

Chapter Three

Women Status in the Past Traditional Indian Culture

In this chapter we propose to deal with the concept of women in Indian tradition. Women are part and parcel of our life, as each and every person is related to woman at least once in a life in the form of mother in the childhood, if not more. Hence, women have a prominent role in one's development of personality and nourishment. Woman is man's companion, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the activities of man of the very minutest detail and she has an equal right to enjoy freedom and liberty. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not just as a result of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless man has been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of the movements stop halfway and much of the work does not yield appropriate results because of the condition of our women.⁶⁴

Men and women are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair, each being complementary to the other; each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived. Therefore, it follows from these

⁶⁴ Maria Mies, *Indian Women and Patriarchy*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1980, P.30

facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve an equal ruin of both.

Indian tradition has generally respected womanhood. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture, one of the greatest is the honoured place ascribed to women. Even God in Hinduism is regarded as half man, half woman (*Ardhanārīśhar*). "Where women are respected, there the God reside, the heavens open up and angels sing paeans of praise," says the Hindu lawgiver Manu. Women are human beings and have as much of right to development as men have. The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than the physiology peculiarities, which distinguish us from one another. In all human beings, irrespective of their sex, the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence, takes place. Due to the physiological matter women cannot do some things that men can. But that does not prove that they (women) are inferior to men. The relation of man and woman is the expression of an urge for duality. Each is a self, which requires the other as its complement. The division of the sexes is biological phenomenon, not a historical event. Male and female constitute ordinarily a fundamental unity.

Status of women in Indian society

In ancient India women in many places occupied an equal position to men. Many Hindu religious books like the Vedas; Rāmāyaṇa, etc., have mentioned the names of

several women who were great scholars, poets and philosophers of the time. According to ancient Hindu scriptures, a man without his wife cannot participate in any essential religious rites. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives are thus befittingly called '*Ardhānginī*'.⁶⁵

During many reigns, the queens held greater power and influence than any of the courtiers. Literary manuscripts tell us about kingdom gained and lost due to a single woman. However, in the medieval period, the status of women went down considerable. Women were considered to be inferior to men. Many historians have called this age as the 'dark age' the woman's position became very miserable. Customs of *purdah* (a black cloth worn by women to cover their face), *Sati* (burning of widows), child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage, and the prevalence of joint family systems have been the factors responsible for the injustice done towards women. Women were deprived of their rights of equality with men.

The Muslim influence on India caused considerably deterioration in the status of women. They were deprived of their rights of equality with men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against this inequality and subjugation. The contact of Indian culture with that of British also brought improvement in the status of women. The third factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom movement. As

⁶⁵ A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, Motilal, Delhi, 1962, P.239.

a result of this retrieval of freedom, women in Indian have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, airhostesses, booking clerks, receptionists, and doctors. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this amelioration in the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give their rightful place in Indian society.

As a result of women's newly gained freedom, Indian women have distinguished themselves in various spheres of life as politicians, orators, lawyers, doctors, administrators, and diplomats. They are not only entrusted with great responsibility, but also perform their duties honestly and sincerely. There is hardly any sphere of life in which Indian women have not taken part and shown their worth. But still in our society there are some sorts of evils, which cannot be fully removed from the society. Society continues to treat widows, divorcees, and abandoned women with contempt. Widow Remarriage, while it happens frequently, is an uphill task for the couple. Many things are being done to address these problems. The National Council for Women advocates policies for women. There is an entire ministry that manages policies for women. There is also a very large body of educated women in professions. Some statistics quote more women engineers and scientist in India than in the U.S. Some other advancement includes publications created by women, several vocal women journalists and pundits, special courts for dowry deaths, and countless women specific NGOs. There have been many laudable

attempts by successive governments to raise the status of women throughout various legislations and organizations.

The status of women in India has been subject to great many changes over the past few millennia. From a largely unknown status in ancient times through the low point of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal right by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful.

Ancient India

Some scholars believe that in ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. However, some others hold contrasting views. Works of ancient Indian grammarians, such as Patanjali and Katyana, suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. *Rig Vedic* verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband. Scriptures such as *Rig-Veda* and *Upaniṣhad* mention several women sages and seers, notably Gārgī and Maitreyī.⁶⁶

Some kingdoms in the ancient India had traditions such as *nagarvadhu* ("bride of the city"). Women competed to win the coveted title of the *nagarvadhu*. Amarpālī is the most famous example of a *nagarvadhu*.

