to Manusmriti, Shudra had denied the right to study Vedas by the God looking after by his karma in previous birth but he could gain the knowledge of Vedas by Purana and Itihas. By serving the people having

pious great knowledge of Vedas, the Shudras could attain liberation from his sins but for other varnas, more efforts were required to get rid of their sins. In the words of Shiva to Parvati neither birth, nor the purificatory rites, nor learning of the Vedas, nor offspring, can be regarded as grounds for conferring upon one the status of a Brahmana. Verily, conduct is the only ground. All Brahmanas in this world are Brahmanas in consequence of conduct. A Shudra, if he is established on good conduct, is regarded as possessed of the status of a Brahmana. But in contrast of Manusmriti,, the Parashara Smriti does not recommend any such punishments for Shudras. Because it is meant for the age of Kali when nobody follows Vedic principles anyway and even many brahmanas are sinful and not worthy of being offered reverence.

In other Smriti, Vashistha Smriti, women had to do prayashchit for her offence only half than a male member had to do. In ancient societies during Smriti period, women of all castes, excepting those born in the reverse order of castes, were exempted from all taxes. Married, un-married and pregnant ladies had right to have food before the male members of the family. There are many instances that prove that women in ancient India were subjected to humiliation and prejudiced treatment in comparison with men. Like for instance, in some Smriti works, women have been associated with Sudras, even Canddlas. Some of the Dharmashastras appear to be very modern which allowed a woman to raise her son by her brother-in-law with the permission of elders. We find passages in Aitereya Brahmana and Maitrayani Samhita which show that women were forbidden to go to the assemblies.

Within smriti, the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most important and authoritative. But by that time these were written, the position of women had deteriorated considerably, although there still existed women called brahmavadinis, who devoted their lives to study and spiritual meditation and who participated in the philosophical discussions.

The shastras talk about Adhyatma Vidya (science of self-knowledge) by assuming that the interested seeker already knows petty morals and is evolved enough to practice them. However, certain smritis like manu smriti do contain minor injunctions on even morals for

each caste for the sake of being comprehensive in scope. According to Smritis, dharma can be changed, as desha, kala and jaati and it should be practiced as required. Shastras need to be analysed as per the current situation. Only Adhyatma Vidya cannot be changed in any case. The shastras are clear that Manu Smriti with all its gory punishments for Shudras is not even meant for this particular age (Kali Yuga):

Women in Pauranic Period / Arthasastras

In the Pauranic age, the position of women was very respectable when she had full freedom to perform religious rights. The Indian Puranas had networks of vratas in which some were meant for women only. Vratas were done for getting rewards and blessings in life like having good husband, for life longevity of husband and sons, averting widowhood etc. women are used to do these vratas to fulfil her desires as a mother and wife. But there is very rare to found a man doing vratas for his wife. According to the Vamana Purana, the sight of Brahmana maidens, among other things, is very auspicious for one leaving home.

Upanishads played an important role an ideal Indian woman. The Brhadarranyaka Upanishad, Yajnavalkya, both favoured women who get clothes, jewellery and food by the men from her maternal or paternal side. According to them, husband should be the whole and sole for her and she should be faithful and dutiful to him. Her main ideal duty is to give birth to the baby and embarrass motherhood. Brahmanas and Upanishads were annexures to Vedas and reflect the life of later Vedic age. Brahmanas limited her role in social life except the religious sacrifice.

The preaching of Epics and Puranas were not only relevant in old days but they are significant in today's life also. The ancient texts were more complex in defining gender roles. They had a great impact on women's lives. Women in our epics are as diverse as it's vastness. Besides Sita and Draupadi, Apsaras, Rishikas, other queens and the princesses, the mother, wife, daughter and sister –all were involved in the social and political life of the people in those

days but they remain sidelines and only the names of the male characters came forward in all epics and puranas. The women were shown two extreme characters as Devi or Devil. They were limited in their conventional images.

Women in Upanishads

In ancient times, the position of woman in India was one of power coupled with honor. Today the power remains, but the honor has been largely eliminated. John P. Jones, 1903.

Upanishads –were so called texts developed from the Vedic tradition, but largely reshaped Hinduism by providing believers with philosophical knowledge. They are collection of texts of religious and philosophical nature, , written in India probably between c.800 BCE and c.500 BCE, during the time when Indian society started to question the traditional vedic religious order. Some of their speculations and philosophy were compiled in Upanishads. In this male dominated world of the Upanishads, there are some light voices of scholarly women, dutiful wife or a responsible mother. Males of the society also composed Upanishads. Although women were not given much importance but they were not degraded too. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, people bear their mother's name with them as she played an important role in shaping their early development.

Upanishads are the text on meditation, philosophy and spiritual knowledge from Vedas. Women have always been regarded as the guardians of dharma, custodian and transmitter of patriarchal values. The Vedas and Upanishads are replete with anecdotes of how gods and sages from time immemorial have created, used and controlled women for their own benefits and other's destruction. In the age of the Upanishads, the women were enjoying high position. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, husbands were considered perfect in nature who takes care of his wife very much. He possessed the right of putramantha to get son from his wife. If she refuses to do so, the husband has right to symbolically renounce her and not share his glory to be his wife. There was no wife beating or torture. The Brihadaranyaka

Upanishad (part of the Yajur Veda) presents in incidence of philosophical discussion between Gargi and sage Yajnavalkya about the soul, which confounded that learned man. In a spiritual teaching to Maitreyi by the Sage Yajnavalkya Upanishad declares that souls are neither male nor female. Apart from Gargi , Maitreyi, Jabali, Usati Chakrayana's wife, Janasruti's daughter, Uma Haimavati, Satyakama Jabala's wife are other women appeared in the Upanishads as the silent and subdued witnesses of their spiritual wisdom.

