

## Position of women in the Indian society

Manzoor Ahmad Bhat

### Abstract

India is a country which boast its glorious heritage, where woman has not only enjoyed the equal status but has been described in the scriptures more than the better half, the same she lost with the passage of time. At present it has become necessary for the Government to create special laws and enforce those rigorously to give the desired social and economic status to this impoverished sex. In fact the problem is deep rooted as to be found in any patriarchal society of which India is a living example where males generally dominate and women are trailing in a subordinate position though they shoulder major responsibilities. Efforts need to revive their glory and honour by removing the inequality and imbalance they are facing in the society.

**Keywords:** Brahmavadinis, Sati, Jauhar, Child Marriage, Slavery, Svayamvar, Pardah.

### INTRODUCTION

Women form a vital but vulnerable section of the society. She is a pivot round which the whole family revolves. Family is considered the cradle of the society. In a country like India which boast its glorious heritage, where women has not only enjoyed equal status but has been described in the annals of history more than better half. During Rig-Vedic period women enjoyed a status of equality with men. She along with men received education, participated in assemblies and debates, studied Vedas and made sacrifices along with their husbands.

The history of India started with the Harappan culture which is mostly based on archeology, but it is Vedic age which boast the history of India on account of sound literary sources. The Vedic literature has been derived from Vedas which are four in number, Rig-Veda, Sama -Veda, Yajur-Veda and Athurva-Veda. It is Rig-Veda the oldest known literature in the whole world that contains 1,028 hymns (mantars) written by a number of priestly families of which some were even contributed by 27 women called *Brahmavadinis* who enjoyed family life as well. In Ramayana and Mahabharata, we find novel examples of women like Anasuya, Sramanisabari, Maitreye and Gargi who were highly educated. On the other hand the highest manifestation of domestic perfection is found in great personality of Sita, the idol of Indian women hood. In Mahabharata there are instances of women who led dedicated lives at home e.g. Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi<sup>1</sup>. Though we notice the practice of levirate and widow remarriage in the Rig-Veda yet there is no reference about *pardah* and child marriage. The marriageable age in the period seemed to have been 16-17 years. She was given a place of honour as she participated in the religious ceremonies with her husband. At numerous places one finds the wives joining their husbands and performing sacrifices together. They offer the oblations together and hope to go to heaven together. But they did not have much freedom in the matter of their marriage. Only the girls of royal families had voice to choose their spouse as there is mention of 'Svayamvara'<sup>2</sup>. As the society was patriarchal the birth of a son was repeatedly desired and people prayed to the gods for brave sons to fight the wars. In Rig-Veda no desire is expressed for daughters, though the desire for children and cattle is a recurrent theme in the hymns<sup>3</sup>.

During the later Vedic period their position deteriorated. The golden Rig-Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off. They were denied the right to study Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rights. On the other hand marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestionable devotion to their husbands. The birth of a daughter was not liked by their parents. Women along with Sudras were held in derision by several authors of Dharmasastras and Puranas. Socially they were regarded most impure. The Brahma Purana

lays down that members of first three Varnas should perform the ceremonies of bathing and muttering of prayers according to the Vedic methods, but the women and Sudras cannot perform these ceremonies accordingly. However it was rejected by Varahamihira, who said women in general are pure and blameless. They deserve the highest honour and respect. He also criticized some writers for dilating only the vices of women instead of their virtues. This too was reflected in the works of Kalidasa, Banu and Bharabhuti<sup>4</sup>. They were even denied the right of inheritance. In Vedas there are references, a father who has no son honours his son-in-law, capable of begetting sons and leaves the property to the sons and daughter. This is the first germ of Hindu law of inheritance, which make son and not daughter, the inheritor of his father's property and religious duties<sup>5</sup>. Their situation further worsened as dowry emerged a custom in the society. The ruler of MagadhBimbsara (544-492 B.C) married a Koshalan princess, got Kashi village as dowry which yielded 10,00,000 coins as revenue. Chandragupta Maurya defeated NikoterSelucus in 305 B.C married his daughter. In marriage he got Kabul Kandhar, Heart and Baluchistan as dowry fromhis father-in-law. History is eyewitness that Chandragupta I (319-334 A.D) married Kumaradevi a lichchavi princess and got 100 villages of Vaishali the territory of his in-laws<sup>6</sup>. The custom filtered down and spread especially when a girl suffered from any defect. With the passage of time more social evils crept in the society effecting the position of women which were sati, female infanticide, child marriage, pardah, jauhar, widowhood. The emergence of the same in the society may be highlighted as:

