

# Status of Women from Ancient to Modern period in relation with Jammu Region

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## ABSTRACT

Study on the status of women remained a developed field of study from period of times. Scholarly writings on the women question are full of references. Authors try to explain position of women in different fields i.e. in the field of political, social, economic, religious and as well as cultural also. Partha Chatterjee in his influential essay *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question* noted that the women's question did not disappear from the nationalist agenda in India towards the end of the 19th century.

**Keywords:** Sati, Pardha, Stridhana, Devdasi, Infanticide.

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## INTRODUCTION

A good deal of the scholarly output on women's reform and education in 19th century, India has been based on evidence drawn from Bengal and Northern India. The first point that emerges from a reading of 19th century texts of Hindi, Urdu and English texts from Awadh and the North West Provinces (modern day Uttar Pradesh and Delhi) is that in the production of new reformist social conditions on women's conditions is reduced to very little. This is in spite of the fact that the question of women's education and with it the girl-child and her upbringing, now gets attention. The focus on the girl-child is a telling departure from the training of the male heir to be found in the earlier times.

James Mill in his book *The History of British India* states that the condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances of the nation. He mentions in his book that the daughter has no place at all in the family because everyone wants son and because of male patriarchy system a woman should never be independent. She should be protected in childhood by her father, in her youth she should live under the protection of her husband and in her old age her sons should look after her. Later on valuable contributions were made by many foreign authors also who wrote about the condition of women and the need for the education of girl-child. One of them is Gorg Fisch whose work deals with the position of women and the institution of sati at a global level. Another initiative in this field was that of Mani Lata's work, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati' in Colonial India is still considered as the classical work of Position of women.

Scholarly writings on the women question in India are full of references to child-wives, child-brides, infant-marriages and sati-pratha etc. women in India have always been topic of concern since Ancient times. And for an analytical account of the position of women in a particular period, it is essential to study the whole context of that particular period as it affects the society differentially. It is likely to find that apart from certain rights and duties which in the society as a whole are meant for women only, what customs and institutions were imposed on women, how these customs and institutions functioned, why these customs and institutions introduced and what the impact on the status of women was?

The question of the role of women in Indian society has been the subject of a number of monographs such as those by A.S. Altekar, P. Thomas and Kumkum Roy. These authors have written numerous academic papers and articles in various journals on the society of India. Since the Ancient times the women do not have the same position as men and they were considered as inferior then men except the well to-do families. They considered as perfect home maker in the world. Infact their condition remains unchanged till the modern times with only little changes. In India, women were never given any right of liberty and equality and their condition become even worse when they gave birth to girl child. Men treated them in a humiliated manner. Women were never allowed to step outside their house that's why they were always abstained being educated. As such it is rather hazardous to draw an accurate picture of their position. Their status in life, since the beginning of creation, has been a subject of ameliorations and modifications. There have been ups and downs in their social status but these ups and downs helped very little to bring about a radical change in their status. Reformers from age to age, no doubt, have tried, to assign them a definite position in life, but in spite of their

honest endeavors, it remained a baffling problem to adjust theories with practice. Manu, one of our chief commentators on this subject, is also giving example of inconsistency in the matter. But despite his wavering attitude, Manu is very firm about one thing; he could never cherish the idea of women enjoying an independent status in life. According to him a woman has to lead a life of dependence throughout her life, seeking protection of her father, husband or son. But this attitude towards women was not same by the writers. It has been written from authors of different generations that in Ancient period women enjoyed equal status and rights with men in all spheres of life. Infact, women were received proper education in early Vedic period. Though the early Vedic family was of the patriarchal type but women had some control over the entire house-hold. The Rig Veda reveals a stage where women enjoyed equal status with men. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife. It has been mentioned by the writers that the Vedic age Patriarchy never denied women from their rights and privileges. From 4th century B.C to 3rd century B.C. girls were given education, but this was practically confined to the well-to-do families. There was also existed the Upanayana or initiation ceremony for both girls and boys. According to A.S. Altekar, "education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage." In Rig Vedic society "the practice of child marriage did not exist." So women got an opportunity to acquire education. And we have example of many educated women who became teachers or upadhyayins like Visara, Apala and Ghosha who even composed mantras and rose to the rank of rishis. We find many women poets and philosophers during this period. Majumdar points out that the Aryans never showed any prejudice towards the education of women, they never neglected them for receiving the education; so, society was not so complex and was at a developing stage.

