



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Position Of Women In India From Ancient Period To Present Day

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Introduction

The position of women in any society serves as a vital indicator of its cultural, social, and economic progress. In the Indian context, the status of women has witnessed a complex trajectory—marked by periods of both reverence and repression. From being esteemed as scholars, philosophers, and spiritual leaders during the Vedic period to experiencing severe marginalization during the medieval era, Indian women have traversed a path shaped by historical, political, and social forces. The colonial period brought both challenges and opportunities, with social reformers advocating for the upliftment of women. Post-independence, constitutional guarantees and policy reforms further catalyzed the transformation in women's roles across public and private spheres. In the contemporary era, women are making notable strides in education, politics, science, and entrepreneurship, yet they continue to face deep-rooted patriarchal barriers. This essay aims to critically examine the evolving position of women in India from ancient times to the present day, highlighting key historical transitions, legislative developments, and ongoing struggles in the pursuit of gender equality.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the historical evolution of the position of women in Indian society from the ancient period to the present day. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. **Trace the status and role of women in different historical epochs**—including the Vedic, Medieval, Colonial, and Post-Independence periods.
2. **Analyze the impact of religious, social, political, and legal changes** on the empowerment or marginalization of women over time.
3. **Understand the contributions of social reformers, movements, and legislation** in improving the condition of women.
4. **Evaluate contemporary challenges** faced by women in terms of gender equality, safety, and socio-economic participation.
5. **Highlight the progress and ongoing efforts** for women's empowerment in modern India, including the role of education, self-help groups, and government initiatives.

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative and historical research methodology** to analyze the changing position of women in India from ancient times to the present day. The approach involves the following methods:

1. Literature Review

A comprehensive review of existing **literature**, including historical texts, religious scriptures, academic journals, government reports, and scholarly articles, has been conducted to trace the socio-cultural evolution of women's status across different time periods.

2. Historical Analysis

The study employs **historical analysis** to examine the condition of women during:

- The **Ancient Period** (Vedic and Later Vedic)
- The **Medieval Period** (pre-Mughal and Mughal rule)
- The **Colonial Period** (British rule)
- The **Post-Independence and Contemporary Period**

This includes the study of major events, reforms, movements, and legal changes that influenced women's roles in society.

3. Secondary Data Collection

Data has been collected from **secondary sources** such as:

- Books and journals on women's studies and Indian history
- Government documents and reports (e.g., Census, National Family Health Survey, Ministry of Women and Child Development)
- Research papers, dissertations, and online databases

Primitive Stage (Prehistoric and Pre-Vedic Period)

The **Primitive Stage**, often referred to as the **prehistoric** or **pre-Vedic period**, covers the time before written records and organized social systems. During this stage, the position of women was shaped largely by **nature-based living, subsistence economies, and tribal social structures**.

Key Features:

1. Equality in Roles:

- In early hunter-gatherer societies, men and women likely played **complementary roles**.
- Women were responsible for **gathering food, child-rearing, and domestic management**, while men hunted.
- This division was **functional rather than hierarchical**, suggesting a more **egalitarian status**.

2. Matriarchal Tendencies:

- Some anthropologists argue that **matrilineal or matriarchal structures** may have existed in certain tribal societies.
- Descent and inheritance in some early communities may have been traced through the **mother's line**.

3. Reverence for Women:

- Archaeological evidence (e.g., **fertility figurines** like the Mother Goddess from the Indus Valley Civilization) suggests the **worship of female deities**, symbolizing fertility and creation.
- Women were seen as **life-givers**, often holding **spiritual significance**.

4. Lack of Codified Oppression:

- In the absence of formalized religion, property systems, and state institutions, there were **fewer structural constraints** on women's freedom.
- Gender-based subjugation became more pronounced only in later stages with the advent of **agriculture, private property, and organized patriarchy**.

Vedic Period (1500 BCE – 500 BCE)

The **Vedic Period** marks one of the most significant phases in Indian history, both culturally and spiritually. It is broadly divided into:

- **Early Vedic Period (1500–1000 BCE)**
- **Later Vedic Period (1000–500 BCE)**

The position of women in this period evolved noticeably—from relative **equality and respect** in the early Vedic era to **gradual decline and restriction** in the later Vedic era.

