



## Research Article

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**Status of Women in India: a study through the ancient, medieval and modern day scenario**Avirup Chakraborty<sup>1</sup>, Debabrata Roy<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Independent Research Scholar.<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Scholar in Human Rights, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta.**Article History**

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**Abstract:** India is the largest democracy in the world with a complex society that is very difficult to assess. It has often been understood, mostly by the western sphere, that India is a land where the women is tagged as one of the most vulnerable group after the indigenous population. True, but this is not the scenario since ancient days. The deterioration of the status of women is a gradual phenomena and this can be traced back from the Vedic period to the most recent post-feminism era. A radical shift in the position of women within the society was witnessed from the Rig-Vedic era to the later Vedic period. Women used to enjoy a high status in terms of participation in religious rituals and ceremonies to acquiring education and thus attaining a high intellectual and spiritual standard. The situation changed completely in the later-Vedic period and the legacy of oppression and subjugation continued in some form or other through the next eras of rulers, be it the Maurya or the Gupta. Medieval India is termed as the 'dark age' for women because of the different foreign invasions and the consequent ill-treatment towards women. The invasion of the Khiljis and the Mughals, for instance, left the women section worst affected, as these invaders looked upon women as property. The women from a conquered state were often taken away as the possession of the conqueror and thus got included within the growing population of the 'harem'. The nationalist movements for independence moulded the womenfolk and they became more vocal to shout for their rights. The westernised thoughts coupled with education gave the necessary impetus needed to rise in protest against the prevalent patriarchal society. The 1970s saw a wave of radical thought in terms of feminism and the consequent fight over a large spectrum of issues like political rights, suffrage movement and the rights of the backward women communities. The modern and post-modern India has witnessed the women's movement in diversifying the role of women and gaining gender equality.

**Keywords:** feminism, women movement, gender equality

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**INTRODUCTION**

The term women's rights refer to freedoms and entitlements of women and girls of all ages. These rights may or may not be institutionalised, ignored or suppressed by law, local custom, and behaviour in a particular society. These liberties are grouped together and differentiated from broader notions of human rights because they often differ from the freedoms inherently possessed by or recognised for men and boys, and because activists for this issue claim an inherent historical and traditional bias against the exercise of rights by women and rights. Issues commonly associated with notions of women's rights include, though are not limited to, the right: to bodily integrity and autonomy; to vote (suffrage); to hold public office; to work; to fair wages or equal pay; to own property; to education; to serve in the military or be conscripted; to enter into legal contracts; and to have marital, parental and religious rights. Women and their supporters have campaigned and in some places continue to campaign for the same rights as men (Acharya, 2011). India is a vast and complex capitalist society. Said to be the largest liberal democracy in the world with a population of over 1 billion, India is not easy to assess. Viewed through a western perspective it can often seem an impenetrable place. Often we see the Indian woman cast

as a victim of patriarchal and religious control (Chatterjee, 1989). Images of instances of 'sati' and stories of mass foeticide have helped form in the western mind the stereotypical ignorant and backward Indian women (Jeffrey & Basu, 1998). However there is a 'rich history linked to the social reform movements' that were taking place in India in the nineteenth and twentieth century's. This history has a direct link to the women of today and in this essay we will show how the Indian women's movement is a vibrant and complex movement that includes millions (Ray, 2000), yet is also a diverse and often of a contradictory nature (Desai, 1996). We will show how the movement varies according to geographical area, how individual organisations are run along differing ideological perspectives and how they are tackling the many problems that Indian women face.