Aryan Period witnessed many women scholars who were well versed in sacred texts. These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts and they also learn music and dancing. Even in early Rig Vedic age the birth of a son was much more welcome than the birth of a daughter. But the Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like female infanticide, sati and child marriage and widow remarriage was permitted in Rig Vedic society. Girls normally married after puberty and both the girls and boys of the Rig Vedic society had freedom to choose their partners in life. And in Rig Vedic times caste system was not all rigid. There was no restriction in society. During this time inter-caste marriages took place in society and people were given absolute freedom to choose their partners. Rig Vedic women enjoyed economic independence to some extent. The women of lower caste took up spinning, weaving and needle-work and also went to the fields with their husbands. They can also attend fairs and festivals and were free to move anywhere with or without their husbands. They were allowed to attend sabhas or assemblies of the learned ones in the company of their husbands. As already mentioned that to certain extent women enjoyed equal rights and as Aryans believed that the wife and the husband being the equal halves so, they were regarded equal in every respect and both took equal part in all duties i.e. religious and social.

It is mentioned by the historians that Alexander's invasion of India in 326 B.C. was an important factor that affected the Aryan society. The Greeks who came to India along with Alexander were mainly soldiers and they did not give much importance to high ideals like chastity of women. Due to this the preservers of Hindu religion began to enforce strict moral laws on their followers. They wanted to preserve their Aryan culture by codifying certain rules for the members of their community. This system of law was mainly based on the concept of Dharma which constitutes the privileges, duties and obligations of a Hindu. Great changes occurred in the Aryan way of life between 500 B.C. and 600 B.C.

In the post-Rig Vedic age there was a reaction against rituals. We get an idea of the post-Vedic society from the Brahmanas, Upanishads and the great epics. Another valuable book that throws light on the post-Vedic society of India is Kautilya's Artha Sastra which is assigned in 2nd century B.C. These great epics give us information on women while analyzing the position of woman in post-Vedic ages.

The world of Indian woman became much more restricted in the time of the Smriti writers. During the time of Kautilya, she began to be treated as a property. She had no separate identity of her own. The scriptures as well as the Dharma Shastras favored the patriarchal system, which marginalized the role of Indian woman. This culminated finally in the seclusion of women. By 200 B.C. pre-puberty marriages became common. The Smriti writers like Kautilya, Manu began to favour seclusion of women. The general belief is that the seclusion of women was introduced by the Mughals in India. But this was practiced as early as the time of Ashoka. Women of royal families were mostly stayed in the house except the lower class women who went out the house to help their husbands in the fields. The social customs and traditions which were reinforced by the law-givers degraded women. There was no equality or justice in these laws. Women had no right on property rights and right of inheritance. A thorough discrimination is shown by these Hindu law-givers. Moreover all these legislators were chauvinistic in their attitude. According to Romila Thapar, "the law books are both a reflection of early Indian society as well as attempts at working out what was believed to be a perfect social system." Authors attempted to create an apparently perfect social system. And they degrade the spirit of Indian woman by denying her the rightful place in society. The division in the society adversely affected the position of Indian woman. Her position in the family as well as in society became very low. The male dominated society treated woman as a weak-minded individual who is depended on her male relations for the whole life. Another idea which became popular during this period is that a woman needs protection and disciplining throughout her life. This is very well reflected in the writings of the ancient law-givers. All these so called law-givers were men, who had male chauvinistic attitudes in their arbitrary prescriptions of rules which virtually degraded women for generations. Authors talked about

pre-pubescent marriage which was another curse on women and explained the ill-effects of this system that how the child-widows were ill-treated by the society, how they were forced to live a life full of restrictions, which affected them physically as well as mentally. They were excluded from all auspicious ceremonies and were looked down upon as ominous beings. The question of remarriage did not arise, as the law-givers prohibited widow remarriage from the 1st century A.D.