### SATI

Smritis and Puranas encouraged the performance of sati rite. Brihaddharmapurana declares that widow, who followed her husband on the pyre though she commits a great sin does well to the departed soul. The authorities however, prohibit those wives who have not attained the age of puberty or pregnant or have very young children from becoming a sati. But the widows of Brahman and Kshtriyavarana, preferred sati to the ill-treatment by her relations. Under the rules of Smritis, a widow had to lead an austere life. She slept on the floor and was not allowed to use a cot; she took only one meal a day<sup>7</sup>.

The practice of sati can be traced with the help of historical records. The wife of Goparaja, the general of Gupt king Bhanugupta is known to have ascended the funeral pyre of her husband in 510 A.D<sup>8</sup>. The existence of a large number of sati memorial tablets proved the practice was popular in central India and in Deccan during the period. The mother of king Harshvardhana Yasomati burnt herself to ashes as soon as it became definite that her husband would be passing away within short time. Though there are exceptions in Orissa and Kashmir many women ruled as queens in their ownright. Prabhavatigupta of the Vakataka dynasty ruled for 13 years as the mother of the Yuvraja, Queen Didda (958-1003 A.D) ruled Kashmir for 45 years and withstood all intrigues against her<sup>9</sup>. But the lot of widows in general was really hard. In the Milindapanho, the widow as a person is despised and condemned in this world. The Sangam literature reveals that as a rule the widows were expected to lead a life of self-denial and that the custom of sati was extolled as a great virtue<sup>10</sup>. In the transition period from Hindu rule to Muslim period in India [800-1200 A.D], the practice of sati was made obligatory. Sulaiman an Arabian writer hold that the wives of kings sometimes burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. It appeared that with the growth of polygamy as enjoyed by feudal chiefs and with the resultant disputes about their property, there was a tendency for the spread of the custom. During the sultanate period, IbnBattuth mention with horror, the scenes of a woman burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband with great beatings of drums<sup>11</sup>.

The practice of sati was in full swing during the medieval times. The custom was found among the nobles castes of Rajas. A woman refusing to perform sati was considered to be less loyal to her late husband. AbulFazl has recorded numerous instances where the reluctant women were

forced to perform sati due to the pressure from her relations or public. During the Mughal period steps were taken to curb this evil. Humayun is said to have banned the burning of widows who were capable of child bearing. Akbar declared that reluctant widows could not be forced to burn herself. In addition, a widow of tender age who had not shared the bed with her husband was not to be burnt at all. Though he passed certain laws against the inhuman custom of sati yet he failed to bring its final end<sup>12</sup>.

### WIDOWHOOD

There is no reference of widow remarriage in smritis and puranas. The system of Niyog or levirate is advocated by Narada following the early smriti writers, but later on the practice was discouraged. Brihaspati remarked, on account of the successive deterioration of the four spans of life in the world, it must not be practiced by the mortals<sup>13</sup>. The widows are expected to lead a chaste life. Though Yajnavalkya informs us about the right of widows to inherit the property of her husband in absence of her sons yet the lot of widows in general was really hard. During the Sultanate period, there was a little change in their position. The writers uphold their right to property of a sonless husband. They were not only the guardian of the property but also had full right to dispose of it. Thus it would appear that the property rights of women improved in the Hindu law. Despite, the widows had either to live a life of fidelity or commit sati. In case a woman did not commit sati, she was looked down upon. They were considered as unfortunate creatures. Akbar too legalized the widow remarriage but it had a little effect on the Hindu society<sup>14</sup>.