1. Position of Women in the Early Vedic Period

During the Early Vedic period, women enjoyed a **fairly high status** in society, often comparable to men in various aspects of life.

Key Features:

- **Access to Education:**
 - Women were **educated** and could study the **Vedas**.
 - Some women became renowned **scholars and philosophers**, such as:
 - **Gargi Vachaknavi**
 - **Maitreyi**
 - **Lopamudra**
- **Participation in Religious Rites:**
 - Women actively **participated in yajnas (sacrificial rituals)** and other religious ceremonies.
 - They were considered **spiritually equal** to men.
- **Marriage and Family Life:**
 - The concept of **swayamvara** (self-choice of husband) was practiced.
 - **Polygamy was rare**, and **monogamy** was the norm.
 - Women had a say in family and social matters.
- **Legal and Social Standing:**
 - Women could inherit property under certain conditions.
 - They were respected as **wives, mothers, and teachers**.

2. Position of Women in the Later Vedic Period

As the Vedic society became more **agricultural and stratified**, the status of women began to **decline**.

Key Changes:

- **Loss of Educational Rights:**
 - Women were **gradually denied access to the Vedas** and formal education.
 - Ritual purity and caste hierarchies became more emphasized.
- **Patriarchal Norms Intensified:**
 - The role of women became increasingly confined to **household duties**.
 - **Child marriage** began to appear, and **widow remarriage** became restricted.
- **Emergence of Social Restrictions:**
 - Practices like **dowry** and **purdah (veiling)** started to emerge.
 - Women's participation in public life and religious functions diminished.

Women in Islam

The position of women in Islam is shaped by **religious teachings, cultural practices, and historical contexts**. Islam, founded in the 7th century CE by the Prophet Muhammad, introduced several reforms aimed at improving the status of women compared to pre-Islamic Arabia.

1. Religious Teachings

- **Equality Before God:** Islam emphasizes that **men and women are spiritually equal** before Allah. The Quran states that both will be rewarded or punished based on their deeds (Quran 33:35).
- **Rights Granted to Women:**
 - **Right to Education:** Islam encourages both men and women to seek knowledge.
 - **Right to Own Property:** Women have independent rights to own, inherit, and manage property.
 - **Right to Marriage and Consent:** A woman's consent is necessary for marriage.
 - **Right to Divorce:** Women have the right to seek divorce under certain conditions.
 - **Right to Work and Engage in Public Life:** Women can participate in economic and social activities.

2. Family and Social Role

- Women are regarded as **mothers, daughters, and wives**, with important family responsibilities.
- The concept of **modesty (hijab)** encourages women to dress and behave with dignity and privacy.
- The family structure is **patriarchal**, with men generally seen as protectors and providers.
- Marriage is considered a **partnership**, but gender roles are often complementary.

3. Legal and Social Status

- Islamic law (**Sharia**) outlines specific rights and duties for women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody.
- Inheritance laws typically grant women **half the share** of male relatives, reflecting traditional family roles.
- Women's testimony in legal matters may have different weight depending on the context.

4. Cultural Variations

- The status and treatment of women vary widely among Muslim-majority countries due to **local customs, laws, and cultural interpretations**.
- Some societies strictly enforce **gender segregation** and **veil practices**, while others have more liberal norms.

5. Contributions and Historical Examples

- Women played significant roles in early Islamic history as scholars, poets, and political figures.
- Examples include **Khadijah**, the Prophet Muhammad's wife and a successful businesswoman, and **Aisha**, a prominent Islamic scholar.

British Rule in India (1757–1947)

The period of British colonial rule was a **complex and transformative era** for Indian women. While colonialism brought some **social reforms** aimed at improving women's conditions, it also reinforced certain **patriarchal and cultural stereotypes** that affected women's status both positively and negatively.

1. Social Conditions of Women

- Indian society under British rule was largely **patriarchal and conservative**.
- Women faced several social evils such as **child marriage, widow immolation (sati), female infanticide, lack of education, and restricted social mobility**.
- The **status of women varied** across regions, communities, and social classes.