Further during the pre-medieval period which covers the span of time between 3rd century A.D. to 12th century A.D. the status of women underwent further deterioration and they were regarded as equal to Sudras. The sphere of their activity was again confined to the home. Seclusion of women became very common even before the advent of Muslims, especially in the upper-class society, due to the rigidity of the caste system. The Smriti writers prohibited intercaste marriages. Especially for an upper caste woman it was strictly prohibited to marry men from lower castes even as the upper caste man retained his right to marry from the lower caste of his choice. In the 8th century the all-pervading influence of Adi Shankara was felt across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. Yet his views on women's role in terms of worldly functions and spiritual services were strongly oriented towards an anti-woman posture.

The Hindu religious revival namely the Bhakti movement which took place roughly around 11th century A.D. was the direct outcome of the proselytization activity of the Muslims in India. The leaders and the propagators of the Bhakti cult were greatly impressed by the ideas of one God and universal brotherhood which were introduced by this great religion based on monotheism. In its attitude to women it followed the footsteps of Buddhism, i.e. on the grounds of compassion towards the suffering multitudes of the feminine gender and also on the realization that men and women are of equal significance before God. It also restored for the time being a religious status to women. They were encouraged to come out of their homes, to listen to the saints and to sing of God's glory in public. There were a few women saints who became very popular. Meera Bai was not only acclaimed as a saint but also as a poet of lasting significance. This clearly indicates the possibilities of artistic excellence lying dormant among the Indian women folk. Even during this period the majority of women in India lived in abject subjugation. Their position was deteriorating rapidly. Except for a short while the conservative attitude of the religious leaders did not undergo any change, radical or otherwise. The ancient ascetic ideal which considered women as an obstacle in the path of achieving salvation continued to dominate. So after the initial success, it failed miserably to bring about any long term change owing to the lack of co-ordination among the cult leaders and also due to the absence of sustained efforts based on organizational structures.

As far as the study of medieval period is concerned this is spread over four centuries from the first half of the 16th century. And this period is a struggle for political power and economic supremacy between two systems which were totally different in their outlook. The incursion of Muslims in India began with the Arab invasion of Sind in the beginning of the 8th century A.D. The large majority of Muslims who came to India were Turks, Afghans and Persians. And the Indian religion and social customs were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite. The caste system became more rigid in the medieval period. Occupation now began to be determined by birth. Such a situation brought about a lot of conservatism in the Hindu society. Those who were low in the social scale of Hindu society found in Islam an opportunity to assert their dignity. Dependence of women on their husbands or other male relatives was a prominent feature of this period. Devoid of avenues of any education, having lost the access to Streedhan or dowry, they virtually became the exploited class with disastrous results for themselves and the nation. Indian women were politically, socially and economically inactive except for those engaged in farming and weaving. This inactivity in a way contributed to their subordination. Most of the women accepted the idea that the proper place for them was their home. Political subordination includes the exclusion of women from all important decision-making processes. With the advent of Muslims in India, the social movement of Indian women was restricted. They were prohibited to attend public functions and were not free to participate as men's equals in religious functions like yajnas, obviously indicating a degradation of her role as she was getting wrapped in isolation.

Another social evil that existed in society during this period was child marriage. These pre-pubescent marriages adversely affected the health of the girls. These child brides were denied all intellectual, physical and spiritual development. Her self-image was destroyed by the patriarchal family which denied her basic freedom. Men being providers and women became dependent on them economically, for their subsistence except for the labour classes, where both men and women participated in subsistence farming and other occupations. Many other social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriages, Purdah system and the seclusion of women were also developed during the middle ages, due to the political instability of Northern India especially due to various invasions. Muslims who came to India were mainly warriors and they did not give much importance to Hindu ideals like chastity so, the seclusion of women was encouraged mainly by the Rajputs and the other upper castes like Brahmins for the safety of their women.

Female infanticide was also prevalent in Medieval period. This particular system was prevalent among Rajputs and other high castes. Even among the Muslims this custom existed. The evil mainly originated from the belief that only the birth of a son could make salvation possible for parents. Only a son had the privilege of performing Samskaras. And lastly the son began to be considered as the maintainer of the race. So in most of the noble families the female child was killed either by poisoning or by burying her alive. Some of them were drowned to death.