### CHILD MARRIAGE

Right from birth a girl was considered a liability. The birth of a daughter was received with disappointment and not celebrated like that of sons. A wife who gave birth to girls in succession was despised. This had naturally given birth to an evil custom of child marriage, who were given training in domestic affairs rather than education. In view of prevailing circumstances girls were married at an early age of 7-8 years. This naturally implied that the selection of the bride or bridegroom was made by the parents. Sometimes the betrothals took place before the actual birth of the children<sup>15</sup>. It has been reported in 19<sup>th</sup> century that the evil existed in the Hindu community of Kashmir as well which sprang the number of widows many of them were young and innocent. Their number increased as no restriction was imposed on the evil. They have to work on the command of father-in-law in the in-laws home, this reveals that their lot was most miserable<sup>16</sup>.

### Pardah

The Arabs and Turks adopted this as a part of dress. They brought it to India with them, so it became widespread in northern India. The growth of pardah has been attributed to the fear of Hindu women being captured by the invaders. In an age of violence women were liable to be treated as a prize of war<sup>17</sup>. R.C Majumdar says, "Hindus adopted pardah as a protective measure to save honour of their women folk and to maintain the purity of their social order." There are references that some sort of pardah in shape of ghoonghat was observed in India even before the advent of the Muslims but in present form it emerged with their arrival<sup>18</sup>. History is eye witness that Rajyasri the daughter of PrabhakaranVardhan put on a veil when she met her husband MaukhariGrahavarman of Kanauj for the first time. In KadambariPatralekha is described as wearing a veil of red cloth<sup>19</sup>. The growth of pardah was more social as it became a symbol of the higher classes in the society, so discarding the practice of using pardah was not favoured. It may be noted that the Hindu women belonging to the middle or lower classes did not observe pardah. They only used *dopatta* to cover their head when they go out. Whatever the reasons it affected women adversely and made them more dependent on men<sup>20</sup>.

## JAUHAR

This evil was prevalent amongst the Hindus. Usually Jauhar was performed by the Rajput ladies, when attacked by invaders and there was no hope of victory. According to his practice, the Rajput ladies would apply *tilak* on forehead of their husbands, touched their feet and then burnt themselves. This was done primarily to escape dishonor at the hands of the enemy in case of defeat. The Rajput ladies cared more for their chastity than their lives. A large number of examples of Jauhar during the medieval period have been recorded by scholars e.g. Hamir Deva, the Chauhan warrior of Ranthambore, the strongest fort of Rajasthan where the women committed Jauhar when they found that AlaudinKhalji was likely to win a victory after a long siege of the fort for three months in 1301 A.D.<sup>21</sup>

## FEMALE INFANTICIDE

The practice of female infanticide was common among the upper class Bengalis and Rajputs, who considered female infanticide to be an economic burden. As per Todd, "Rajputs resorted to this practice due to the scarcity of suitable matches on the prohibition of inter-marriages between families of the same clan, as unworthy match lowers prestige of the bride's father." Further the Rajput's pride led their downfall which affected their social setup as well because they thought it below their dignity to become the father-in-law of anyone else<sup>22</sup>.

## SLAVERY

This evil too got birth in the Hindu society. It was during 800-1200 A.D the evil opened its eyes. The temple at Tanjore was a richest one during the period. It maintained 400 women associated with entertainment [the devadasis]. These devadasis [female slaves of gods] were commonly found in most temples during Chola period. They were in origin a special and venerated group of women attendants dedicated to the temple by their parents at their birth or in younger age. The talented among them were selected for becoming a BhadrataNatyam dancer. But the system was absurd and eventually in many temples, the devadasis degenerated into shame full exploited prostitutes. Their earning being collected by the temple authorities<sup>23</sup>.

The position of women was distinctly subordinate to the service of male and dependent upon him in every stage of life. In a word her life was a state of perpetual hardship and the social laws and costumes stamped her with a sort of mental deficiency. They were supposed to have no personality of their own apart from their ties to their husbands. They could not find any other expression to their in born talents or desirous to expect as house wives. In fact they were seen as more adjuncts to men<sup>24</sup>. Though women were not given a pride in the social structure of the nation yet certain talented women made a mark in different spheres. These women mainly belonged to higher classes. Gulbadan Begum, JahanAra of Mughal period produced outstanding works, similarly Mirabai, Noor Jahan, ZebunNisa produced works of distinction. Some even showed their mettle in the administration of the state as well. Mahamanga, the chief nurse of Akbar controlled the affairs of the state for full four years from 1560-1564. Chand Bibi was a brilliant ruler of Ahmadnagar. Rani Durgawati also ruled with great courage. Tara Bai widow of Maratha king Raja Ram (1700-1707) also displayed great qualities of administration. She became the chief source of inspiration for her son Shivaji II<sup>25</sup>.

