



## Women's Education in Ancient India

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### ABSTRACT

The general position of women in ancient India was unique. They enjoyed high status and independence in the society. An unmarried young learned daughter ought to be married to a learned bridegroom. Early marriage was not in vogue in those days. Even girls could freely choose their husbands. The customs of infant marriage and enforced widowhood were not prevalent in Vedic India. Women in ancient India had free access to education. They were expected to participate in Vedic sacrifices and utter mantras. Even some of the hymns of the Rigveda were composed by poetesses. We get references of such learned ladies as Visvavara, Lopamudra, Apala, Urvashi, Ghosa, Sulabha, Lilabati, Maitreyi, Saswati, Kshana, Gargi and others. Maitreyi, the celebrated wife of the most learned philosopher of ancient India, Yajnavalka, used to hold discussion on abstruse philosophical questions with her husband.

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### Introduction

Gargi also participated in debate with Yajnavalka on philosophical issues. Lilabati was a great mathematician of ancient India.<sup>34</sup> Thus we find that ancient society was not conservative to provide education to women and that many of them attained to great proficiencies in learning. The ancient women had equal rights with men in respect of education.<sup>1</sup>

The Upanayana (Vedic initiation) of girls should have been as common as that of boys. In the Vedic period the women not only enjoyed privileged position but also possessed high standard of morality. They had contributed positively to the educational system. The number of women who used to receive general literary and cultural education must have been fairly large.<sup>2</sup>

For a long time family was the only educational institution, and even boys used to receive education only from their fathers or elders.<sup>33</sup> The same naturally was the case with girls. But in later times a class of women teachers came to being (Upadhyayani). There was no purdah custom in Hindu society down

to the 12th century, and so there was no difficulty for women in taking to the teaching profession.<sup>35</sup> Lady teachers may probably have confined themselves to the teaching of girl-students. Panini refers to boarding houses for lady-students, *chhatrisalas*, and these probably were under the care of lady teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Co-education was also prevalent in ancient India in mild form. Sometimes boys and girls were educated together while receiving higher education. From the ‘*Malatimadhava*’ of Bhavabhuti, written in the 8th century A.D., we learn that the nun Kamandaki was educated along with Bhurivasu and Devarata at a famous centre of education. In the ‘*Uttara-Rama-charit*’ also (of the same author) we find Atreyi receiving her education along with Kusa and Lava.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to determine the exact extent of education imparted to women during the early Vedic period in India.<sup>32</sup> Upanayana ritual was obligatory for girls, and this must have ensured the imparting of a certain amount of Vedic and literary education to the girls of all classes. But female education received a great set-back during later Vedic period primarily owing to the deterioration of the religious status of women.<sup>5</sup>

Upanayana began to be gradually prohibited to girls and by about 500 B.C. it had already become a formality.<sup>36</sup> The discontinuance of Upanayana was disastrous to the religious status of women and they were declared unfit to recite Vedic Mantras and perform Vedic sacrifices. Thus Vedic education was prohibited to women. With the advent of foreigners the Brahmanical society became rigid and conservative.<sup>6</sup>

The pandits adopted measures of defence. For this the women lost their freedom. They were confined within the home. In the changed situation the right to study came to be denied to women. With the code of Manu (200 A.D.)<sup>31</sup> (*Manusmriti* or *Manusanghita*) her dependent position was firmly established. According to Manu, “by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently’. Manu further opines that “in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons”, a woman must never be independent.<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion

“Day and night must women be kept in dependence by the males of their families.<sup>30</sup> Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence”. Thus, at the time of Manu, women were in low esteem and were not allowed to study the Vedas<sup>37</sup>. Early marriage had become by now the custom.<sup>8</sup>

The mischief caused by the discontinuance of Upanayana was further enhanced by the lowering of the marriageable age. In the Vedic period, girls were married at about the age of 16 or 17; but in the later Vedic period (from 500 B.C to 500 A.D.) girls were married at the age of 8 or 9. Early marriage of girls gave a death-blow to female education. Though in society, as a whole, female education received a great set-back during this period,<sup>29</sup> it continued to receive attention in rich, aristocratic and royal families. Girls in these families were given a fairly good literary education but surely not Vedic literature.<sup>9</sup>

The only education a girl of an ordinary family received was one which fitted her to fulfil her duties in the household of her husband. Her duties mainly confined to rearing up her children, keeping everything clean, preparing food for the members of the family and looking after the household utensils. Thus, the education of girls was entirely domestic. They used to receive education at homes.<sup>10</sup>

