



Research Paper

Gender Inequality in India: Ancient and Modern Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Gender equality is a human right, but women and men continue to have unequal access to opportunities and decision-making authority in our world. Women have fewer economic opportunities than men, have less access to basic and higher education, face greater health and safety concerns, and have less political representation globally. Women face discrimination and inequality every day, in every country on the planet. At home, at work, and in their communities, they are subjected to violence, abuse, and unfair treatment, and they are denied opportunities to learn, earn, and lead. But from where and when did it actually start? Were women considered as a lower sex since the beginning of time or did the idea of lower sex eventually evolve with time? This paper discusses the status of women in different eras starting from the pre-vedic age and how were they treated vis-à-vis men. The paper also highlights the current status of women in the society.

KEYWORDS: Gender Equality, Women, Discrimination, Inequality

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality refers to the state of equal access to resources and opportunities for men and women, regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making. It comprises the idea that all humans, both men and women, are free to develop their personal capacities and make decisions without being constrained by others. In addition, gender equality indicates that men and women's different behaviours, desires, and needs are equally considered, respected, and favoured.

There is a social distinction in dealing with men and women in every society on the planet. Both have distinct roles, with men serving as resource providers and women performing reproductive and domestic duties. Wives and mothers were regarded as important roles for women. However, they are subordinate to men not only in India but around the world, with their domains of influence limited only to their own homes in ancient times. It is a well-known statistic that women make up half of the world's population. However, the proportion of women in India is declining. The decreasing ratio of men to women is the cause of women's social position being unequal to men's. Women now have an equal position under our Constitution, which is based on equality principles such as equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination. Indian women have to fight for a long time to attain or gain these rights. Even though women in the early Vedic period occupied a dignified status, they participated in outdoor life as circumstances and conditions required. There were few designated positions specifically intended for them and for males. However, as the Vedic period progressed, women's status degraded. Women were never supported by a patriarchal society. Women were never treated equal to men, nor were they ever encouraged to come out of the four walls of their house.

II. WOMEN IN PRE- VEDIC PERIOD

The Pre-Vedic period began with the arrival of Aryans in India in the 15th century B.C., when patriarchy began. The status of women in this age is not very clear because the people of the era were old and prehistoric, and they changed their location constantly and collect food instead of permanently settling in a single place. Over time their behaviour of food collection has changed, and they started food production. The first civilization in India, which gave rise to the adoration of Mother Goddess (Prakriti), was the Indus civilization of the valley in the 25th century B.C. This shows the importance of mother and woman in this civilization. Gender discrimination did not exist in prehistoric India. Polyandry was common in prehistoric Indian matriarchal communities, and mothers were the head of the family. In economic life, both men and women played an equal role.

III. WOMEN IN THE EARLY VEDIC PERIOD

Women had an equal standing with men in all aspects of life during the early Vedic period. In ancient India, women respected though there was a patriarchal society. Women were considered valuable and productive community members by the Vedic Aryans, who were mainly engaged in fighting the war. Women of the Kshatriya caste were trained in the field of martial arts and arms. Vedic women were in good condition. In ancient times the multitude of Goddesses was created to instil respect for women. The highly adored "Ardhanarishwar." Hindu believes the two aspects of a person are the men and women. Women were considered more potent than men and treated as "Shakti" deity. The Shakta Hindu regard the Mother Divine as the supreme creator; even Vaishnavites and Saivites, who adore Lord Vishnu or Lord Siva, claim that one can no longer approach God through His Shakti.