According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C), the status of women began to

⁶⁶ Dr. YogirajBasu: *VederParichaya*, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Kolkata, 1377 (BS) Henceforth, *VederParichaya* P. 198.

decline with the Smritis (esp. Manusmṛiti) and other religious texts curtailing women's freedom and rights. Although reformatory movements such as Jainism allowed women to be admitted to the religious order, by and large, the women in India faced confinement and restrictions. The practice of child marriages is believed to have started from around sixth century.

Myth and reality about women

The very word 'woman' is symbol of eternal mystery because it seems that it is not enough for her to be flesh and blood and she should be better than what she is. Therefore, she is not allowed to take part in the incessant activity of the world and she is like an entity in this world, she is there only to make things beautiful and men are there to appreciate the beauty. This mythical idea found expression in the poet's memorable lines:⁶⁷

*Not God alone has created you O maiden,
Man has completed your being by giving you
Beauty and grace (of his hearts' desire)*

Women are always misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood and that is why her place is always behind the mist of illusion and for this only she is detached from the world and leading her life in a secluded place. Women, it seems, outside her home and obviously the household works, has no place and it has been a fact that men

⁶⁷ See Jasodhara Bagchi (ed.) *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, Sangam Books, New Delhi, 1995.

were born to rule and women are to be ruled. Even within the family a son gets more attention than a daughter. It is as if man is the maker of the world, and woman's duty is to make him a home. We often consider the inherited notions, values, aspects of our tradition as false ideology but we cannot uproot this ancestral prejudice, which are in their mind. So our society cannot be free from the control power of men. Though the dowry system has been prohibited yet this is being practiced in our society nakedly and widely and for the terror of dowry thousands of women are being slaughtered. So, as long as it will remain patriarchal attitude will never change. Most of the men are in favour of dowry because in this way and through these patriarchal attitudes it is possible for them to keep women under their pressure. They are quite disdainful about talent in women and no one wants to give her the acknowledgement she deserves. In our society women do not stand in the way of other women's development. If all women can raise themselves against such pettiness and consider what is desirable for them, some of these problems can be solved.

Laws in Judaism and Christianity

In ancient Judea some priests or prophets were the lawgivers. At that time, there was a concept that the authority of these lawgivers came from the domain of the supernatural and their intention was social cohesion. Among some communities, like tribal and postural communities, women were under the pressure of men and they were the victims of male domination. There was the myth that God directly

created Adam and Eve was an afterthought and Eve was created only to make her as a life-mate of Adam (Genesis II: 22) after the fall, God cursed man with hard work and enmity with the serpent but Eve he cursed thus: 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception....Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee' (Genesis III: 16). So, in the *Old Testament* there are such kinds of myth regarding women and their inferior position the picture is somewhat different in the *New Testament*. With the advent of St. Paul as the *New Testament* lawgiver the attitude toward women was changed. In Paul's world, a woman's position was considered as a *second-rate citizen* and man best avoids her. The *Old Testament* gave the husband the unilateral right to divorce, and now according to the *New Testament* the wife too, could leave the husband. But Paul also asks the husband not to put away the wife away.

Woman and the Hindu tradition

The roles women play in society and the images people have of them have developed not simply from the exigencies of biology and social situations but are rather deeply rooted in the myths and legends and the religion of the culture. This is especially true of Indian culture. In the west, the Virgin Mary is hardly presented as a model that ought to be emulated whereas in India, Sita is considered just that. This has made the task of social change particularly difficult. In a patriarchal culture, what we get is masculine's definition of ideals and images of women. These ideals and visions are not women's creations. They are not born out

