

POSITION OF WOMEN IN DIFFERENT AGES: AN ANALYSIS

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I. Introduction

Position of women in the present society and in the increase in this magnitude of the variety of offences against them have a long history dating back to ancient times. The *Rig-Veda*, being the masterpiece of great scholars and the oldest developed authoritative written text of the world, provides ample evidence on the history of ancient Indian culture. It is exhibited in the *Vedic age*, the refulgent golden age of women, their social position and status was at the apex, and they enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the sphere of family, religion and public life, wife was then considered as the *Ardhangini* and the founding stone of the family arch. In the family, she was usually expected to play the vital role of a sympathetic mother and beloved wife, but while she used to serve the family like a servant, she presided over it like a Queen. In the society, girls were entitled to undergo the *Upanayana* ceremony and studied *Vedic* literature and even *Vedas* contain many hymns which were revealed by the women seers who were then called a *Rishikas* and *Brahmavadinis*. The oldest *Rig-Veda* followed by *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva* along with other Upanishads, portrayed women as the incarnation of the almighty mother power and respected *motherhood* with highest prestige. The *Shastras* pictured the better half to be instinctively imbued with qualities of head and heart and glorified her significant role in smoothening the daily life of her male consort and portrayed her noble qualities to be:

Bhojyeshu Mata, Karyeshu Mantree; Bachneshu Dasee, Shayaneshu Rambha(1)
*Dharmanukula Kshamaya Dharatree, Bharyachakhad Gunavteeh Durlabha(II)*²

Thus *Shashtras* attributed the noble and ideal wife with characteristics of affectionate mother in serving and feeding the family. A reliable and trusted adviser to her male counterpart in deciding her family problems, a devoted and humble servant in serving the family, a sexually pleasing partner like *Apsara*, *Rambha*, and religious, dutiful obedient, tolerating woman with quality of pardoning others like the mother Earth. While incorporating these qualities of women as wife, *Shastras* also enumerated her rights in the family and placed her in a very prestigious

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² *Gupta, G.L. Edited- "Challenges to the fair Sex" Delhi 1988*

position. In fact, woman being the attraction and inspiration of her male counterpart, is also depicted as the living ideal of affection, pleasure, confidence, devotion and faith and described her as women, you are mere faith in the silver mountain foot of confidence. May you flow like a nectar stream smoothening the beautiful plain of life³. The much debatable concept of equality which is germane to Vedas and nowhere better exhibited then in the Hindu God's *Lord, Rudra* provided equal status to his better half in his own body and termed himself as *ardhanariswar*. During 1930-31, three prominent women were invited to the round table Conference in London; Indian delegate Smt. Reddy represented the International Women Conference at Chicago in 1934.

II. Women's position in Different Ages

In the Vedic period women on whole occupied a position of honour, respect and equality with men *Rig-Veda*, the meditative mastermind product, is excellent, projection of the highest religious truth of thoughts, which dawned on the saints and seers as a result of their contemplation in a life of complete as catechism and penance, shows evidence pointing to the fact that women were fully the equals of men as regards access to and capacity for the highest knowledge of *Brahma*. The *Veda* contains hymns which were revealed even by the women seers, who were called *Rishikas*, and *Brahmavadinis*. The position and status of Indian women in the Vedic age was much higher than in any other ancient society like that of *Greece* and *Rome*.⁴ The general position of a wife was of high dignity and she enjoyed peace, happiness and prosperity in family along with the members. In *Vedic* age the wife in a family enjoyed full religious rights with her husband and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with him. In the absence of wife, such performance of religious ceremonies were considered invalid and she was given the position of full partner in life, and this system also continued in *Upanishadic* Age.

In the *Epics* and *Puranas* though, no woman figured as ruling queen but women like *Gandhari*, *Draupadi*, *Kaushalya*, *Kaikeyi* and *Kunti* were in very high positions and exercised considerable influences in the family councils of *Kings*. In this age there are instances of marriage of *Aryans* with *Non-Aryans*. Heroes like *Bhima* and *Arjuna* were married to *Non-Aryan* girls *Hidimba* and *Ulupi* as narrated in *Mahabharat* text like the custom of *Upanayana* of girls was prevailing in the early *Vedic* era. There were worship of Mother Goddess in *Vedic* literature. Among them, the mother of

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid* – Majumdar Ramesh Chandra, “*Ideal and position of India Women in domestic life*” – Great Women of India. Calcutta, 18 Hem Naskar Road, Calcutta 10, 1082, P.5S

Gods (*Devamata*), *Prithvi*, *Saraswasti*, *Shri Lakshmi Devi*, *Ratri*, *Ambika*, *Uma*, *Durga* were famous Goddesses of warship. So *Shakti puja* was evidently prevailing in society since the early age.

II.I. Position of women during Vedic period

The parents influence was not unfairly exercised against the wishes of their wards in choosing their life partner. Women were not only highly educated and cultured; they proved to be good teachers in the upbringing of their children in all spheres of life⁵. They even imparted military training to their children in case of need. The overall image of the Hindu women in the Vedic society was quite commendable. The Hindu women then lived with full sense of dignity and security. The family life was also conducted according to *Vedic Dharma* and its injunctions. The *Smritis*, Commentaries and the digests was the developed literary works in the *Vedas* and was basically founded on them⁶. The first Indian literature⁷ (in its evolutionary state) was said to be reflected in the *Vedas*. The Vedic society was governed by “*Varna Dharma*” and “*Varna Ashrama*” and a Hindu was born in the then society, for fulfilling the four great missions of his life viz. the *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*. The *Rig Veda* the first among the four *Vedas* was said to have been compiled by the great *Aryan Rishis*, *Bhardwaja*, *Atriyee*, *Vanndev*, *Vasistha*, and *Kanva* etc. The learned Brahmins, while compiling the *Vedas* took notice of the then existing traditions of the people of the *Pre-Vedic age*⁸.