Therefore in order to evaluate the position of women in India today it is necessary to first look at some of the fundamental changes that occurred through the nineteenth and twentieth century's ; in particular the nationalist and independence movement. These movements and the changes they brought about in India profoundly altered women's standing in society. It can be said that the evolution of the Indian women's movement in the nineteenth century grew out of a

cultural and nationalistic response to the British colonialists condemning of the treatment of women as barbaric and directly connected to Indian religious practices (Chatterjee, 1989). Chatterjee (1989) interprets this dichotomy as a way of maintaining the positive elements of western materialism; economic practices, good governance, rationality, science, etc, with the higher, spiritual nature of Indian culture; the identification of traits that are distinctively national. Education of women became a popular idea in India (amongst the higher castes at least) in the early nineteenth century (Patel, 1998). It was around the 1970's that the contemporary women's movement began to be more radical and active, especially against the Indian state who for a time declared a state of emergency which led to the repression of all political and progressive groups, not just women's (Ray, 2000). Hindu nationalism, the kind of nationalism that led to the new form of oppression that Chatterjee (1989) described, still has a large say in women's issues in India today. Gender symbolism has been used by the modern Hindu nationalist movement in much the same as the nationalists and anti-colonialist's of the nineteenth century did, with the crucial difference, however, that several female leaders now espouse renunciation and violence as a part of their imagery (Sarkar & Butalia, 1995).

#### ***Status of Women in India through the ages:***

According to Dr. Jamal A. Badawin "the status which women reached during the present era was not achieved due to kindness of men or due to natural progress. It was rather achieved through a long struggle and sacrifice on woman's part and only when society needed her contribution and work, more especial, during the two world wars, and due to the escalation of technological change" (Acharya, 2011). The Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Their condition was good. The women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage. But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig-Vedic society, women started being discriminated against since the Later-Vedic period in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, the purdah and polygamy further worsened the women's position. The epics and Puranas equated women with property. Even Buddhism did little for women. Though the Maurya kings often employed female bodyguards, spies and 'Stri-adhyaksha mahamatras', their status was still quite bad. Upper caste ladies had to accept the purdah. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without husband's permission. They became worse off in the

Gupta period. The Smritishastras abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and sati, prostitution and devadasi system became widespread (Basu, 2014). Indian society is cohesion of Hindu and Muslim culture. India at the eve of Muslim invasion was basically a Hindu society. As a result of Muslim invasion the two cultures had interactions with each other. Political changes made social changes inevitable. When we talk about society the study of the various aspects related to the women becomes necessary. We get a better understanding of the position of women in society when we study various practices, traditions, customs and rituals related to women ([http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/110747/6/10\\_chapter1.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/110747/6/10_chapter1.pdf)). The treatment given to females in any particular society reflects the societal conditions of that particular society. Since Indian society has been patriarchal in nature. Law givers like Manu, Yajnavalkya, Yama, Marichi prescribed laws for women. These law givers insisted that girls must marry before they attain puberty. Law-giver Manu says something very strange regarding the women he is of the view that 'in childhood woman is to be dependent upon her father, in youth on her husband, and in old age on her son, woman is never fit for independence (Thomas, 1964). Medieval India was not women's age. It is supposed to be the 'dark age' for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in women's status. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India they brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "harems". In order to protect them Indian women started using 'Purdah', (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education (<https://wewomen.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/medieval-india-womens-dark-age/>). When we compare the late ancient society and the society in the Sultanate era we see that there was influx of Muslim population hence

the social conditions became different from the earlier times. The historians of the medieval India have described the social conditions considering the Muslim population but we get a good description of Hindu society at the eve of invasion by the work of Alberuni. Features of royal class ladies are almost similar; education was imparted to them by private tutors in the royal apartments. The y did not go to a primary school for education and also no higher education was imparted to them. In Sultanate the education imparted was religious but for women in Hindu Royalty we do not find them gaining religious education rather they prefer red military education and also received it. Receiving military education was restricted in Sultanate period on grounds of purdah. In this way we can conclude that most of the practices like female slavery, polygamy, Sati, prostitution were a part of society in both the eras. There were rare women administrators also in some regional kingdoms of Sultanate and the only woman who ruled at the Sultanate was Razia but ancient society was familiar with women administrators ([http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/110747/6/10\\_chapter1.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/110747/6/10_chapter1.pdf)).

#### ***Status of Women in Colonial, Post-Independence era:***

*“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.”* — Swami Vivekananda.