of their own experiences. This perspective developed by social sciences is influenced by the culture's ideology. According to most of the world views, Hindu women are degraded, downtrodden slaves. The concept of the female in Hinduism presents an important duality: on the one hand, the woman is fertile, benevolent the bestowed; on the other, she is aggressive, malevolent-the destroyer.⁶⁸ A popular statement characterizes the goddess in all her manifestation thus: in times of prosperity she indeed is Lakṣhmī, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times of misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune and brings about ruin. These two facets of femaleness relate to this duality, and perhaps provide a cultural logic for it. The female is first of all *sakti* (energy/power) the energizing principle of the universe. The female is also *prakṛiti* (nature)-the undifferentiated matter of the universe. In Hindu cosmology, although without the female there would be no energy in the universe. In fact, all beings contain their share of *śakti*, their defining qualities (*guṇa*) and actions (*karma*). Furthermore, the *śakti* that is part of an individual at birth can be increased or decreased through later actions. For example, a woman, by being a true and devoted wife, increases her *śakti*. Various austerities, particularly sexual abstinence, also increase a person's *śakti*. But even though both men and women have *śakti* as a personal attribute, the woman embodies *śakti*, the original energy of the universe.

⁶⁸ Margaret Cormack, *The Hindu Women*, Asia Publishing House, 1992, P.176

The role of women in Hinduism is often disputed, and positions range from quite fair to extremely intolerant. Hinduism is based on numerous texts, some of which date back to 2000 BCE or earlier. They are varied in authority, authenticity, content and theme, with the most authoritative being the Vedas. The position of women in Hinduism is widely dependent on the specific text and context. Positive references are made to the ideal women in texts such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, while some texts such as the *Manu Smṛiti* advocate a restriction of women's rights. In modern times, the Hindu wife has traditionally been regarded as someone who must, at all costs, remain chaste or pure. This is, in contrast, with the kingdoms, which included highly respected professional courtesans (such as Amrapālī of Vesālī) sacred *devadāsīs*, mathematicians and female magicians. Some European scholars observed in the 19th century that Hindu women were "naturally chaste" and "more virtuous" than other women, although what exactly they meant by that is open to dispute. In any case, as male foreigners they would have been denied access to the secret and sacred spaces that woman often inhabited.

Gender of God

There is a wide variety of viewpoints within the different schools and sects of Hinduism concerning the exact nature and gender (where applicable) of the supreme person or being; there are even sects that are skeptical about the existence of such a being. The *śakti* traditions, for example, focus their worship on the goddess *Durgā* as the supreme embodiment of power and feminine strength (a female form

of God). *Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism* both worship Lakṣhmī with Vishnu and *Parvati* with Shiva respectively as beings on an equal level of magnitude (the male and female aspects of God). In some instances such as with *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, specific emphasis is placed on the worship of God's female aspect (*Rādhārānī*) even above that of her paramour Krishna. Thus, it could be said that Hinduism considers God to have both male and female aspects, as the original source of both.⁶⁹

Male deities (such as Śhiva and Indra) are believed in some traditions to themselves offer worship to the Goddess, Durgā:

"O parameśhwari; (The supreme Goddess) who is praised by the husband of the daughter of Himalayas (*Śhri Śhiva*)...." "O parameshwari, who is worshiped with true of feelings by the husband of *Indrani* (Indra) please give us the spiritual personality, the victory, the glory and destroy our enemies."

Elsewhere Śhiva and Viṣṇu are also described as possessing feminine qualities represented through their *Ardhanariśhvara* and *Mohini* forms respectively. There have also been male devotees who have claimed to be incarnations of goddess, such as Narayani peedam and Bangaru Adigalar of Melmaruvathur, Tamilnadu who claim to be forms or avataros of the goddess Narayani. Hindu feminists such as Phoolan Devi have also used the goddess *Durga* as their icon. Traditions, which follow the

⁶⁹ N.N. Bhattacharjee, *Indian Mother Goddess Indian studies: Past and Present*, Calcutta, 1971, P.93.

advaita philosophy, consider that ultimately particular gender, or are transcendental to such considerations.⁷⁰