2. Impact of British Policies and Social Reform Movements

- The British administration and Indian social reformers worked together to address some social issues affecting women.

Key Reforms and Movements:

- **Abolition of Sati (1829):**
 - The practice of widow self-immolation was banned due to campaigns led by reformers like **Raja Ram Mohan Roy**.
- **Campaign Against Child Marriage:**
 - Social reformers like **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** advocated raising the marriageable age of girls.
- **Promotion of Widow Remarriage:**
 - Reformers such as **Jyotirao Phule** and **Pandita Ramabai** encouraged widow remarriage and education.
- **Education for Women:**
 - Missionaries and reformers established schools for girls, promoting **female literacy** and empowerment.
- **Legal Reforms:**
 - Acts like the **Age of Consent Act (1891)** raised the legal age of consent for girls.
 - The **Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929)**, also known as the Sarda Act, attempted to curb child marriages.

3. Women in the Freedom Movement

- The British era saw the **active participation of women** in India's struggle for independence.
- Leaders like **Sarojini Naidu**, **Kasturba Gandhi**, **Annie Besant**, and **Aruna Asaf Ali** became prominent figures.
- Women participated in movements such as the **Non-Cooperation Movement**, **Civil Disobedience**, and **Quit India Movement**.
- The freedom struggle helped **expand women's public roles** and fostered ideas of equality and empowerment.

4. Contradictions and Limitations

- Despite reforms, many women, especially in rural areas, remained **illiterate and socially oppressed**.
- British colonial policies often had a **limited understanding of Indian social complexities** and sometimes reinforced existing patriarchal structures.
- Social reform efforts were sometimes viewed as **Western impositions**, leading to resistance.

Independent India

After India gained independence in 1947, the country embarked on a journey to establish a democratic, inclusive society that promotes equality for all its citizens, including women. The **status of women in Independent India** has improved significantly due to constitutional safeguards, legal reforms, social movements, and increased awareness about women's rights.

Women in Hinduism

Hinduism, one of the world's oldest religions, has a complex and diverse view of women's roles and status, shaped by its vast scriptures, traditions, and cultural practices. The position of women in Hinduism has evolved over time and varies widely across regions and communities.

1. Religious Texts and Women

- **Vedas:**
 - The earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, contain hymns and teachings that recognize women as **wise and knowledgeable**.
 - Some women, called **Rishikas**, were sages and composed Vedic hymns (e.g., Gargi and Maitreyi).

- **Upanishads and Epics:**
 - Women are depicted both as **spiritual seekers and ideal homemakers**.
 - The **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** portray women like Sita and Draupadi as embodiments of virtue, devotion, and strength.
- **Manusmriti and Dharma Shastras:**
 - Later texts like the **Manusmriti** emphasize a more **patriarchal framework**, prescribing women's duties mainly in relation to their fathers, husbands, and sons.
 - Women were expected to follow '**Pativrata Dharma**' — devotion and obedience to their husbands.

2. Roles and Status

- Women in Hinduism have traditionally been seen as **caretakers of the family and custodians of dharma (moral order)**.
- **Marriage** is highly valued, with the wife considered the guardian of the household.
- Women participate in religious rituals, though some roles are restricted or gender-specific.
- Widows historically faced social restrictions, though reform movements have challenged these practices.

3. Spiritual and Philosophical Perspectives

- Hinduism acknowledges the **divine feminine principle (Shakti)**, symbolizing power, creativity, and energy.
- Goddesses like **Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kali** represent various aspects of strength, wealth, knowledge, and transformation.
- Women are seen as manifestations of Shakti, which gives them spiritual significance.

Constitutional Provisions for Women in India

The Constitution of India is a foundational document that ensures **equality, dignity, and protection** for all citizens, including women. It contains several important provisions aimed at eliminating discrimination against women and promoting their welfare and empowerment.

1. Equality Before Law (Article 14)

This article guarantees that **all citizens are equal before the law** and entitled to equal protection by the law. This means women have the same legal rights as men and cannot be discriminated against by the state or individuals.

