

STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Prof. Priyanka

Asst. Prof. History Dept.

Sant Baba Bhag Singh University, Jalandhar

Indian Civilization has accorded varying status to women across its journey in history from relatively liberal in certain spheres in period before later Vedic age followed by general deterioration in period following later Vedic age, to its further acceleration and consolidation in medieval and early modern period. In this paper, we will focus on the status of women in medieval Indian history. With the advent of Islam, new forces appeared on the Indian horizon. These forces not only brought changes in the political, economic, religious sphere but also to a great extent in Indian society. There had been definite deterioration in the status of women in the centuries that followed the Vedic age which we will discuss further through various aspects such as, purdah system, women education, concept of marriage and slavery.

PURDAH SYSTEM

Strict Veiling of women was the common practice among the Muhammadans in their natively lands, which they stressed upon here in India also. Even a liberal king like **Akbar** had to issue strict orders that:

'If a young woman was found running about the streets and bazars of the town and while so doing did not veil herself or allow herself to be unveiled, she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession'.

B.N. Sharma's view is that purdah before the Muslim rule in India could have been partial. This system became well grounded in northern India by 1200 A.D with the advent of Muslim culture. The Hindus adopted purdah as a protective measure to save the honour of their women folk and to maintain the purity of their social order. Seclusion thus became a sign of respect and was strictly observed among the high-class families of both communities. *Barbosa*, an early 16th century traveller had referred to the strict observation of purdah by the women of Bengal.

Among Muslim, if for any reason a lady of rank discarded purdah even for a temporary period the consequence for her were disastrous. For instance, Amir Khan the governor of Kabul renounced his wife when her purdah was broken when she jumped from the back of an elephant who had run amuck. The system, however, was less rigorously observed in Rajput families. As the women trained in the art of warfare, would frequently take part in hunting parties and other expeditions. Along with this it is viewed that women belonging to lower stratum of society

were entirely free from the bondage of purdah. Furthermore, they were expected to help their husbands in all external pursuits and internal economy.

EDUCATION

Education is a useful tool in the hands of women which makes her strong and independent ways. **Altekar**, is of the view that ‘during the Muslim rule the percentage of literacy among Hindu women declined with great rapidity’. It can only be asserted for the girls in aristocratic and affluent families which experienced a setback due to invasion but the position of education in the common strata of society was very poor and as the marriageable age was lowered it deprived girls from primary education.

By the tenth century A.D. India became famous as an important Islamic country to which Muslims thronged from all parts of the Islamic world. So, the education was based on the same pattern as imparted in other Islamic countries i.e., religious education. After Mahmud, Mohammad Ghori was one of the most important rulers who played a vital role in sowing the seed of education in India. He despite his political preoccupations, contributed to the cause of education and established some schools in Ajmer. Qutbuddin Aibak who loved learned people, established mosque schools in his province where religious education was imparted to the masses. The *Muizzi college* at Delhi was one of the best centres of learning in the reign of Sultan Raziya. Nasiruddin was also a great scholar and he appreciated and rewarded scholarship. Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khalji established a madarasa exclusively for women because he considered their education essential for the progress of the country. Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq being an eminent educationist deputed teacher to various parts of empire.

Despite all these developments in the sphere of education, ladies in medieval India, did not attain to that degree of literary education as Muslim ladies of Baghdad and Spain, yet with such luminaries as **Raziya Sultan, Gulbadan begum, Jahan Ara, Mehr Angez, Islam Khatoon** etc. Muslim women in India had no reason to fear comparison with contemporary Muslim women in other parts of the world. *Mira Bai, Dewalrani, Rupmati, Salima Sultana, Nurjahan, Siti un Nisa* (the tutoress of Jaahn Ara) and *Zab un Nisa* (the eldest daughter of Aurangzeb) were poetesses of distinction. The Sultan of Hinawar, in south-west coastal region of India, who was an Arab descendant, seems to have been particularly keen about the education of his female subjects. *Ibn Battuta* who visited his kingdom during his world tour, informs us that there were as many as thirteen girl’s schools in his capital, and the women of that place were pretty, chaste and knew the holy Quran by heart. Hence, it can be ascertained that education of women was limited to the elite and was not a general scenario.