The *Rig Veda* referred to only two classes of people who then constituted the *Vedic society*⁹. They were the *Aryans* and the *Dasas*. The *Aryans* possessed white complexion and the *Dasas* were ordinarily black skinned. It is observed that the *Aryans* were religious minded people and worshipped the Supreme being, by performing different *Yajnas*

⁵. *Rig Veda* M. – 1[S. – 124, S1.4; S.122, Sl. 14; S. 116, Sl. 13] : *See also Rig Veda* M.1[S.123, Sl.2; S.118 Sl. 1; S. 120, Sl. 5; 3. 114, Sl.1]

⁶. Manu, Yajvalkya, Narada, Parasara *Smritis* etc: Mitakshara, a running commentary on Yajvalkya *Smriti* : Daybhaga, a digest; containing the views of various *Smriti* writers.

⁷. Writing came into vogue in India at about third century A.D. (Dr. H.S. Gaur, *Hindu Code*, p-31)

⁸. Muller Prof. Max computed its age to be above 1200 B.C. *See Max Muller's A.S. Lit.*, p. 49.

⁹. Gaur H.S. – *Hindu Code* p. 25. The Earlier *Vedas* contain no reference to any caste. They only refer to the *Aryas* and the *Dasyas* the former being the *Aryan* immigrants and the latter the aboriginal natives of the country like *Dasya*, *Sirvyas* *See Dutt's R.C. History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 212

(sacrifices)¹⁰. Whereas, the *Dasas* were not religious minded people and did not submit to the authority of the *Vedas* for a long time. It is observed the *Dasyas* were merged into the *Sudra* community at a later stage of social progress.¹¹ They served the twice born *Aryans* for attaining their *Mukti*. The *Vedic* texts assigned each “*Varna*”, their academic or professional duties.¹² The *Dasas* or the *Sudras* were categorized in the class of servants or slaves and were asked to serve the regenerate class of *Aryans*. The *Aryans* were less in number and therefore, with a view to enlarge their number, they permitted many Non-Aryan tribes aboriginal races (already residing in India) to join the Aryan culture¹³. Many Non-Aryan tribes or races, who espoused the *Manu* cult were merged into the Aryan race, increasing thereby, the then existing population and further the area of Aryan influence. Many, who were not initially Aryans, became *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Sudras* by their professional conduct, etiquette and deeds were accepted within the Aryan community, thereby increasing the Aryan population in India which at that time was known as *Aryavarta*, the place of Aryan.

II.II. Position of women in Vedic Society

History has put the emphasis on outstanding women and not women as a whole. Moreover there is a marked gap between the micro setting i.e. the single woman who is the object of direct observation and the macro setting of society. Florence has in her book “Women and the Power to Change” states that the true business of civilisation has been in the hands of men. On the other hand, the extent to which civilization has been built by women is unacknowledged and unpaid.¹⁴ It is observed that women had neither property nor the right of inheritance, and their status was on a level

¹⁰. “*Vedic* Hinduism laid great stress on the performance for Yajnas... The Vedic Hindu was not concerned with meditation and reflection”. Dr. Paras Diwan-Mod. Hindu Law, 8th Ed., 1990, p. 15.

¹¹. Manu traces the origin to the animus mundi (the Supreme soul) *Brahma*, who “produced by a thought a Golden age, in which he himself was born as *Brahma*, who for the sake of the prosperity of the world, caused the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriya* the *Vaishya* and the *Sudra* to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs and his feet allotted to these their distinctive duties”. Dr. H.S. Gaur – Hindu Code, P-27. See also *Rig Veda* X, 90, 12; “*Brahmans*” *Syamuktam* avoid bahu Rajanyah pad Bhyam *Sudra* Ajayata”, See also “The four *Varnas*” R.C. Dutt’s Vol. I.Chap. VIII P. 284 to 325

¹². The Hindu society was divided into two main castes – I. The Dwiza or twice born and 2. The *Shudras* or the servile people.

¹³. “Some aspect of ancient Indian Culture” by Bhandarkar P.6 at.9 of his book, the learned author observes that, “...Many members of Non-Aryan tribes or races espoused the *Manu* cult and were merged into the Aryan race”.

¹⁴. Das Amrita (Dr.), *History of Women in India*, p 1.

with that of the *Shudra*, which suggest that their social position was very low. But other evidence tends to show the opposite. The wife as a companion in conjugal life in *Vedic* society was not an unusual feature. There were women among the *Rishis*, and, in the *Upanishads*, among the theologians. The wife of the sacrifice had a part, though a passive one, in the ritual and in some agricultural ceremonies the woman offered sacrifice even if she was not married. The nuptial rites emphasised the high value attached to the wife at the religious level: “the friend half of the man”. But from *Rig Vedic* times onwards pity or contempt was expressed for the “girl without a brother” and the birth of a daughter was deplored. Finally, from the certain references in the hymns it has been inferred that prostitution was fairly common (Paschal)¹⁵

In social terms, early *Vedic* society was in many respects almost egalitarian. Thus, while differences based on rank and wealth existed, especially in terms of access to cattle chariots and horses, while there were differences in status on the basis of age and sex, restrictions on the access to productive resources were virtually non-existent as far as men were concerned.¹⁶ The fourfold *Varna* system on the other hand, was virtually absent. There are only fourteen references to *Brahman*'s, nine to *Kshatriyas*, and one to the *Sudra*, the last named being referred to only in the context of the *Purusasukta* hymn which occurs in the tenth *Mandala* of the *Rig Veda* which is commonly regarded as late.