Purdah gained popularity with the advent of the Muslims. Many writers feel that the purdah system existed among Kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras. But the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or "dupattas." But for Muslims it meant complete veiling. Purdah actually is a Persian word which means curtain. According to Patricia Jeffrey "Purdah is a part and parcel of stratification in India for the submissiveness of the young bride and the inability of adult women to cope with the world outside."

Dowry system was a common phenomenon. It actually meant "Stridhana" which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period the term acquired special significance. It meant money or "Dakshina" which was actually presented to the bride groom along with the bride. In Vedic times it ensured some sort of security for her. But during the middle ages she was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin. During the middle Ages the term "Stridhana" acquired huge dimensions. The Hindus and Muslims favored this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the Vedic ages it was given with the intention of providing security for women when a crisis occurs and she was free to make use of this "Dhana." But the middle Ages witnessed a sudden transformation. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free access to this wealth, which rightfully belonged to her.

Another important evil which existed in this period was the condition of Hindu widows, which became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death.

The feudal society of the time encouraged "Sati" which meant self-immolation of the widow. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. According to Saroj Gulati "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society." And Sati was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity.

Prostitution became a recognized institution. The Devadasi system which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans, who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the Devadasi system women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Alberuni: "the kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons."

Coming to Jammu region, we find that the scholars working on Social History particularly with the topic of status of women is very scanty. Hand written sources on this topic on Jammu are very scanty, on the other hand whatever we found are absolutely mute on the subject of social, economic and cultural condition of the people. Even the modern writers of Jammu who wrote during the 19th and early 20th centuries seem not to have discussed much on this topic what they are written about the are political events of the Jammu region little was thought of enlisting socio-cultural conditions. Diwan Kirpa Ram, Kahan Singh Ballawaria and J. P. Hutchison and J. P. Vogel are hardly referring the social conditions of women. The Persian chroniclers of the sultanate and Mughal period contain only fragmentary references to historical events of Jammu and totally ignore the life and culture, religious and economic activities of the people of this region.

Ganesh Das Bادهhra's Rajdarshani and Tarikh-i-Kishtwar by Sheoji Dar however are pleasant exceptions. Both of these Persian works take into account social and religious conditions of the people also. The Rajdarshani is particularly rich in social data. Though the work does not possess a regular and connected scope on this field, yet it contains numerous references to social, religious and cultural activities of the rulers of the people at large, scattered all over the work. He writes in detail about the 'seven evils' prevalent in the hills since from past, including those of sati, female infanticide and adultery, which Raja Ranjit dev sought to reform. But unfortunately such information is too short and cryptic.

Thus, in the light of above discussion, there is need to undertake the study of status of women of Jammu region. As far as the region of Jammu is concerned, though such initiatives are lacking, nevertheless some authors tried their best to commemorate this problem.

In 1985 with the publication of Vina Mathur's Role and Position of women in the social, cultural and political life of Kashmir (7th to 16th century A.D.) throws light to show a true picture of the role and position of women in the socio-cultural and political life of Kashmiri women. An assessment has been made about their standard of life, position in



society, their contribution in cultural and political life of Kashmir and their life journey from daughter to mother. One interesting topic we find in this book about women is that the culture of Devadasi and this practice existed only in Kashmir. While discussing the role and position of a woman in Kashmir this book is lacking to explain in detail women of Jammu.

Another author M. L. Kapoor wrote Social and Economic history of Jammu and Kashmir State (1885-1925 A.D.) published in 1992. His work coincides with the reign of Maharaja Partap Singh and confined to the social and economic history. Even the work is so vast but to be limited to the study of some specific aspects of the social and economic life of the people. This work has abundant material on Kashmir but it is scanty in the case of Jammu. We can find only one chapter related to the position of women which is based on statistical data. This chapter deals with position of women along with various forms of [marriage which was practiced in the state. Some other important topics like marriage ceremonies, restriction upon inter-marriage and the female morality are also discussed besides some other aspects of the life of women has also been given under it.

Another work is The History of Punjab Hill States by Hutchison and Vogel, where author's concern for historical geography is based on the colonial approach. Though this work talked about the physical aspects on history but gives us little information on women and touched only the sati pratha of this region and adjoining regions also nothing else we find related to women in this work.

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