EARLY MARRIAGES

Marriage was an occasion of jubilation and celebrations. Looking at the status of Medieval Indian Girls, historians are of the view that they were married off at the age of 8-10, were not allowed access to education and were treated as the material being. The plight of women can be imagined by one of the shlokas of Tulsidas where he writes "Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadankeadhikari". Meaning that animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating. Thus, women were compared with animals and were married off at an early age. At Another instance, according to Mukundram, a Bengali poet of the 16th century says that a father was considered fortunate and worthy of the favours of God who could get his daughter married in the ninth year. **Afif**, also tells us that the worries of the parents increased when their daughter reached the age of puberty.

Both Hindus and Muslims favoured an early age for boys and girls. **Akbar** wished to interfere with these conditions and fixed the minimum age limit at sixteen years for boys and fourteen for girls. It is difficult to say how far his enactments were carried out. The childhood marriage had its own drawback. The marriage had been the turning point in the life of girls. Early marriage devoid them of any education only of name, regarded as ineligible for any holy sacraments and religious sacrifices, and too young to exercise any influence on the choice of her husband and the position of wife steadily deteriorated. Instead of possessing coordinate authority and equal partnership with the husband in dealing with household affairs her status confined to that of an obedient and humble servant to her lord. A very heart moving drawback of the child marriage was marital faithlessness on the part of the husband. Early marriages were naturally followed by early maternity, which increased the mortality among women between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two. The enormous disparity between the ages of the two parties naturally helped the spread of the practice of having concubines in society. To some extent a polygamous society was also a result of early marriages of girls.

SLAVERY

Slavery has been a socio-economic system under which certain persons known as slaves were deprived of the personal freedom and compelled to perform labour or service. It was a legal or informed institution under which a person (called as 'slave') was compelled to work for another (sometimes called 'The master' or slave owner). The term also refers to the status or condition of those persons who were treated as the property of another person or household. Slaves were held against their will since the time of their capture, purchase or birth, and also deprived of the right to leave, to refuse the work, or to receive compensation (such as wages) in return for their labour. Thus, slavery has been a form of un-free labour.

‘The International Encyclopaedia of social sciences’ also mentions that ‘slavery was defined as an institution whereby someone is subject to the dominion of another contrary to nature.

Similarly, Encyclopaedia Britannica states that “slavery is the social sanctioning of involuntary servitude imposed by one person or group upon another”.

Studies indicate that both men and women slaves were not only engaged in different kinds of jobs but also had varied interests. During Medieval times the classification of the women slaves could be ascertained from the important terms dealing with female slaves, such as *Dhatri* (appointed by princely and elite class to nurture their children), *Gehdasi* (domestic women slaves), *Pricharika* (at the disposal of the royals). Despite the various pure and impure works done by the female slaves some of them emerged as cultured and virtuous slaves. *Udda*, *Nonika* and *Valga* are the three names quoted by *Kalhana* who were the slaves of queen *Suryamati* of Kashmir and who jumped into burning pyre when *Suryamati* committed sati with her husband. *Rajasekhara* mentions about a highly educated, very intelligent and a poetess of high order slave girl named, *Vicaksana*. An inscription of 14th century (1343 A.D.) also testifies the property rights of female slaves and their children. This institution that emerged during the later Vedic period, kept on continuing throughout the medieval period and onwards.

In our present write up, we tried to understand the status of women in Medieval Indian society, in accordance with the education, marriage, slavery and the purdah system. A society’s condition as good or bad can be determined from the status of women in the respective society. The present sphere of study indicates that the condition of women was not so good, as their status declined more. All strata of women were affected by this, be it elite, poor or the women slaves. Yet it cannot be neglected that we come across some learned women, reformers, administrators and women warriors too. Which shows us that despite the general social decline, women in this era strived for their existence.

REFERENCE:

1. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/113757>
2. A SOCIAL, CULTURE AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF INDIA by Chopra-Puri-Das
3. History of Medieval India, V.D. Mahajan
4. A History of Medieval India, Satish Chandra
5. Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India, J. L. Mehta