Women took part in religious events and tribal gatherings in Vedic civilization. In the spiritual realm, the wife had full rights and routinely joined her husband in religious ceremonies. Husband and wife participated in religious rituals and sacrifices together. Women even took part in the events like lectures about religion. Women were allowed to read and study any of our holy texts without restriction. As a result, women were not inferior to males in terms of spirituality. Women in Vedic society enjoyed both marriage and home life. They were given the option of having numerous husbands and leaving their current ones. Widows had the opportunity to remarry. It was unheard of for children to marry. In society, there are signs of matrilineal influence. According to Rigveda, the wife and husband are equal in every way since they are equal halves of the same material. As a result, both should participate equally in all religious and secular works. It also states unequivocally that women should be empowered. Given the responsibility of managing the country, and that they should have the same rights over their father's possessions as sons. The Rigveda had given qualified women of the time the highest social rank. Women chose their spouses through a 'Swayamvara' marriage or a live-in relationship known as a 'Gandharva' marriage, references to which can be seen in the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This was still the case in upper-class families later on. Women are not excluded from family and social issues, although throughout their lives, they have been reliant on their male relatives.

The Rigveda gives significant evidence for women's equality with men regarding access to and capacity for acquiring the highest knowledge, even absolute knowledge. Women made up a large portion of the Vedic rishis. Women of all ages, married and single, were acknowledging Vedic authority. The Gargi, a prophetess who questioned the origins of all life, wrote several Vedic songs. Other Vedic hymns include Vishwawara, Sikta, and others who have been credited with this. Many woman rishis are mentioned in the Rigveda, and it even contains dozens of verses attributed to Ghosha, a female philosopher, and Maitreyi, the renowned Maitreyi, who bequeathed half of the wealth of her husband Yajnavalkya in order to attain spiritual knowledge. Long intellectual talks between the sage Agasthya and his highly educated wife, Lopamudra, are also included. The entire universe of great people bows to the glory of the glorious woman, according to the Rigveda, so that she may educate us with knowledge and foresight. She is the society's leader and a source of information for everyone. She is the daughter of brilliance and a sign of riches. We should appreciate her in order for her to eradicate evil and hatred from society. Women should be heroic, intellectual, prosperous, intellectual, and knowledgeable, according to the Atharva Veda; they should participate in legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society. When a bride marries, she is expected to "rule there alongside her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad provides teacher genealogy that contains male references to female seers like Gargi and Maitreyi. One of the renowned participants, the aforementioned Gargi, posed concerns regarding the soul to the scholar Yajnavalkya, which perplexed him. Another occurrence occurred in the same area. The spiritual teachings of Yajnavalkya are related to Maitreyi in the Upanishad. The Upanishads state that we are neither masculine nor female as individuals. According to Hinduism, every one of us goes through several stages throughout our lives, both male and female. As a result, Hinduism makes no allowance for abuse of others, whether based on gender or for any other cause. Thus, when we compare the general status of women in our scriptures to that of other faiths, we can quickly see how they are treated in Hinduism.

IV. WOMEN IN THE LATER VEDIC PERIOD

The status of women has changed over time in all aspects of society. In the later Vedic and Epic periods, women's standing deteriorated. During this time, women's political rights to attend assemblies were revoked. It was also possible to marry a child. Aitreyya Brahman claims that a daughter has been described as a cause of misery. The birth of daughters is likewise frowned upon in the Atharva Veda. However, there are some matrilineal features in this period as well. However, we find an increasing trend in Indian society to divide society along gender lines during this time. Over time, the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to disappear, and women's position deteriorated. During this time, women were not treated equally to males, or, to put it another way, they did not have the same rights and privileges as males. Women took part in each family ritual

with the men, but only as silent observers, not active participants. Women began to be discriminated against in terms of education and other privileges. Emphasis was laid on the physical virtue of women in child marriages, and their unquestioning loyalty to their husbands resulted in constant degradation of their position.