The status of women in early *Vedic* society is a matter of some debate. While there has been a consistent tendency to idealize their position, it is likely that reality may have been more complex. That women played a certain part in the productive process is evident from the term *duhitri* as noted earlier as well as from their involvement in activities such as weaving. Further we have references to women seers of *Vedic* hymns, which would indicate some access to ritual and spiritual traditions. Besides, certain practices such as child marriage seem to have been unknown in early *Vedic* society. However, society appeared to have been organized patrilineally, and while there were prayers for the birth of sons in particular and for *Praja* or offspring in general, there was none for the birth of a daughter. Further, most of the major deities in the early *Vedic* pantheon are male.¹⁷

However, in the *Rig Vedic* period (1500-1000 B.C.) women enjoyed a high position in society surpassing the contemporary civilisation of Ancient Greece and Rome. There were hardly any prescribed positions

¹⁵. Louis Renou – “*Vedic India*”, p. 131

¹⁶. Roy Kumkum, “*The Vedic Age(3) : Societal Change*”, published in *Employment News weekly*, New Delhi, Saturday 25.3.89. P.1

¹⁷. Roy Kumkum, “*The Vedic Age(3) : Societal change*”, published in *Employment News weekly*, New Delhi, Saturday 25.3.89. p.1

exclusively earmarked for man and there are references in *Vedic* literature of a ritual for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. Many women made a mark as renowned scholars and philosophers like *Visvavara*, *Ghosala* and *Apala*. *Saunaka* in *Brahmadevta* mentions 27 *Brahmavadinis* great scholars – who contributed *Suktas* in the *Rig-Veda*. Women were married at a mature age, participated in religious ceremonies and had freedom in the choice of husband's polygamy was rare.¹⁸

II.III. Position of women in Post Vedic period

In the *Dharma-Shastras* women are unambiguously equated with the *Sudras*. Even the *Gita* places women, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras* in the same category and describes them as being of sinful birth. Thus a dichotomy is evident throughout ancient Indian history. The two major heterodox religions, Buddhism and Jainism supported greater freedom for women. *Sanghamitra*, the daughter of king *Ashoka* established a nunnery in Sri Lanka and is remembered even today for her message of universal love. In south India, women enjoyed a higher status because of the prevalence of the matriarchal system¹⁹.

II.IV. Position of Women as Illustrated in the Epics

“In the ancient literature of India, dated from centuries before European culture began, in the great epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, women took distinguished part in the husband's work, aiding him with her love and counsel, accompanying him, like *Sita* and *Draupadi*, even into exile. She shared in the public ceremonies and was accorded the highest rank and dignity.²⁰

The legal position of women, according to *Manu*, the earliest exponent of the law, was definitely unfortunate. They were always dependent on somebody either the father, or the husband, or the son. (“A woman is not entitled to independence; her father protects her in her maidenhood, her husband in her youth, and her son in her old age”). Almost they were treated in law as chattels and a non entity in the family. The circumstances in which *Sita* herself was discovered by *Janaka* merit notice. It is held that while ploughing the sacrificial field, *Janaka* found her as a

¹⁸. Das Amrita (Dr.), “History of Women in India”, p.1. A paper read by her in a seminar held in I.T. College, Lucknow on “*Position of Women*” in the year 1988.

¹⁹. Das Amrita (Dr.), “*History of Women in India*”, P. 2. A paper read by her in a Seminar held in I.T. College, Lucknow on “*Position of Women*” in the year 1988.

²⁰ Her Highness the Maharani of Baroda and S.M. Mitra: “*The position of women in Indian Life*, Ch-1, P. 4, First Reprint, 1981.

founding, smeared with dust.²¹ The mythical origin of *Sita* as having sprung from the bosom of the Earth is however, unacceptable to commonsense (can it then be that *Sita* was an abandoned baby who was later found and brought up as his daughter, by king *Janaka*).

The epic furnished good ground to assume that once daughter was begotten, utmost solicitude was bestowed on her and full latitude given to her for complete development of her personality. The problem of her marriage was not decided somehow or anyhow by the parents, but was given due deliberation in respect of choice and selection guided by certain guiding principles and rules and not by any personal infatuation or fancy.²² The elaborate *Svayamvara* organized by *Janaka* with a desire to find the best warrior of the land as his son-in-law is a positive proof indicating that the daughter was not in any way an object of indifference in the family. *Draupadi's Swayamvar* is also an example in this regard. During his love plaints for *Sita* after her abduction, *Rama* feels particularly sad when he thinks how poignantly distressed *Janaka* would become on learning about the loss of his dear daughter. The giving away of a daughter in marriage (*Kanya-dana*) was believed to confer good merit on her father; it was his express and holy duty (*paro-dhamah*) to find a husband for his daughter. A daughter endowed with excellences, was like the goddess of prosperity (*Laksmi*) incarnate. "A new era of happiness and prosperity is said to have been ushered in the family of *Janaka* after he obtained and adopted *Sita* as a daughter."²³