Women in the Vedas

The Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights to both the sexes and does not discriminate. But, despite the constitutional provisions; women do not enjoy the equality with men. Our attitude towards women stems from our religious scriptures that refer to women as contemptuous. Our oldest books are the 'Vedas' that contain highly objectionable and condemnable passages concerning women. 'Satipratha' was the custom of burning the widow with the body of her husband. 'Dasi pratha' was to keep the slave girls and the '*Niyogī prathā*' i.e. the ancient Aryan custom of childless widow are women having sexual intercourse with another husband to beget child. These were all the cruel customs responsible for the plight of the women. So, at that time female infant came to be considered as unwanted. Everyone was interested in having a son. The birth of the son was celebrated, but the birth of the daughter plunged family into gloom. 'Rig Veda' itself says that a women should beget sons. The newly married wife is blessed so that she could have ten sons, so much so, that for begetting a son, 'Vedas' prescribe a special ritual called '*punsawan Sanskar*'(a ceremony performed during third month of pregnancy).⁷¹

⁷⁰ Pranabananda Jash, *History of Saivism*, Calcutta, Roy and Chaudhury, 1974, P.130

⁷¹ *Veder Parichaya*, p.200.

During the ceremony it is prayed: "Almighty God, you have created this womb. Women may be born somewhere else but sons should be born from this womb"-Atharva Veda 6/11/3.

"O Husband, protect the son to be born. Do not make him a woman"-Atharva Veda 2/3/23.

"Lord Indra himself has said that women have very little intelligence. She cannot be taught"-Rig Veda 8/33/17.

At another place it is written:

There cannot be any friendship with a woman. Her heart is more cruel than that of a hyena"-Rig Veda 10/95/15.

'*Yayur Veda (Taitriya samhata'm)* says-"Women's code says that the women are without energy. They should not get a share in property. Even to the wicked they speak in feeble manner". *Yayur Veda* 6/5/82.

Property rights

Arthaśāstra and *Manusamhita* are sources about the woman's right to property or *stridhan* (literally meaning, property of life). It is of two types: maintenance (in money or land given by the husband), and anything else like ornaments given to her by her family, husband, in-laws and the friends of her husband. Manu further subdivides this into six types-the property given by parents at marriage, given by

the parental family when she is going to her husband's house, given by her husband out of affection (not maintenance which he is bound to give), and property given separately by brother, mother and father [Manu ix 194]. Pre-nuptial contracts are also mentioned where the groom would agree to give a set amount of bride price to both parents and the bride. Such property belonged to the wife alone and was not to be touched by the groom or her parents belonged to the wife alone and was not to be touched by the groom or her parents except in emergencies (in sickness, in famine, threaten by robbers, or for performing holy deeds). At the same time, the *Manu Smriti* contradicts itself by declaring that a wife has no property and the wealth earned is for the husband [Manu viii.416]

Daughters and sons equally inherited their mother's property; but some scriptures insist that a mother's property belongs solely to the daughters [Manu ix 131], in order of preference; unmarried daughters, married but poor daughters, married and rich daughters. When a father died, unmarried daughters had to be given a share in their father's property, equal to one-fourth from every brother's share [since it is assumed that the married daughter had been given her share at marriage] [Manu ix. 118]. If the family has no sons, the (appointed) daughter is the sole inheritor of property [Manu ix 127].

Study of scriptures

Several women sages and seers are mentioned in the Upanishads, the philosophical part of the Vedas, notable among them being Gārgī and Maitreyī. The Sanskrit word for female teachers as *Āchārya* (as opposed to *Acharya* for teacher and *Acharyini* for teacher's wife) reveal that women were also given a place Gurus.⁷²

The *Harita Dharmasutra* (of the Maitrayaniya school Yayur Veda) declares that there are two kinds of women: *Sadhyavandhu* who marry, and the *Brahmavadini* who are inclined to religion, they can wear the sacred thread, perform rituals like the *agnihotra* and read the Vedas. *Bhavabhuti's uttararamacharita* 2.3 says that *Atreyi* went to Southern India where she studied the Vedas and Indian philosophy. Shankara debated with the female philosopher Ubhaya Bharati and Madhava's shankaradigvijaya (9.63) mentions that she was well versed in the Vedas. Tirukkoneri Dasyai (15th century) wrote a commentary on Mammalian's *Tiruvaayamoli*, with reference to Vedic texts like the *Taittiriya Yayurveda*.

The *Bhagavata puraṇa* states that the Mahabharata was written specifically for women and also men who were not in the priestly Brahmin caste.