V. WOMEN IN THE EPIC ERA

Women in ancient India's Epic period held an honourable role at home. Women were given a dignified place in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In the Epics, women were referred to as the root cause of ahimsa and the source of dharma, prosperity, and pleasure. We find several references to women who have shown courage, strength, willpower, and valour, such as Sita, Sabitri, Draupadi, and others. The Epic Ramayana is a wonderful depiction of Hindu ideas of femininity; it extols the value of 'Pativrata' and idealizes women as one of our heritage's most venerable qualities. The Mahabharata also describes the wife's responsibilities and attitude toward her husband. In ancient Indian society, women enjoyed a prominent place. However, there is evidence that women's authority has destroyed kingdoms and powerful monarchs. The Mahabharata by Veda Vyasa narrates the narrative of the Kauravas' demise as a result of their humiliation of Draupadi. Ravana was also annihilated in Valmiki's Ramayana when he kidnapped and forced Sita to marry. Sita's 'Agni Pariksha' and her exile to the forest are two scenes from the Ramayana that are usually quoted to demonstrate women's subordination. Because Rama and Sita were to become king and queen of Ayodhya, they were required to prove Sita's chastity while kept captive by Ravana through the 'Agni Pariksha'. Despite the fact that these events are mythical, their impact on society and culture cannot be underestimated or ignored.

VI. WOMEN DURING DHARMASUTRAS

Sutras were a form of text found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (ancient and mediaeval Indian writings) from 600 BCE to 200 BCE and were contemporaneous with the Upanishads. These are a unique sort of literary creation, consisting of a collection of brief philanthropist speeches such as religious teachings, philosophy, grammar, or any other topic of expertise. Every school that taught Hindu philosophy gave Vedic instructions for rites of passage and specialized in diverse domains of art, law, and social ethics established their sutras, which aid in the teaching and transmitting ideas from generation to generation. One of the Sutras, the 'Grihya-sutras,' departs from the knowledge of the season of marriage, as well as the attributes that a bride and groom must possess. Marriages between the same caste were preferred from 600 BC to 320 AD, while intercaste marriages were common. The Arsha form of marriage, in which the bridegroom must provide specific presents to the bride's parents, was the most popular of the eight kinds of marriage prescribed by the Dharma-sutras.

The 'Apastamba,' a Sanskrit-language Dharma sutra that is regarded Hinduism's oldest dharma-related work, recommended a penalty for a husband who abandons his wife. Only when her husband performs penance or worships God can the wife forgive him. Men were not allowed to leave their wives on the spur of the moment or against their consent. The entire dissolution of the marriage tie was not permitted, even in the instance of the woman's infidelity. In the case of the wife, a separation owing to adultery gives her the right to maintenance. In the case that her husband dies, she is free to marry someone else. If a widow's marriage was not consummated, the same authorities allow her to remarry.

If her parents did not marry her on time, an adult girl might choose her husband. There were also female professors with a high level of spiritual knowledge who imparted education to the people.

VII. WOMEN DURING DHARMASHASTRAS AND PURANAS

The status of women gradually deteriorated and changed through the age of the Dharmashastras and Puranas. One of the Dharmashastras is the Manusamriti, which was composed well after the Vedic period. Those who seek to degrade and destroy Hinduism have made extensive use of its negative statements regarding women. Women were lumped in with the Sudras during the Smritis period and were forbidden the right to study the Vedas, speak Vedic mantras, or perform Vedic ceremonies. For women, marriage or domestic life has become compulsory, and their sole responsibility is to their husband. Formal schooling was denied to the girls; daughters were looked down upon as second-class citizens; women's rights were reduced. The age of sons was given more weight than the age of daughters. Girls were not allowed to study the Vedas or become Brahmacharinis. 'Women have to be under their father throughout childhood, under their husband during youth, and under their son during old age,' said Manu, the lawgiver of Indian society. She does not, at any point, deserve to be free. This was the mindset of a patriarchal, private-property-based society. As a result, she lost her independence and became reliant on a male-dominated society for the rest of her life.

As a result of the many constraints placed on women's independence, numerous issues began to emerge. Pre-puberty marriage became common; widow remarriage was outlawed; the husband was granted the position of God for a woman; education was completely denied to women. Simultaneously, the customs of 'Devdasi' and 'Sati' became increasingly popular, the purdah system came into existence, and polygamy was accepted. Women became viewed as a type of property in the business world. She may be given away or rented

out like any other object. Women were not granted any property rights under Brahmanical law. As a result of the women losing their property rights, they were forbidden a stake in their husbands' property entirely, arguing that a wife and a slave cannot own property. Furthermore, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers, to practise penance, and to go on pilgrimages in the holy realm.