In Colonial India, the social status of women seemed to be dependent on their men (Mill, 1840). The religious tradition ascribed for their humility and subordination to men in all matter. They were denied the opportunity of education and refinement. Except a few women of the upper classes, the life of general women was not worth living. In short, the access to social justice and equality were denied to them. They were unaware of their basic rights as individuals due to illiteracy, ignorance and economic subordinate through the age. (Manu Smriti with six commentaries, 1886). Strange is the fact that when the Christian missionaries saw the deplorable condition of women in traditional Indian society. They were amazed and emotionally moved. The Christian missionaries aimed to spread their religion in India. There for they opened school, asylums, dispensaries and orphanage to give relief to the poor and the needy Indian people. They succeeded in converting mostly the lower classes of Indian people. They failed to understand as to what they should do to save the women from burning alive. They desired to undertake from some “Culturally Motivated” performance to end their crime. The first and foremost social problem that attracted enlightened opinion was the need for a better deal for women in society. In the abolition of the cruel rite of sati and infanticide, in the condemnation of child marriage and polygamy and popularization of widow remarriage in the abolition of purdha in provision of education facilities for women

and economic opening to make them self- supporting and finally an equal share for women in the political life of the country by enfranchisement (Stanley and Kumary, 2010). In Bengal alone three-fourths of the total occurrences of sati occurred in British India. It occurred among all castes, but it was more among the Brahmanas and Rajputs. Among the princely families, the sense of pride and heroism elevated the sati into a noble act. But, on the whole, the rite was practised by women whose husbands belonged to the middle and lower middle classes. The following factors could be attributed to the practice of sati: (1) The position of women in the Hindu system, (2) The institution of polygamy, especially among the kulin Brahmanas, (3) The enforced widowhood and austerity, (4) Social convention, (5) The sense of salvation attached to the rite, and (6) Antiquity and adoration of the practice. The British had shown interest in the abolition of sati in 1813. Female infanticide was found mainly among the Rajputs of Benaras, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in parts of Punjab and Sind and among some Sikhs. The institution of female infanticide arose due to (1) the deplorable position of women in Hindu society, (2) the dowry system, (3) hypergamy, and (4) the sense of honour and pride. Marriage of a female is considered compulsory. In 1779, infanticide was declared to be murder by the Bengal Regulation XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. However, the practice continued in secret till recently, particularly among the Rajput’s in Rajasthan. Dowry is its main cause. Child marriage is prevalent even today among the rural people, and among the urban illiterate and poor. The institution of child marriage is also the result of hypergamy, dowry, and notion of virginity and chastity. It has resulted in the problems of over-population, poverty, unemployment, ill-health, dependence upon parents, etc. The first legislation was passed in 1860 under which the minimum age for consummation of marriage in the case of girls was raised to ten. In 1891, the age of consent for girls was raised to twelve, and in 1925 to thirteen for married girls and fourteen for unmarried ones. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sharda Bill) was passed. Under this Act, which came into being in 1930, the minimum age of marriage for a girl was fixed at fourteen and for a boy at eighteen. According to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the minimum age for a bride is fifteen, and for a bridegroom it is eighteen. The legislations have not proved effective in this case. Education, economic pressures, and migration to towns and cities from rural areas have certainly contributed to the raising of the age at marriage of both the sexes. However, child marriage persists unchecked. Many a time, even political leaders of repute have enacted child marriages of their wards. No stringent actions are taken for violation of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. Slavery was of two types: (1) Domestic (2) Predial (agricultural). There were also institutions of the nautch (dance) girls and prostitutes. The latter was found particularly in the princely states. Predial slavery was