"Out of compassion, the great sage thought it wise that this would enable men to achieve that ultimate goal of life. Thus, he compiled the great historical narration

⁷² P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, BORI, 1974, pp.345-349.

called the Mahābhārata for women, labourers and friends of the twice born.⁷³In several schools for Vedic priests, many graduates are women.

Education

Katyayana's Varttika 125, 2477 mentions that there were female teachers of grammar. *Patanjali* wrote in his comments to *Ashtudhyayi* 3.3.21 and 4.1.44, that women undergo the thread ceremony before beginning their education, and says that women studied grammar.

Marriage

In a Hindu marriage, both husband and wife are two parts of one, complementing each other and becoming one in their spiritual journey. The most sacred part of the ceremony involves circumambulating the sacred fire in seven steps to a Vedic mantra where the groom addresses his wife thus the Vedas prescribe, as do most ancient cultures, that a dowry be given by the bride's family to the groom as a token for supporting the female as parents will not have to.⁷⁴

An opposing opinion is, however, that the evil of dowry is conspicuous by its absence in the entire range of authoritative religious literature of Hindus. Scholars (such as Veen Talwar Oldenburg) have shown that dowry amongst Hindus started as a result of peculiar conditions created during the British rule in India, and that

⁷³PrativaVerma, *Social Philosophy of the Mahabharata and the Manusmrti*, New Delhi, 1988, P.90.

⁷⁴Davies John, *Hindu Philosophy: An Exposition of the System of Kapila*, New Delhi, 1981, PP.94-95.

this practice is actually attested quite well in Medieval Europe. In lieu of dowry, however, her father and brothers upon her wedding gifted brides lavishly. Those gifts constituted her personal property not subject to use or control by her husband or her in-laws. Upon her death, it passed onto her daughters. A bride's or a wife's personal wealth was called *stridhana* or the women's wealth. If the bride's father was no longer alive, her brothers were obliged to grant her a share of their own inheritance to create her *stridhana* and for her marriage.⁷⁵

In the *Manu Smṛiti*, on the other hand, 8 types of marriage are specified, two involve bedecking the bride with costly garments and ornaments before giving her away, two involve the groom's family giving a gift to the bride's and the other four do not involve an exchange of gifts.

The *Manusmṛiti* enjoins 'Let mutual fidelity continue until death, 'this may be considered as the summary of the highest law for husband and wife [Manu ix 101]. Ṛig Vedic verses suggest that the women married at mature age and were probably free to select their husband. The wedding in the Ṛig-Veda (Rv 10.85.37-38) speaks of "husband" (plural) for a single wife, but this may have mythological character.

Another reference of the past that is contrary to the present practice is of *satyawatī*, the poor and lowly fisherman's daughter in the Mahābhārata. She exercised her freedom of choice in marriage. Even Shantunu (the great kuru king) could not just

⁷⁵See Subhra Ghosh: *The social Philosophy of Manu*, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2002.

go and marry her. He had to seek permission for her hand in marriage from her and her father (a lowly fisherman). He even had to agree to a pre-nuptial agreement with her promising that her own sons would inherit his throne eventually. This indicates that in ancient India a poor and lowly girl was able to exercise her power and freedom even while marrying a king.

Also Satyavati's marriage to Shantunu did not require dowry from her father, which is another indication that there was no dowry system. Moreover, she did not have to commit suicide or sati after Shantunu died which shows that sati was a custom did not exist then. After her husband's death, Satyavati remained very active in running the affairs of his kingdom (*kuru dynasty*) and even helped her sons in performing their royal duties efficiently.⁷⁶ This shows that women used to have a very active and fruitful social life when they became widowed or old and they certainly were not put to death prematurely through sati⁷⁷ etc.

Divorce

Both *Manusamhitā* and *Arthaśāstra* say that, if the husband is impotent, a traitor, evil-liver, has become an ascetic or is missing for a prescribed number of years, and then the wife can leave him without blame and marry again. *Arthaśāstra* also declares that in other circumstances, divorce can take place only by mutual consent.

⁷⁶ P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, BORI, Vol. II, 1974, PP.345-579.

⁷⁷ See Sati: *A vindication of the Hindu Women*, London, 1913.

Manu discusses situations where the wife wishes to return to her first husband whether she has simply deserted him or had married another.