Some sociologists claim that there are a variety of explanations for women's inferior status in the later Vedic period. For example, the imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society, the caste system's and joint family system's stringent constraints, the absence of educational opportunities for women, the entry of non-Aryan households, and foreign invasions are among these reasons. As a result, the social, cultural, and religious foundations of Indian civilization were built on a patriarchal structure that treated women as second-class citizens.

VIII. WOMEN DURING BUDDHISM

Because it is linked to their theology, history, anthropology, and feminism, women in Buddhism have become a hot topic. During the Buddhist period, women's status improved slightly, but not dramatically. The caste system's rigidities and restrictions were eased in some areas. Buddha promoted equality and worked to better the position of women in terms of culture, education, and religion. Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, allowed women to join his monastic society and fully participate in it. Early Buddhism's conventional opinion on women is that they are inferior. There are statements in Buddhist scripture that appear to be misogynists, such as the presentation of women as obstructers of men's spiritual progress or the notion that a woman's birth is an inferior one with less opportunity for spiritual progress. Buddhist attitude is to women as deeply ambivalent.

The prospects of women's spiritual achievement are viewed differently by different Buddhist schools and traditions. One crucial thread emphasizes that, in terms of spiritual accomplishment, men and women are spiritually equal and that women can, and in many cases, have achieved spiritual emancipation. Early Buddhist literature in the Theravada lineage, Mahayana sutras, and Tantric works all include such a worldview. There are accounts of women and even toddlers attaining enlightenment during the Buddha's lifetime. Furthermore, Buddhist theories make no distinction between men and women because everyone, regardless of gender, status, or age, is subject to old age, illness, and mortality. Therefore, all are exposed to the pain and impermanence that characterize conditioned existence.

IX. WOMEN DURING JAINISM

Jainism is a religion believing in religious egalitarianism. Except for infernal beings, one-sensed beings, and gods, all beings, according to the Tattvartha-sutra, have one of three genders: female, male, or hermaphroditic. These genders result from a specific "body-making karma" that is linked to a person's soul. This karma is shed in the process of spiritual emancipation to free the soul from the cycle of rebirths known as samsara. As a result, regardless of gender, any entity with the ability to reach spiritual emancipation can do so. Although Jainism is committed to equality in many respects, for some Jain women, their femininity produces spiritual injustice.

One of the most important differences between the Svetambara and Digambara Jains is their respective perspectives on women as mendicants or nuns, which arose from their nudity discussion. According to Digambara Jain, all mendicants must perform their renunciation without clothing. For them, it exemplifies the idealized practice of aparigraha. In this practice, a mendicant gives up all of his or her possessions, including clothing. Women, according to Digambaras, cannot become ascetics because they are unable to remain nude, which is considered "an essential component of the route to nirvana." Because their bodies continuously breached the basic rule of ahimsa, women were exempt from spiritual emancipation. The Digambara Jain thinks that women cannot be liberated unless they first reincarnate as men. The Svetambara disagrees with the Digambara Jain because they do not believe that nakedness is a necessary part of the path to nirvana.

Women cannot achieve direct liberation because they are not permitted to be naked in public and are considered second-class citizens. This prohibition on female nakedness serves to safeguard both men and women:

Men would experience sexual desire if women strolled around naked, and the desire would obstruct the man's path toward emancipation. Women, according to Digambaras, are likewise damaging. This is due in part to the assumption that menstruation blood kills microbes in the female body. Menstrual blood, according to some Jain literature, is a symptom of impurity. Spiritually, women are impure. Another argument presented by Digambaras is that because a woman's nature is to care for children and other dependents, she will find it far more challenging to break free from these earthly attachments. She will not be able to reach liberation unless she does so.

X. WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

Discrimination based on gender can be encountered in a variety of dimensions. Let us look at some examples of discrimination in certain vital areas.