found in Bengal, Madras, Assam, Coorg and southern Bombay Presidency (presently in Karnataka and Maharashtra, respectively). The slaves of this category were insolvent debtors. Some of them were migrants from Rajputana. Even slaves were sold out. There was also the practice of entering a contract by a person to work for a specific period of time either to pay the debt or to “have a fresh one”. Domestic slavery was confined to females. The foreigners also indulged in the purchase of children in a clandestine manner and exported them overseas. Proclamations were made in Bengal, Madras, Bombay, etc., to prevent the institution of slavery. Today, the institution exists in the form of bonded labour. It is known by different names in different states. The British policy of apparent and selective non-interference in social matters encouraged the institution of slavery and other institutions which supported this evil. With the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In 1861, a Widow Marriage Association was formed. The Arya Samaj gave top priority to this programme ( <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/essay/status-of-women-in-india-during-the-british-period/35181>). In the matter of education of women, Hindu society in the 19th century suffered from false religion illusions that Hindu scripture did not sanction female education that education of girls wrought wrath of Gods leading to their widowhood. Vidyasagar established no less than 35 girl’s school in Bangal. Charles Wood’s dispatch on education (1854) laid great stress on the need for female education (Jones, 1989). In the broad perspective, women education became a part of the general campaign for amelioration of the plight of women in society (Heimsath, 1964). In this era abolition of devdasi system (1929) was a remarkable incident; the central legislative of Indian enacted this law in 1928 for the degenerated system of Devdasis. The Bombay legislature also passed a legal enactment to stop the immoral practice of prostitution. In twentieth century, the period of national movement, more increment in the field of “Women Enhancement Movement”. Women had taken a great part in freedom movement after 1920, the women had starting attempting of their own right and in 1927, the established of A.I.W.C. (All Indian Women Congress) was a great effort by women. thousands of women took part in the freedom struggle under Gandhiji’s leadership fearlessly facing police lathis and guns. They gradually became conscious of their rights. Soon after the Government of India Act of 1935 introducing provincial autonomy came into effect, many women became ministers in Congress governments. Many women took to studying economics, sociology, science, mathematics, etc. Social hindrances began to disappear gradually. Purdah almost became a thing of the past. In the social and political fields, men and women started working side by side. Educated girls began to marry by choice and some of them took to the stage. Music and dancing were

assiduously cultivated and some of the women achieved world fame in the arts.

When the Indian Constitution was formulated, it granted equal rights to women, considering them legal citizens of the country and as an equal to men in terms of freedom and opportunity. The sex ratio of women at this time was slightly better than what it is today, standing at 945 females per 1000 males. Yet the condition of women screamed a different reality. They were relegated to the household, and made to submit to the male-dominated patriarchal society, as has always been prevalent in our country. Indian women, who fought as equals with men in the nationalist struggle, were not given that free public space anymore. They became homemakers, and were mainly meant to build a strong home to support their men who were to build the newly independent country. Women were reduced to being second class citizens. The national female literacy rate was an alarmingly low 8.6%. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls was 24.8% at primary level and 4.6% at the upper primary level (in the 11-14 years age group). There existed insoluble social and cultural barriers to education of women and access to organised schooling.

A very few were allowed into the public space, which she was expected to manage on her own, while maintaining her domestic role as a homemaker. In spite of the Sharda Act which was passed in the 1950s to raise the marital age limit for girls, child marriage particularly in North India was quite prevalent though the average age at marriage for females was increased to 18. Sprawling inequalities persisted in their access to education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in political, social and cultural spheres. It was almost unthinkable for women to have a choice or a say in matters of marriage, career or life. Rather she had no voice at all. The practice of dowry was as common as ever. And since men were better educated than girls, the demands were even more. The Dowry Prohibition Act was finally passed in 1961, to protect women and promising severe punishment, but the conviction rate of crime against women was, and still is very low in India. Because of such inhuman practices which were normalised by our society, the birth of the girl child was considered inauspicious. In villages as well as cities, the girl child was killed either before birth or after it. Even till date, the practice continues. The United Nations Children’s Fund, estimated that up to 50 million girls and women are ‘missing’ from India’s population because of termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care. Though a number of constitutional amendments were made for women’s social, economic and political benefits, yet they were never effective to bring a radical change in the situation. Women had only the role of a ‘good wife’ to play, and if a woman ventured out to work, she was seen as a bad woman, going against societal norms. Women were