Besides instructions in rituals girls acquired a sufficient knowledge of the scriptures, namely, *Smritis* and *Puranas*, not only from their parents but also from *Brahmanas* and hermits.²⁴ The knowledge gathered in this way seems to have been thorough. *Sita* in her father's home had come into contact with priests, *Brahmanas*, astrologers and learned men, and was at home in quite a few branches of traditional lore.²⁵ She is represented as fully conversant with the *Pauranic* love of the day to²⁶ *Kaikeyi* and *Tara* too, displayed an extensive knowledge of the scriptures. At the same time, parents were not oblivious of the necessity of equipping their daughters with practical education. Daughters were given instructions pertaining to their duties and obligations after marriage. *Sita*, insistent on accompanying *Rama* to the forest, told him that she was well instructed by her parents regarding

²¹ *Valmiki's Ramayana*, II. 118. 28-29;

²² Valvalkar P.H.: "Hindu Social Institutions, p. 198 f; cf. 1.33.10. See also Dr. Shanti Kumar Nanooram Vyas : "India in the Ramayana Age", Edition, 1988

²³ *Valmiki's Ramayana* II. 118. 34.

²⁴ *Valmiki's Ramayana*, II. 29.8.13.

²⁵ *Valmiki's Ramayana*, II.29.9.17; VI.8.2.

²⁶ *Valmai's Ramayana*, II30.6.5 24.9, - 12;

wifely duties, rendering all further persuasion for her to stay back unnecessary.

It appears that girls were not barred from even military training as it is clear from the fact that *Kaikeyi* accompanied *Dasaratha* to the *Devasura* battle. When the king was rendered unconscious by wound received in the battle, *Kaikeyi*, by her pluck and resourcefulness, removed him from the battle-field and saved his life.²⁷ This implies knowledge of driving war chariots and rendering first-aid. Physically strong women were not a rarity in those days. The sacrificial horse of *Dasaratha's Asvamedha* was decapitated by his eldest queen, *Kaushalya*, by her own hand with three strokes of the sword obviously, she must have been a very strong and true *Kshatriya* lady. In Lanka, women were trained as armed guards and the guards of *Sita* at *Ashoka Vatika* were only women soldiers bearing arms.²⁸

II.V. Position of women during Mauryan Period

“The role of women in *Mauryan* society is of some significance. It was taken for granted that their position was subordinate to that of the men. This is particularly the case in the type of society envisaged by the *Arthashastra*. *Brahmanical* treatises were usually serve with women, who, in later works are regarded without equivocation as an inferior species.²⁹ The *Buddhists* were much more human in their attitude. Because the women were not independent, therefore it was observed that “The decision to allow nuns in the *Buddhist* order was one of tremendous importance, whereas their *Brahmanical* counter parts would not even admit of education for women. It has been suggested and with some justification, that for a woman life in *Buddhist* Society was not so trying as life in *Brahmanical* society, since she was not regarded primarily as a child bearer. The birth of a son was not necessary to *Buddhist* ritual as it was to Hindu ritual. Since *Buddhist* society accepted unmarried women the women tended to be less concerned with finding husbands and consequently less subservient. All the same marriage was still regarded as the most suitable occupation for a woman. Working women were restricted in their work. The only possibilities seem to have been those of performing in circuses and plays, working as domestic slaves, either in private homes or in royal palaces, and as a last resort, setting themselves up as prostitutes and Courtesans. At a later state when Hindus ideas on this matter began to infiltrate into Buddhism the woman's

²⁷ *Valmiki's Ramayana*, II.9. 15.

²⁸ *Valmiki's Ramayana*, V.17.15.

²⁹ Thapar Romila: “*Ashoka and the decline of the Mauryas*”. IInd Ed., 11th Impression, 1990; p. 87; See also Horner : “*Women in primitive Buddhism*”, P. 22ff.

importance even within the home, declined, and the older Brahman cal attitudes were revived”³⁰

II.VI. Position of Women during Mughal Period

In Mughal period the position of women in general was subordinate to men. As Prof. Ashraf has observed “The functions and the position of a woman were distinctly subordinate and in the long run came to be understood as the service of the male and dependence upon him in every stage of life. As a daughter, a woman lived under the ward ship of her father, as a wife under the tutelage of her husband and as widow (that is, if she was permitted to survive her husband) under the care of her eldest son. In a word her life was state of perpetual wards hip and the social laws and customs stamped her with a sort of mental deficiency”³¹ The girls were considered a liability right from the time of their birth³². A mother giving birth to a number of girls in succession was despised. Amongst same of the *Rajput* clans the girls were killed at the time of their birth. According to James told the famous author of the annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan,” the *Rajputs* resorted to that practice due to the scarcity of suitable matches due to the same clan and continuous inter-marriage between families of the same clan and continuous wars and feuds with the remote tribes together with the sentiment that unworthy match lowers the prestige of the bride’s father.

II.VII. Position of Women during the British Rule

The position of women was not satisfactory in the early period of British rule. The reasons are being that they were the subject of adject exploitation and discrimination as was ordained in the *Sastric* texts. It was obvious as Britishers being totally ignorant of their plight in the early stage and further felt disinterested in interfering with the personal laws of the Hindus. They not only lacked interest in bringing reforms in the state of Hindu Law but they otherwise were busy in other important matters. The position of woman in the words of *Shastri* appeared to be as follows:-

“The enforced child-marriage; the exposure of the female children by throwing them at the junction of the Ganges and the sea, the violence used to make women follow the Sati rule and, thus, end their miserable existence, the shameful

³⁰. *Ibid*

³¹. K.M. Ashraf: *Life and conditions of the people of Hindustan*, P-192. See also Roychoudhury S.C.: *History of Muslim India*, Ed. 1986, P. 252-253.