During the modern period of history in India social reformers started a powerful movement to improve the position of woman. They declared that Hinduism or Islam or Zoroastrianism did not sanction the inferior status of women and true religion assigned them a high social position. As per Holy Quran, "*women are men's raiment and men are their raiment.*" If a woman observes five time prayer, fast in the month of Ramadhan, chaste, obedient to her husband then she is guaranteed an entry into paradise by the door she likes<sup>26</sup>. It is Islam that for the first time

indicated the rights of woman and their secure position. They could inherit property, though only half as much as man could and dreaded divorce as well<sup>27</sup>.

Numerous individuals, reform societies, religious organizations and administrators took keen interest in liquidation of evils prevalent in the society like sati, female infanticide, child marriage, widowhood etc. Raja Rammohan Rai a Bengali was the first Indian who raised his voice against the inhuman custom of sati when he lost his brother Jug Mohan, whose wife was compelled by the people to be on the pyre of her husband in 1811 A.D. she boldly denied performing the custom. Raja Rammohan Rai supported her for which he faced torture from his parents. Since then he crusaded against the custom. His struggle got full vigour when Lord William Bentinck passed a law in 1829 which banned sati<sup>28</sup>. Raja Rammohan Rai denounced the practice in strongest terms and showed from the scriptures, that it was contrary to religion. It has been recorded that from 1815-1829, 8000 widows burnt. Accordingly volunteers were directed to watch the Ghats in Bengal where such customs were observed. Subsequently the custom of sati got decreased day by day. If the Britishers during their rule succeeded in receding the custom now it rest on the shoulders of Indian administrators to bring its logical end as reports are there of the custom in the remote parts of Rajasthan even today.

The success of Raja Rammohan Rai inspired his fellow men to fight against the remaining evils of the society. Accordingly Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar launched an uncompromising struggle in favour of widow remarriage. In 1855 he published an article describing their petable condition. The success of this country wide movement for widow remarriage got fruit in 1856 as widow remarriage got legalized. The first widow remarriage was celebrated under his direct supervision. From 1856-1860 twenty widow remarriages were performed<sup>29</sup>. This had affected other parts of Indian subcontinent as well. In Kashmir Shri Ram Chandraji Abhay an Arya Samajist publicized the evil effects of child marriage and conducted propaganda in favour of widow remarriage. It is remarkable that from 1920-1930 the samajists celebrated the marriage of half a dozen widows in Srinagar. These steps were even supported by M.K Gandhi, who had written a letter to P.N Bazaz, the architect of Fraternity society in Kashmir [1920]. The contents of the letter strongly supported the issue of widow remarriage. This naturally led the passage of widow remarriage act in 1933 in Kashmir<sup>30</sup>.

The practice of female infanticide was widespread along the Rajputs of Banaras Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Sindh. The reasons for the evil were dowry system hyper gamy, pride and sense of honour. The Bengal regulations of 1795 and 1804, declare female infanticide illegal and equivalent to murder. In 1870, Lord Mayo passed laws against the evil, which made it compulsory to register the birth of all babies and provides for verification of the female children<sup>31</sup>. Though laws against it were passed in 19<sup>th</sup> century yet the practice still goes on in a modernized and scientific manner which need to be condemned, as fair sex are being killed in the womb of their mothers. The status of women was further destroyed by the evil of child marriage. This was the result of hyper gamy, dowry, the notion of virginity and chastity<sup>32</sup>. which led to the problem of overpopulation. Since 1860-1955, various acts were passed against, it, which time and again fixed the marriageable age 18 years for girl and 21 years for boys. Despite these laws, child marriage is prevalent even today especially in Northwestern parts of India, where couple used to be under the age of [07-09] years while making a contact through media with the married ones, the girls revealed, if they deny to opt for the said evil, then they had to take resource of ill-famed prostitution for their survival. Further it has come to press that in India 40% of marriages are being conducted below the age of 18 years especially of girls.