2. Prohibition of Discrimination (Article 15)

Article 15 specifically **prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth**. Importantly, Clause 3 of this article allows the government to **make special provisions for women and children**. This clause enables positive actions like reservations or welfare programs specifically for women to help achieve equality.

3. Equality of Opportunity (Article 16)

This article guarantees **equal opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state**. Women cannot be denied government jobs or promotions just because of their gender.

4. Protection of Life and Personal Liberty (Article 21)

Article 21 ensures that no person shall be deprived of their **life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law**. This right to life includes the right to live with dignity and safety, protecting women against violence and abuse.

5. Right to Education (Article 21A)

This article mandates **free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14**, which includes girls. Promoting education among girls is crucial for women's empowerment.

6. Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 39)

The Directive Principles guide the government to promote social welfare. Article 39 instructs the state to ensure that men and women have **equal rights to an adequate means of livelihood** and **equal pay for equal work**.

7. Maternity Benefits and Welfare (Article 42)

This provision directs the state to make provisions for **maternity relief and welfare of women workers**, ensuring protection and support for women in the workforce.

8. Political Participation (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments)

These amendments reserve at least **one-third of seats for women in local self-government bodies** (Panchayats and Municipalities), encouraging women's participation in grassroots politics and decision-making.

Uniform Law and Present Opportunity

What is Uniform Civil Code?

The **Uniform Civil Code (UCC)** is a proposal in India to replace the personal laws based on the scriptures and customs of various religious communities with a **common set of laws governing personal matters** such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and maintenance for all citizens regardless of religion, caste, or community.

Why is UCC Important?

- Currently, different religious communities (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc.) are governed by their own personal laws.
- This leads to **unequal treatment of women** in areas like divorce rights, inheritance, and custody.
- UCC aims to provide **equal rights and protection** to all citizens, especially women, by having a single law for everyone.

Constitutional Context

- Article 44 of the **Directive Principles of State Policy** in the Constitution of India directs the state to **endeavor to secure a Uniform Civil Code for all citizens**.
- However, this is not yet implemented nationwide due to the complexity of diverse customs and religious sensitivities.

Issues Related to Women and UCC

- Many see UCC as a way to protect women's rights by ensuring **gender justice and equality** in personal laws.
- Some communities fear loss of cultural identity or religious freedom.
- Debate continues on how to balance **women's rights** with **religious freedoms**.

Present Opportunities for Women in India

Education

- Increased access to education through government schemes like **"Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao"** and scholarships encourages more girls to attend school and higher education.
- Women are entering traditionally male-dominated fields like engineering, medicine, and law.

Employment

- Women have greater opportunities in various sectors: government jobs, corporate world, entrepreneurship, and startups.
- Laws protect women's rights at the workplace, such as **maternity benefits** and **protection against harassment**.

Political Participation

- Women participate actively in politics at local, state, and national levels.
- Reservation of seats in Panchayats and Municipalities empowers women in grassroots governance.

Social Empowerment

- Women are increasingly aware of their rights and are involved in movements against domestic violence, gender discrimination, and for reproductive rights.
- NGOs and government programs work to support women's health, legal aid, and financial independence.

Challenges Still Exist

- Despite progress, women still face **gender biases**, **safety concerns**, **wage gaps**, and underrepresentation in leadership roles.
- Continued efforts are necessary to create a truly equal society.

Conclusion

The position of women in India has undergone significant changes from the ancient period to the present day. While ancient scriptures and early societies often recognized women's roles in family, spirituality, and society, over time, patriarchal practices led to social restrictions and inequalities. The colonial period introduced social reforms and sparked movements for women's rights, setting the stage for greater emancipation.

After independence, the Indian Constitution laid the foundation for gender equality, enshrining women's rights and providing legal safeguards. Progressive laws, educational opportunities, and political participation have empowered women in various spheres. Despite these advances, challenges such as gender discrimination, violence, and social inequality persist, requiring continued commitment from society and the government.

Overall, the journey of Indian women reflects resilience and progress, with growing awareness and efforts toward achieving true equality and empowerment.

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