³². Upadhyay Neelam & Pandey Rekha : “*Women in India : Past and Present*”, First published, 1990, P.- 18. See also Col. James, Tod, “*The Anals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*”, edited by W. Cookes, 1920, Vol. II, P. 739-740. See also Niccolac Ventian Irawin : “*Storia De Mogar*, Vol. II, P. 343.

treatment according to a widow the famous *Kulinism* which make marriage a profession rather than a *sacrament*, made woman not only an object of pity but many a woman sighed in the secret recess of her heart and wished that she had never been born a woman in the unfortunate country.³³

III. Position of Women in the Pre-British India

Presenting the position of women in the pre-British India, they have been declared uneducated, considered on a level with the *Shudras* married before their characters fully developed, transferred from the loving and sympathetic atmosphere of parent's house to the house of the parents-in-law where an atmosphere of awe prevailed, apprehensive of supersession, frequently forced to drag on a miserable existence in an interminable widowhood, their character suffered from forced repression in some direction and unnatural stimulation in others. They had no status in society; none in their own estimation.³⁴ Cursing the curse of polygamy, *Vidyasagar* says that – “with the coolin *Brahmin*, the sacred rite of matrimony had been notoriously degraded to a system of shameful traffic. These men for some sordid gain of some paltry sum visited village after village accepting the hands of scores of maidens, the great majority of whom were destined never to enjoy the blessing of wedded life.”³⁵

Economically too woman became dependent on men:

*“The present woman is an atrophied limb of the social organism and especially in civilized society she depends as completely for her support and sustenance on the husband as a child does on its mother.”*³⁶

From the days of the East Indian Company India was turned into a backward country by the elaborate, ruthless systematic exploitation by the British from the start of their rule. The main concern of the British Raj was to exploit India to the full without endangering its traditional modes of control and integration which enabled them to capture India. The British colonialists found its solution in the use of middle men³⁷ who were to serve

³³ Shastri Shakuntala Rao: *Woman in the sacred Laws*, Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, (1959)171.

³⁴ Dube S.C. in Barbara ward (ed): *Women in the New Asia*, The Hague: UNESCO, (1963), 189.

³⁵ Vidyasagar Iswar Chandra, *Friend of India*, (March 30, 1865).

³⁶ Nehru Jawaharlal, quoted in Pratima Asthana, *Women's Movement in India*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. Bombay, (1974), 9.

³⁷ See Pandey B.N., *The Break up of British India* (London : Macmillan, 1969) ; Sovani N.V., “*British Impact in India*” in Metraux G.S. and Crouzet F. (eds.)

as a link between the traditional and modern structure. For this three institutions among other-education, religion and military were perceived. Through education, they tried to create an army of educated men who may be interpreters between the British and the millions who they governed; through religious propagation, they tried to create an army of convert Christians who may welcome them and protect their interest and through an army of Indians, they tried to crush Indians by Indians themselves.

The advanced economic condition of the country was ruined³⁸. The entire framework of Indian society was broken down,³⁹ bodily and mental powers of the people were wrecked by administrative ring to them the Posta – preparation of opium;⁴⁰ new classes and vested interests, tied up with British rule were created and Indians were divided among themselves by encouraging one group at the cost of the other. The 1857 war of independence brought men and women in the battle field. *Rani Laxmibai* of Jhansi (1835-1858) inspired women as well as men in India. The way she participated in it and died fighting valiantly at the battlefield was the revelation of potentialities of women.

The movement of social reform began during the British rule though with a slow pace when a few educated Indians coming in contact with western ideals started taking keen interest in ameliorating the condition of Hindu women. *Iswarchand Vidya Sagar, Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tilak* and other prominent figures laid emphasis on the education of the Hindu Female, abolition of child marriage, lifting of *Pardah* system, removal of dowry evil and *Sati Pratha*. The movement started with their efforts and there was realization of feeling that the legislature should step in and to take some concrete steps by giving statutory recognition to their rights and provide some kind of identity and recognition to them in the society. Though their efforts possessed a limited character nevertheless it created a kind of awareness that after all their position has to be improved. It was the beginning during the British rule but it took a concrete shape during the course of time in the post independent era when parliament passed notable legislations for improving upon the status of the Hindu women by passing many legislations in that regard.

The New Asia New York: Mentor Books, (1965); Spear, *A History of India* London: Penguin Books, (1965) Vol. 11.

³⁸. Vera Anstey, *The Economic Development of India* London; (1929), 4th edition, (1952) : Dutt R. Palme, *The economic History of India* London, (1901), 7th edition, (1950).

³⁹. Marx Karl, “*British rule in India in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected works*, Moscow, (1949-1950).

⁴⁰. Macaulay, Speeches, quoted in *William Digby, prosperous British India*, London, (1901), 63.