Sex Ratio

The number of females per 1000 males is referred to as the sex ratio. In the sex ratio, there is no gender equality. According to the data in the table, in India, the desire for the male child still reigns supreme. Between 1901 (972) and 2001, the country's sex ratio decreased (933). The poorer the country's sex ratio becomes, we strive to achieve the status of a developed and civilized nation. In comparison to the early twentieth century, the current state of the sex ratio is deplorable and potentially dangerous. Even in the economically developed states of Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi, and Chandigarh, the child sex ratio is unfavourable to females. A majority of blocks in Punjab had a sex ratio of fewer than 800 females per thousand males, indicating 200 to 250 missing girls.

Health

In terms of health care, the country's low female sex ratio and higher mortality rate among girl children indicate a lower status of the girl child in society and discriminatory health practices towards women. Several micro-level studies indicate that girls have a greater rate of malnutrition. True, women's nutritional levels are often low, and good health and medical services are not widely available.

As a result, they face several reproductive issues as well as contagious infections. Anaemia rates are greater among women than males in all age categories in both rural and urban locations, according to a survey done by the National Nutrition Board. Anaemia affects more than half of pregnant women in underdeveloped countries (WHO 1992). Iodine insufficiency affects about 250 million women, and while specific numbers are unclear, millions are likely blind owing to Vitamin A deficiency. Malnutrition reduces women's productivity, makes them more susceptible to infections, and causes various debilitating and deadly diseases.

The maternal mortality rates in underdeveloped countries are more than 15 times that of developed countries. Women in several Asian and North African countries are discriminated against and have a decreased life expectancy due to their neglect. Girl child health programmes are quite limited, and programmes to prepare her for young womanhood are woefully inadequate.

Literacy

Education is the cornerstone for a man's overall development. It is also the most effective way of enhancing women's talents. As a result, 100 per cent female literacy is required to promote gender-based justice to society, but unfortunately, the gender inequality in education is disturbing. Our country has yet to achieve even 60 per cent female literacy. The national literacy rate is 65.38 per cent, according to census data from 2001. (54.16 per cent for women and 75.85 per cent for man) The national literacy rate in 1991 was 52.217 per cent, according to the census report (39.29 per cent for women as against 64.13 per cent for man). Rural areas account for 30.62 per cent of the population, compared to 57.58 per cent for men.

Work-Life

Gender imbalance in employment participation rate exists in addition to gender imbalance in education and health care. According to a World Bank estimate, women in India make up barely 32% of the workforce. The gender gap in work participation is estimated to be roughly 26%. Furthermore, most working women operate in the informal sector, such as agriculture, domestic industries, petty trade and services, and building and construction, where they are more vulnerable to exploitation. Women in contemporary culture are typically financially reliant, which is one of the main reasons for their exploitation.

Political Life

Gender inequality is also visible in politics, with women holding only 8.9% of Lok Sabha seats and 7.3 per cent of Rajya Sabha seats, a total of less than 9% of seats in parliament. Women's poor political participation is primarily attributable to the social environment and a lack of motivation, attitude, and aptitude.

XI. CONCLUSION

Women have been egregiously mistreated in ancient India, later Vedic Age, mediaeval and current Indian society, and everywhere in the world, except for the Rig Vedic Age. It is a breach of the Santana Dharma in India. Every religion seeks instruction from its scriptures and holy men and women. Women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators, and saints are mentioned in the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient scriptures. In today's world, women in Western countries are treated on an equal footing with males. However, this is not the case in India. Women suffered from unequal social status with men in every facet of India's male-

dominated society. Our culture demonstrates that on the one hand, we revere women as goddesses in the form of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, and Kali. On the other hand, we perpetrate heinous and illegal acts against them such as sexual exploitation, rape, kidnapping, child marriage, dowry system, and, most recently, female foeticide. But we believe that one day in the future, we will be able to overcome these issues and establish an ideal society in which women are respected and given their rightful place, whether they choose to focus on the role of wife, good mother, friend, philosopher guide, scholar, doctors, scientist, author, artist, or a good human being.

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