



STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

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The position of Indian women in *Vedic* society held much revered position than in the later centuries. In early *Vedic* period, women were never looked down upon as a mere object of lust. *Rigveda* testifies that the wife participated in the religious rites along with her husband. Intellectually also women were advanced at this age, (A.S. Altekar, 1938). They allowed girls to acquire knowledge on literature and various fine arts. The names of *Vedic* women like Apala, Maitri, Gargi must be mentioned in this context. *Dharma sutras* supported widow's right in the property of her husband. *Rigveda* and later *sutras* clearly refer to re-marriage of widows (Indian Women Today', Volume I, 1996).

Indian women in Muslim age hardly faced the outside world with 'purdah' system. Under Muslim rule both Hindu and Muslim women lost all their liberal activities and became property of their male masters. The eighteenth century with its "intellectual stagnation" coupled with social degeneration, worsened the conditions of Indian women. Polygamy, early marriage, *Sati* rites



(burning of widow women), killing of female children throwing the first child into the holy water became regular practices. Indian women practically had to submit before all the inhuman restrictions imposed on them by their 'lawful masters'.

In the name of '*Kulinism*' (high caste society), thousands of girls' lives were totally blasted and their conditions were like household animals. The Hindus regarded a widow as an unfortunate and inauspicious woman (Kane 1974). The fate of a high caste Hindu widow was tragic; they denied the simplest pleasures of life to her. She ate only once a day and never any thing but the plainest food, without any spices. The child widow was dressed in the normal fashion until maturity. Later, after attaining maturity her hair was shaven and was to wear white coarse cotton garment. The sight of widow was inauspicious and unlucky. Family members would watch their widowed daughters; sisters and mothers suffer physically and mentally for the fear of caste rules and excommunication From the community (J.K.H.Denny). They regarded female education as total waste and luxury.

One worst aspect of eighteenth century Indian society was the prevalence of widow burning rite (*Satz*), ('Indian Women Today', Volume I 1996). Though the rite had been prevalent among upper caste Indians for at least two thousand years, no one knows when and how the rite first gained place in Indian culture. Some reasons were



mistrust, translation of the texts by *Brahmins* (High caste members), the difficulty of profiting women in times of war particularly in middle ages, decline of Buddhism in India, adopting some tribal cultures which believed that comforts of the dead in his afterlife could be ensured by burning with him his wives, jewels, slaves and other favorite possessions. Moreover, "*Sati* became means of securing social status and renown for virtue". During 1815 to 1826, in Calcutta and the regions around it, 57 percent of the virtuous wives or *Satis* burnt themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands.

Vidyasagar, Nadia, Dinajpur, Burdwan, and many other reformers, have continued their efforts to expose the evils of polygamy. Vidyasagar strongly emphasised that infant marriage was the root of miseries of Indian widows. Apart from social uplift of Indian women, female education is another aspect where Vidyasagar had put in his earnest efforts. Besides prejudice and ignorance, the practice of child marriage, '*pardah*' system, lack of girls' schools and women teachers retarded the growth of female education. Due to Vidyasagar's encouragement, no less than thirty-five schools for female students opened in Bengal only between November 1857 and May 1858, (Usha Chakraborty 1963). Towards liberation of Indian women, *Brahma samaj*, founded on 20 August 1828, under the constant patronage of Dwarkanath Tagore and his son Dehendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandrasen.



Keshab Chandrasen said, the people both men and women, have fallen into a low state so much so that it is impossible to recognize in modern India, the noble soul of the ancient Hindu.

It was Gandhi who gave new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers. He experimented with his weapon of Satyagraha. In India, he realised that women could participate in it together with men. Mahatma Gandhi appealed to women of India to enter the struggle for India's freedom (M.K.Gandhi, 1950). He said that if non-violence is the law of our being the future is with woman and if women of India arose, no one could stop the country's march to freedom.

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