III.I. The Renaissance

In the nineteenth century, India began to discover her long cherished ideals and cultural self-consciousness. This came to be known as the period of “Renaissance” in India. The remodeling of her cultural modes and indigenous values began herein. It meant a reawakening, a process of rediscovery, and a reform of the self. The reformers, who advocated the emancipation of women, aspired the restoration of such healthy and congenial conditions which once prevailed in the early Vedic period. The renaissance of Indian women attained its fruition by “The renewed awareness of Indian’s glorious past”. This implies that the removal of evil social practices was perceived not in the light of new liberal thought of the west but on the basis of revival of the *Vedic* feminine ideals which was thought to be truly democratic.⁴¹

In response to the enlightened Indian public opinion, the British rulers legislated against the glaring social evils. Significant legal reforms were the abolition of Sati in 1827, the suppression of infanticide in 1725 and 1804, and the removal of restriction on remarriage of the widow in 1856. Although these early reforms and legislations were not able to bring intended results, they did succeed in creating resurgence among Indian women. Under the western impact Indian women experienced an air of freedom and the stir of the new life. In the words of O’Malley “profound as has been the penetration of the west in to men’s ideas of religion, caste and national status, it has no where penetrated more deeply than its revolution of women.”⁴² It brought to women a total new concept of themselves as persons “individually important and nationally needed.”⁴³ To be sure social reformers woke up in the different parts of the country who worked for the cause of women. The wave of reformist thought in the nineteenth century initiated by social reformers led to very significant legislation, social and educational changes. It would be instructive to describe briefly the efforts of the enlightened men and women.

The father of the Indian Renaissance was *Raja Ram Mohan Roy* (1774) in West Bengal. He pleaded that it was erroneous to consider women as weak in intellect and virtue and deficient in resolution, trustworthiness and control over passion.⁴⁴ He opposed the custom of Sati and polygamy and

⁴¹ See Gedge E. and Choksi M. (Eds), *Women in Modern India*, Bombay, (1929) 4.

⁴² Malley S.S. O’, *Modern India and the west London*, (1941), 445-446. See also his *Indian Social Heritage*, Oxford Clarendon Press, (1934)

⁴³ Malley S.S. O’, *Modern India and the West London*, (1941), 45. See also *India’s Social Heritage* Oxford Clarendon Press, (1934).

⁴⁴ See Ghose J.C., *English works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, Vol – II, Allahabad, (1906), 123-128.

encouraged widow-remarriage. He founded *Brahma Samaj* in 1828 and used English education to transform the social system responsible for the misery of women.

In fact, West Bengal produced several other social reformers. For instance, *Devendra Nath Tagore* (1817) and *Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar* (1820) supported the views of *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*. *Keshab Chandra Sen* attacked *Kulinism*, public dances by women, and tried his best to make women men's true partner in life. He brought out a monthly magazine, *Bama bodhini*, exclusively meant for women. He denounced polygamy, encouraged inter-caste marriages and opposed *Purdah* system for women.⁴⁵ It was due to his courage and perseverance that the civil Marriage Act of 1872 was passed. *Rabindra Nath Tagore* (1861) and *Swami Vivekanand* (1863) also supported these views. In Uttar Pradesh, *Huzur Maharaj Rai Salig Ram*, born in 1829 in Agra, had published a fortnightly journal *Prem Patra*, wherein he had advocated women's problems and created awareness among the people about the plight of women. He opposed *Purdah* and challenged the traditional beliefs that the husband is the virtual guru (teacher) of his wife. He did all what he could to remove illiteracy among women.⁴⁶ In Madras *Viresalingam* devoted himself to the women's advancement through education and marriage reforms.⁴⁷ *Venkata Rantam*, too, encouraged female education.⁴⁸

The Hindu law-givers did not permit women to inherit property. So a revolutionary change took place with the passage of Married Women's Property Act of 1874 which widened the scope of *Streedhana* and the money she acquired through her artistic and literary skills. Side by side the *Streedhana* – movable property which was given to the women by her parents or husbands, also remained intact.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati, born in Gujrat in 1824, advocated the female education, widow remarriage and marriage by consent, like ancient *Swayamvara* and procured readmission in Hindu society of those who have once been converted to other religions through *Suddhi*. He founded the *Arya Samaj* in 1875 at Bombay.⁴⁹ *Mahadev Govind Ranade*, born in Bombay

⁴⁵ See Mazoomdar P.C., *The life and Teachings of Keshab Chandra Sen*, Calcutta, (1887).

⁴⁶ See Maharaj Huzun, *Prem Patra*, Vol. V Agra, (1903), 58

⁴⁷ See Gurunadhan J., *Viresalingam, The founder of Telugu Public Life*, Raja Mundry, (1911).

⁴⁸ Suryanarayana K., *Sir R. Venkat Ratnam, Raja Mundrai*, (1952).

⁴⁹ See Saraswati Swami Dayananda Satyarth Prakash, Translated as Light of Truth by Chirangiva Bharadwaj, Lahore: Kaviraj Satya Vrata Bharadwaj: 3rd ed; (1927). For a recent evaluation, See Kishwar Madhu, "The Daughters of Aryavarta", *The Indian Economic and social history Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1986) 151-186.