Remarriage

According to all Hindu scriptures, a widow can remarry. The very term *punurbhu* is defined as a woman, virgin or not a virgin, who has married again. There are several texts that lay down her property rights in various such situations and the rights of her children from both her previous and later marriages.

Sati

Sati (as verb) is an act of immolation of a woman on her husband's funeral pyre. Sati (as noun) is she who immolated either self-willingly or by societal inducement and compulsion. Sati was performed ideally as an act of immortal love and was believed to purge the couple of all accumulated sin. Though no scriptural mandates it, the Puranas, part of the Hindu Smṛiti; mentioned sati as highly meritorious in several instances. A few instances of Sati are recorded in the Hindu epics, which are otherwise replete with influential widows. Some examples from the Mahābhārata include: Several of Vāsudeva's wives (*rhini, DeDebaki, Bhadra and Madira*) [M.Bh. Mausalaparvan 7.18].

Madri, second wife of Pandu, who held herself responsible for his health, performed sati. His first wife Kunti did not commit Sati.

Moreover, Kunti in the Mahābhārata even had a son before marriage but went on to become a queen by marrying another man (king Pandu). It shows that the society used to value women more for their overall qualities of intelligence, determination, loyalty and leadership etc., rather than some personal and private issue such as the pre-marital virginity. Needless to say, Kunti, in spite of her pre-marital indiscretion, not only married a king but also remarried highly respected and loved by all (family and others) throughout her entire and long life and did not have to commit sati at the time of her husband's death.

In reference to India, the act of *satism* began around the inception of the Moghul Empire in 13th century. From 13th century onward, because of the death of her husband, Hindu women (who avowed to remain true to their husbands as part of the sacred ritual marriage) became targets of Muslim raiders and early conquerors of India. Since such women were vulnerable to molestation, rape and other atrocities, it became a societal means to deprive these helpless women.

Women in medieval era

The Indian woman's position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period. Sati, child marriages and ban on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the purdah practice in the Indian society. Among the *rajputs* of Rajasthan, the *jauhar* was practiced. In some parts of India, the *Devadasīs* or the temple women were sexually

exploited. Polygamy was widely practiced especially among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were secluded to zenana. In spite of these conditions, some women excelled in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia Sultana became the only woman monarch to have ever ruled Delhi. The Gond queen Durgavati ruled for 15 years, before she lost her life in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Ashaf Khan in 1564. Jahangir's wife Nurjehan effectively wielded imperial power and was recognized as the real force behind the Mughal throne. Sivaji's mother, Jijadbai was deputed as queen regent, because of her ability as a warrior and administrator. In south India, many women administered villages, towns, divisions and heralded social and religious institutions.⁷⁸

Social practices

Traditions such as *Sati*, *jauhar*, child marriage and *devadasi* have been banned and are largely defunct. However, some cases of those practices are still found in remote parts of India. The *purdah* is still practiced by many Indian women.⁷⁹

Sati

Sati is an old, largely defunct custom, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although the act was supposed to be a voluntary one on the widow's part; it is believed to have been sometimes forced on the widow. The

⁷⁸ See R. Srinivasan: *Facts of Indian Culture*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1980.

⁷⁹ Raghunath Ghosh, *Sura, Man & Society: Philosophy of Harmony in Indian Tradition*, Academic Enterprise, 1984, PP.69-85.

British abolished it in 1829. There have been around forty reported cases of Sati since independence.

Jauhar

Jauhar refers to the practice of the voluntary immolation of all the wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the Rajputs of Rajasthan, who are known to place a high premium on honour.

Child marriages

Earlier child marriages were highly prevalent in India. The young girls would live with their parents till they reached puberty. In the past, the child widows were condemned to a life of great agony, shaving heads, living in isolation, and shunned by the society. Although child marriage was outlawed in 1860, it is still a common practice in some underdeveloped areas of the country. But the position of women in modern India has changed considerably. A woman's position in modern Indian society is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. Women's suffering from sati, child marriage, institution of temple prostitution no longer exists. Now women have the right to receive education, inherit and own property and participate in the public and political life of the nation. Women have become economically independent and can seek employment anywhere, without remaining a domestic slave. But the evil of illiteracy, dowry and

economic slavery should be removed so that women can get their right place in society.