In the society, the role of Muslims may not be underestimated, various socio-religious organizations of the community got birth to eradicate the evils prevalent in the society. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan strongly opposed polygamy, subordinate position of women, easy divorce

and Pardah<sup>33</sup>. He raised his voice in support of women education as well, for which he faced severe criticism from orthodox Muslims ulemas. Despite his novel ideas to bring reformation in the society, there are certain evils existing even at present i.e. “Asura” type marriages in the Muslim community e.g. in Kashmir there are thousands of girls purchased by the people from Bengal and Bihar, who enjoy a family life there. In spite of the article 23 and 24 of the Indian constitution which prohibited the illicit trafficking in women.

The liberation of the fair sex received a great stimulus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as they played an active role in the struggle for freedom of India. How could they any longer be confined to the home and be satisfied with the life of “*doll or as salve girl*”. They are bound to assert their rights as human beings<sup>34</sup>. It was Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who had advocated their self-dependence and self-reliance. He also stressed that women have to fight for freedom, from the tyranny of man-made customs and laws, for man is not likely to help them<sup>35</sup>. The event led to the birth of a women’s movement in the country. Till 1920’s enlightened men had worked for the upliftment of women, now fully aware and self-confined women undertook the task. They began to organize themselves under one flag and put a joint fight against these evils. They realized its importance to bring effective changes in this dismal scenario. The struggle resulted in the formation of All Indian Women’s Conference in 1927, which pressed its legitimate demands<sup>36</sup>.

In post-independence period India witnessed a universal movement for equality with men. All over the world feminism has in its origin inequality between men and women. Their dependence on men folk was in total. Recently the educated women especially employed one in particular and poor in general realized the need to work outside the households. Despite this men’s tyrannical hegemony is strong and deep-rooted to allow her for any change. Though the working ladies give their earnings to their husbands yet she is still identified as a daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law etc. but not as a person. The crusade for a changed social order had come both for government and voluntary association. Article, 14 and 15 of the Indian constitution guaranteed a complete equality of men and women. The Hindu marriage Act of 1955 permitted the dissolution of marriage on specific grounds. Monogamy had been made mandatory on men as well as women. The Hindu succession Act of 1956 made a daughter an equal co-heir with the son. The Directive Principles of the Indian constitution lay down the principle of equal pay for equal work both for men and women. Despite this many visible and invisible obstacles still remain there in practicing the principle of equality between the sexes. Though a committee on status of women 1974 was followed by:

- i) National Plan of Action for women.
- ii) The Committee on self-employed women.
- iii) The National Perspective Plan for women 1988.

The programmes for women empowerment were held in every nook and corner of country, yet the status of women had changed minutely. Birth of a daughter is still considered a bad omen. Burning of brides goes on its routine work. They are tortured for not bringing dowry though it has been banned. They often commit suicide. It got added by other crimes i.e. molestation, kidnapping, abduction, rape. Eye teasing and murder after rapping which do come in press time and again.

## CONCLUSION

The account made clear that the impoverished sex faced wretched onslaughts in the society. Which were manmade and permitted nowhere in any religion? Despite different efforts taken so far, the status of women had continued to remain at the low level. The situation demands a proper change of social and mental climate of the nation, where men had to give their unlimited

support to their female organization in eradicating these evils, so that the impoverished sex may revive their own status with honour in the society. “A successful woman is one who can lay a firm foundation with stones that others’ through at her.”

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### AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY



**Manzoor Ahmad Bhat** is an Indian author, born on Nov.10, 1961 in saffron town Pampore of Kashmir. The author got P.G in history from university of Kashmir in 1984, M. Phil in 1988 and PhD in 1992. He joined the dept. of education in 1993 as lecturer at inter-mediate level, got elevated to Asst. Professor in the said discipline in 2007 and promoted to the present scale as Senior Asst. Professor in 2011. The author had a number of Research papers published at international level to his credit.

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