1842 founded Indian Social Conference and supported the cause of woman. He favoured freedom in choice of marriage partners and wanted to infuse traditional virtues⁵⁰. *Behramji Malabari* (1853) published a journal, *Indian spectator*, to spread his reformist ideas. He opposed infant marriage and enforced widowhood.⁵¹ It was his effort which led to the Age of consent Act 1881 that raised the age of consent to 12 years. *Gopal Krishna Gokhale* (1866) established servants of Indian society to carry out the work of social reform. He was deeply interested in the propagation of female education. He opposed the exclusion of women.⁵²

Thus the male social reformers of the Renaissance differed about the nature and scope of the work, but all of them were of the view that women's lot need amelioration. Some reformers wanted women to return to the *Vedic* glory and others placed definite plans to eradicate their problems. Some reformers, say *Dayanand Saraswati*, gave a severe shock to the traditional society when launched the *Suddhi* movement and attempted to take back women in the Hindu fold who were converted to Islam or Christianity. Other reformers argued in favour of holistic development programme.

III.II. National Movement

Gandhi devoted his attention to women's cause. He opposed child marriage⁵³ and deplored the treatment meted out to Hindu widows.⁵⁴ He wanted to give every widow the right to marry. Her condemned the system of *Purdah* and appealed to the parents to be broadminded. For him, the system of dowry was a real drag on society.⁵⁵ He wanted to bring women on equal footing with men.⁵⁶ He held men responsible for women's degradation.

It was Gandhi above all who was responsible for the creation of a new myth of Indian woman hood. He was well aware of the interest and revolutionary potential among the masses of oppressed Indian women. *Gandhi* identified with the enslaved women and channelised their rebellion into his non-violent, anti colonial struggle. The *Gandhian* ideology of

⁵⁰. See Ranade M.C., *Religious and Social Refors*, A Collection of essays and speeches, compiled by Kolaskar M.B. Bombay (1902); J. Kellock, Ranade Mahadev Govinda, Calcutta, (1926).

⁵¹. Gidumal D.. *The life and life work of Behramji Malabari*, Bombay, (1888).

⁵². Natesan G.A. (ed.), *Gopal Krishna Gokhle speeches*, Madras, (1909).

⁵³. Gandhi M.K., *To Women* ed. By A.T. Hingorani, Vol. III, Karachi, (1946), 122-123.

⁵⁴. Gandhi M.K., *Young India*, February 4, (1926).

⁵⁵. Gandhi M.K., *Harijan* May 23, (1936).

⁵⁶. Gandhi M.K., *Women and Social Injustice*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan, (1942); *The Role of women* Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, (1964); *Women* Ahmedabad : Navjivan, (1964).

“Indian womanhood” combined the female virtues which orthodox Hinduism had preached for several thousand years with certain qualities of the modern women. *Gandhi* revived the figures of the Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and above all, the *Ramayana*. *Gandhi* chose *Sita* – the monogamous, chaste self sacrificing spouse of *Rama* as his ideal woman and not *Draupadi* the strong willed, passionate revengeful, polyandrous wife of the five *Pandavas* of the *Mahabharata*.

The National Movement brought women from their homes to face *lathi's* and bullets and gave them not only a consciousness of their own strength but a new vision of their true place in society. This has several implications for women. First, in the wake of national movement, it became easier for women to leave their homes to involve in the national cause as the movement was supported by their husbands and guardians. Secondly women themselves became aware of their capacity for work, suffering and leadership and organized themselves to fight for their due place both in the home and in the society. Thirdly, the nationalist movement further provided a suitable forum for women to assess their own work which began in the earlier part of the century with the creation of several women's organizations. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of social organizations for women grew rapidly. Called by various names *Mahila Samiti's*, Women's clubs, Ladies Societies they emerged in the cities and towns of British India and the native states. In 1917 the women of Madras formed the Women's Indian Association which fostered branches and affiliated many of the small societies already in existence.

The All-India Women's Conference, which was founded in 1927, was the product of the reawakening of women. At its first met in Poona in 1927, AIWC confined itself to the educational programme for women, but it soon enlarged the scope of its activities. Unfortunately, a great proportion of its activities was confined only to the passing of numerous resolutions; the practical work undertaken to implement those resolutions was, however extremely meagre. Thus, the demands embodied in the bold resolution of AIWC often remained, in substance, paper demands⁵⁷. This was partly due to the fact that the members of AIWC were generally upper middle class women who participated in it more with a desire to dabble in social work.

III.III. Movement for Women's Property Rights

The decade 1920-30 witnessed some developments of far-reaching importance. The most important question that was raised during this period was women's property rights to provide a degree of economic security to near female relations. And, the partial success was achieved in the form of the Hindu law of inheritance (Amendment Bill) of 1929 which recognized

⁵⁷. Desai, *Women in Modern India*, 149.

the son's daughter, daughter's daughter, sister and sister's daughter as heirs "if it is not contrary to special family or local customs having the force of law". The woman's right to property got further momentum when the Hindu Woman's Right to Property Act of 1937 was passed under which a widow has the same interest in the property as her husband had.

The causes of women were carried forward by many other renowned women. Margaret E. Cousins (1878-1954) was keenly interested in the progress of female education⁵⁸. Margaret Nobel (1867-1911), later known as sister *Nivedita*, *Sarla Devi Chaudhury* (1872), *Sarojini Naidu* (1879-1949), *Rustomji Fairdoonji*, *Heerabai Tata*, *S. Muthulakshmi Reddi* (1886), *Durgabai Deshmukh* (1909), *Raj-Kumari Amrit Kaur* (1929), *Vijay Lakshmi Pandit* (1900), *Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay* (1903), *Begum Sariffa Hamid Ali*, *Lady Magalammal Sadasiva Iyer*, *Cornelia Sorabjee* are some of the most prominent names among others,⁵⁹ who took part in the national movement and worked towards advancement of women.