The teaching of Hinduism is same for both sexes and all have to follow the karma, ahinsa and non-hurtfulness for others. There is no gender discrimination in teachings of Hinduism.

In Chandogya Upanishad, women had getting very much regard. They had the right to wear yajnopavltini and entitled for upnayana sanskar. According to Gobhila Grhya Sutra and Kathaka Grhya Sutra, they were allowed to utter vedic mantras. In smriti shastra Before coming to Smriti Shastra, it may be mentioned that the word 'patni' implies equal participation of men and women in sacrifices..

Although the Upanishads contain deeper spiritual, philosophical and ritual information, we can also find in them a few important facts about the status of women who lived in those times. The women in the Upanishads never seemed to be in the limelight. The verses regard that women in the Upanishads were worshipped in matters, which dealt with procreation, sexual intercourse, planning of male childbirth, black magic to attain or destroy the peace of life.

Men shared their suffering with their women and cared for them and so as their wives. They share their knowledge, wisdom and thoughts with their wives as we have already seen in the case of Yajnavalkya who shares his philosophical thoughts with his wife Maitreyi who was possessing deep knowledge of self. Till the daughters get married, father had complete control over their daughters. He was free to choose the bridegroom for his daughters. This tradition continued in India for a long time until the last century. In ancient times, only the bride's father had the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal and his consent was

essential for a lawful marriage. This was obligatory for a bridegroom to give gifts to the bride's father at the time of marriage in exchange for the bride.

In the Chandogya Upanishad the examples of the fathers who had greater control over the fate of their daughters, and in choosing the grooms for their daughters they often used them as a leverage to strike deals. Women took interest in the duties of their husbands and gave them counsel. But did not share the teaching responsibility with her husband, she had a role in the welfare of the students as a guardian mother and did not hesitate to interfere if the situation demanded. There are also the examples that all women were bound to their husbands or household duties by marriage. If women decided to live freely, she had the right to live single. The practice of single parenting and unwed motherhood could be seen in ancient India, although not very favoured. There was a provision of punishment for the men and women in case of cheating with their spouses.

In Hinduism, sexual intercourse is considered neither evil nor sinful nor dirty. Sex is divine, and the basis of creation and preservation. The Upanishads contain mostly statements of philosophical and spiritual truths. However, interspersed between the statements of wisdom and ritual details are verses that contain sexually explicit information. At least in the principal Upanishads, and especially in the oldest and largest of them, namely the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads, do not find any negativity being associated with sexual acts. Sexual desire, like any other desire, may bind the souls to the mortal world, whereas sexual actions performed as one's duty towards God, gods, and ancestors, and for the purpose of procreation are considered obligatory, Religious duty, obligation and a ritual offering. References to sexual intercourse as a sacrifice are found in the Chandogya Upanishad (5.8.1-2), and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (6.2.13 and 6.4.2-3).

As the society got much more settled and was not subjected to the pressure of continuous invasion, the position of women became subject to deterioration. The majority religion in India, Hinduism assigned a lower status to women.

Criticism

But the honourable position of women existed in ancient India is questioned by many historians and writers. According to them the position of Women in Ancient Indo-Aryan society was very pathetic. Many evils like Child Marriages, Dowry system, female foeticide, Bride-Burning; No rights in their paternal property, Mass Wife-Burning (Jauhar) and Widow-Burning (Sati) have their roots in ancient India. Hence infanticide arose as a convenient way of getting rid of the burden called daughter due to high demand of dowry from the bridegrooms. The ideal for women, Sita was required by her husband Ram to come from the fire after her return from the Ravana's captivity in Sri Lanka, no one feels her sorrow behind the idea of her being purity. The Aryans, introduced the horrific custom of sati (1500 B.C.) It is sanctioned by their most sacred texts, and was practiced from the fall of the Semito-Dravidian Indus Valley civilization to the modern age. Old Texts and quotes supporting Sati are found in Rig Veda, Vishnu Puran etc.

The way of punishment given by the Aryans to their wives by cutting off ears and nose for leaving home without his permission, Lord Ram practiced the cutting off of women's noses (Shurpanakha) for minor offences for expressing love with Ram in the epic Ramayana, thereby providing divine sanction for the custom, death penalty by the sage Gautama cursed his wife Ahalya for sleeping with Indra though through no fault of her own are some examples of the behaviours with women. Even Manu Smriti says "When a woman deceives her husband (with another man), then the king should ensure that she be torn apart by dogs in a public place and the evil man should be burnt in a bed of red-hot iron'. During the Maurya period, if a woman was found guilty of a matrimonial crime her generative organs were cut off and she was ultimately sentenced to death. T

Women have no right to inheritance or property. In that period, women and Shudras have no right to read Vedas. A woman was not allowed to sleep alone in the absence of her husbands. They had to cover their faces in front of any stranger.(

<https://abhisays.com/india/life-of-women-in-ancient-india.html>)