expected to cook food and eat only after the men, with whatever meager amount of food is left. This led to rampant malnutrition among women, and an extremely poor health status. Around 500 women were reported to die every day due to pregnancy related problems due to malnutrition, and getting married before 18. It was only by the 1960s, that a few educated women began to see themselves increasingly change from a mere guardian of home to a legitimate participant in the discourse of life. The country saw the first undercurrent of female discontent with the system. With time, a lot has changed since those dark ages of the 1950s for the women. Though at some levels like dowry, crimes like rape, sexual harassment at office or public places, and molestation, eve-teasing, even after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited, which is the shameful side of our country. Yet one can't deny that the situation has improved since the earlier times. Women, who now represent 48.2% of the population, are getting access to education, and then employment. From 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51 to 61.1 million girls in 2004-05. At the upper primary level, the enrolment increased from 0.5 million girls to 22.7 million girls. Dropout rates for girls have fallen by 16.5% between the year 2000 and 2005. Programs like 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' and 'Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy' has helped increase the literacy rates from less than 10 percent to more than 50% today. The result of this is that India has world's largest number of professionally qualified women. In fact India has the largest population of working women in the world, and has more number of doctors, surgeons, scientists, professors than the United States. Women in India slowly started recognising her true potential. She has started questioning the rules laid down for her by the society. As a result, she has started breaking barriers and earned a respectable position in the world. Today Indian women have excelled in each and every field from social work to visiting space station. There is no arena, which remains unconquered by Indian women. Whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, technology everywhere, its women power all along. Today names like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shobhaa De, Jhumpa Lahiri can put any other writer to shame. In the field of cinema, women like Rekha, Smita Patil, Shabana Aazmi and Vidya Balan and Konkona Sen are such names who don't play feminised roles, but have asserted themselves over this male-dominated realm. In the field of politics, from Indira Gandhi to Shiela Dixit, Uma Bharti, Jayalalithaa, Vasundhara Raje and Mamata Banerjee today, women are making their presence felt. Today, the modern woman is so deft and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman, juggling many fronts single-handedly. Women are now fiercely ambitious and are proving their metal not only on the home front, but also in their respective professions. Women in Indian are coming up in all spheres of life. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They are entering into all kinds of professions

like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching, etc. A nation's progress and prosperity can be judged by the way it treats its women folk. There is a slow and steady awareness regarding giving the women their dues, and not mistreating them, seeing them as objects of possession. Despite progress, the very fact that women, along with being achievers, also are expected to fulfil their roles as wives or mothers, prioritising home against anything else. This point of view hasn't changed much. There is still a large section of women who are uneducated, and married off before the age of 18. Families are required to supply a chaste daughter to the family of her future husband. Also very few women are actually employed in good-paying jobs, and hence parents don't see the point of spending money on girls' education. Statistics say that close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write, which is a large number. Only 13.9% women are employed in the urban sector, and 29% in the domestic and agriculture sector, where too a majority of women are exploited by the men. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female, and a lot is yet to be achieved in this context(<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2012/03/heres-how-the-status-of-women-has-changed-in-india-since-1950-till-date/>)

## GENERAL DISCUSSION:

Women are not born, but made. What better than India to exemplify this statement by Simone de Beauvoir. With the whole world celebrating International Women's Day with great pomp and show, it would be only apt to analyse the position and space Indian women occupy today, and comparing it to the time 60 years ago when the country had just gained independence. With women participating in nationalist movements, to being pushed into the domestic household space, to their resurgence as super-women today, women in our country have seen it all. There have been innumerable debates about gender in India over the years. Much of it includes women's positing in society, their education, health, economic position, gender equality etc. What one can conclude from such discussions is that women have always held a certain paradoxical position in our developing country. While on one hand, India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persisting still continue. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much. The matrimonial advertisements, demanding girls of the same caste, with fair skin and slim figure, or the much criticised fair and lovely ads, are indicators of the slow changing social mores. If one looks at the status of women then and now, one has to look at two sides of the coin; one side which is promising, and one side which is bleak. The path towards total gender empowerment is full of potholes. Over the years,

women have made great strides in many areas with notable progress in reducing some gender gaps. Yet realities such as 11,332 women and girls getting trafficked every year, and increased practice of dowry, rape and sexual harassment hit hard against all the development that has taken place. Thus, if on one hand women are climbing the ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Women may have left the secured domains of their home, but a harsh, cruel, exploitative world awaits them, where women have to prove their talent against the world who see women as merely vassals of producing children. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the socialised prejudices against her, and the men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country's way forward.

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