The British Rulers did not interfere with the traditional Indian social system for their purpose was to rule and not to disturb the equilibrium by taking radical steps like reform of women. However, in the process of manipulating and serving their own interest, the colonial masters introduced English and allowed missionaries to operate. This created an Army of men who started questioning the utility of age-old social system. And, this subsequently led to the reform movement of the Renaissance period. In the 19th century educated Indian elites focused attention on the plight of women. They attacked the social practices of child-marriage the harsh treatment of widow and *Sati-pratha*. They worked towards education of women in an effort to create the preconditions for improvement in the status of women. The social reformers emphasized the female aspects of Hinduism.

IV. Position of Women after Independence

Since independence, all India women's conference became interested in constructive work and left its agitation attitude of pre-independence era. Its activities since independence led to the enactment of some legislation concerning women. Some significant ones are: Act of women's legal Rights, 1952; the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in women and Children Act, 1954; the Special Marriage Act, 1954; the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, 1956; the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956; Intestate Succession Act, 1956; the Orphanages and Widow Home

⁵⁸. Mrs. Margaret Cousins and Her work in the India Madras, (1947); Rani Laksmibai Rajwade, A Tribute to Margaret Cousins, Madras, (1956).

⁵⁹. See the names in Asthana, *Women's Movement in India*, 125.

Act' The Orphanages and Other Charitable Homes (Supervision and Control) Act, 1960; and the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, to cite a few.⁶⁰

After independence, the legislature took a more positive attitude in the matter of law reform and undertook to enact some of the measures which the British administrators were hesitant to undertake. The Hindu legal system was based on a rigid caste system. The caste system however broke down, and came to be regarded as an anachronism, in course of time as a result of the release of new political and social forces. People began to think in a limited way in terms of a classless and casteless society. As a consequence, many old principles of Hindu law perpetuating the caste system needed to be done away with. The Hindu Marriage Validity Act, 1949, constituted a great step in this direction. It came to validate inter caste marriages⁶¹. Before 1949, there was some confusion on the point and a few High Courts declared such marriages void⁶². The Act of 1949 removed this confusion and declared such marriages as valid and thus sought to help in the consolidation and integration of the Hindu society. It was no doubt a step forward towards the evolution of a casteless society which is the great need of the day in India.

The Indian Constitution came into force in 1950 guaranteeing Indian citizens and non-citizens certain basic human rights called as Fundamental Rights. Article 14 of the Constitution of India guaranteed every person equality before the law and equal protection of law within India; Article 15 of the Constitution prohibited discrimination against any person on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of these. Article 15(3) stated that nothing in this Article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children. Article 16(1) of Indian Constitution guaranteed equality of opportunity in matters of public employment for all citizens. According to Article 16(2), no citizen shall on grounds of sex, among other grounds, be ineligible for, or discriminated in respect of employment or office under the state.

V. Conclusion

The historical survey of Records exhibit that since the Ancient Age "Women hood" has been respected as incarnation of mother power. In *Vedic* and, *Upanishadic* period, women occupied a position of honour and respect and were equalised at par with men in society. But in *Smriti* period i.e., since

⁶⁰. Upadhyaya Neelam and Pandey Rekha : *Women in India – Past and Present*", 1st Published (1990) 41.

⁶¹. Jain M. P. "*Outlines of Indian Legal History*", , 3rd Ed. (1972) 603.

⁶². *Pudiava v Pavanasa*, I.L.R. (1922) Mad 949; *Lakshmi v Kalian Singh*, 2 Bom. L.R. 128; *Padam Kumar v Suraj Kumari*, I.L.R. (1906). All 458; *Gopi Krishna v. Mt. Jaggo*, 63IA 295.

about 500 B.C., few new concepts gradually entered into and got established affecting the position of women adversely. In this Age, women were equalized with lower caste of “*Shudra*” and were argued to be ineligible for the *Vedic* studies. The glorious position of women thus gradually deteriorated due to entry of many social evil customs which continued in society with sanction of *Smritis*, *Puranas*, *Sutras* etc. The *Brahmanical* authors of later *Vedic* literature projected what was regarded as ideal for their own class and did not portray the actual state of things. The change in societal attitude and effect of frequent invasions of foreign powers again added to existing problems. The *Puranic* literature preached the ascetic ideal and painted women in black colours to fulfil their purpose and to discourage men from marriage.

Due to the influence of religious injunction of later *Vedic* texts Child Marriage system continued. Girls remained uneducated and under *Purdah* system they were confined within the four corners of the husband’s house. Remarriage of widow was discontinued. The evil customs of *Sati*, *Devadasi*, *Dowry* and female infanticide, etc. continued in large scale. These evil customs in aggravated crime frame eventually affected the position of women and they were criminally exploited in all walks of their lives. The British period saw the period of Renaissance. The English people encouraged women to pursue academic pursuits of life, passed legislation for remarriage of widows, abolished *Sati Pratha*, restrained Child marriage and permitted them to come out of *Purdah* and share liberty with their counterparts. But picture remained as gloomy as it had been in the past social bias and religious injunctions proved to be more effective in blocking their emancipation. The movement lacked revolutionary charter. The women proved to be too shy and indifferent to the effort of the social reformer and indifferent to the British legislation. When one is not interested in availing benefits showered on her, the legislation could do nothing and efforts of social reformers goes in vain. Therefore, one is constrained to remark that during the British period the gain to Hindu women remained minimal and improvement of their position negligible.