Women in India were deprived of educational privileges for centuries, but there were always some exceptions to this general condition. Indian literature of all ages refers to educated women who took prominent part even in public affairs and showed finest skill in fine arts as well as in military art.<sup>38</sup> Chandragupta Maurya had women bodyguards. As we have mentioned earlier, the daughters of princes and well-to-do families often received some education from their fathers or elders or family priests. Many female ascetics and mendicants used to learn some Sanskrit and were conversant with popular religious poems.<sup>11</sup>

The dancing girls in the South who often were attached to temples (devadasis) received some education, particularly in dancing and music.<sup>28</sup> They were famous for their wit and cleverness. These semi-prostitutes learnt to read, sing and dance. These prostitutes sometimes worked as spies. The education of prostitutes is a very ancient custom in India. The Arthashastra of Kautilya refers to the education of the prostitutes.<sup>12</sup>

Buddhism no doubt had its effect on the education of women. The Buddhist monastic order included not only monks but also nuns (bhikshunis). But it was only with the greatest reluctance that the Buddha consented to this arrangement. In this he no doubt reflected the opinions of his time which were against the independence and education of women. His aunt, Mahaprajapati, expressed her desire to join the order, but he refused thrice. At last, at the fervent appeal of Ananda, his first and favourite disciple, the Buddha yielded. He, however, expressed his sorrow and opined that the admission of women would ruin his work. The nuns were made closely dependent on the monks, and could only be admitted by them.<sup>13</sup>

## Results

There are ample evidences to show that the Buddha, like Manu, shared the low opinion of women. It is true that Buddhist nunneries did not spread to a desirable extent. Their number was very few. The cause is very simple. The Buddhist movement gave only an indirect impetus to female education. Nunneries had gone out of vogue by the 4th century A.D. Chinese pilgrims of the 5th and 7th centuries. A.D. do not refer to them at all.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that in modern Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma (Myanmar) nuns are very small in number compared with the monks. In these countries nunneries do not impart instructions to girls as monasteries do to boys. This shows that Buddhist nunneries did not help much to spread education amongst women. There is nothing to show that the nunneries, like the monasteries, became centres of general education.<sup>14</sup>

Even when Buddhism was at its zenith in India it did very little for the education of women. But those nuns who joined the order received instruction in the Buddhist doctrines and also in reading and writing. No doubt some attained to higher proficiency in learning. There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to the intellectual attainments of many Buddhist nuns. Some of them even became famous as teachers and scholars. In old times, women were considered with deference and dignity. They were made aware of all areas and had a significant impact on governmental issues and ruling. The arrangement of sati and early marriage was not so common. In the Rig Vedic culture, ladies were worshipped and appreciated, yet they were being victimized in the later Vedic period.<sup>15</sup>

The status of women further encountered a decay with the pervasiveness of child marriage, sati, polygamy, and the purdah system. Not only women but the state of low-class people in ancient India was horrible. The caste system still plays a vital role in today's society and its roots can be traced

back millions of years. Brahmins were the supreme power in ancient India. The society was divided into 4 varnas based on the occupation of people and their birth. Thus caste system deprived the poor of many facilities and basic essentials, they were always subjected to the upper-class orders and worked for them at the cost of their self-esteem, just to have 3 meals a day. By the end of the Vedic period, women were denied social, cultural, and religious freedoms. They were not permitted to partake in administrative and governmental aspects. Progressively, the place of women declined so much that the birth of a girl child was viewed as a misfortune. Women were only treated as domestic workers. The role of a mother was only to bring up the child teaching moral values, and the role of a wife was only to look after and take care of her husband and in-laws, they were not allowed in decision-making scenarios. They were not given the right to inherit their father's or husbands' property which made them economically dependent on men.<sup>26</sup>

Men were put in a very powerful position by the end of the Vedic period, they were accepted as the true successors of the family. The way of thinking of the man-centric family depends on the rule that the genealogical record grows up with the male. The property was inherited only by the men in the family and the elder son took the responsibility for the family after the father.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusions

### The phase of Women's Education in India

Formal schooling was given to young ladies and women, they were expected to present the mantras or the stanzas with clearness and proficiency. In ancient India, women were given equal opportunities as men in educational institutions but this privilege ended very soon and women were only exposed to domestic work and family responsibilities. They were sent to schools, instead, they were trained to do household work. Women who tried to overcome these barriers were cursed and got abandoned by society. Thus, women became unaware of issues taking part in society and lacked knowledge of men.<sup>17</sup>

### Working towards reforms

Social reformers played a very important role in changing the status of women in India. They were the backbone of reforms made to help women to cope with the difficulties they were facing. They were the voice behind innocent women getting ached under the name of sati. Social reformers had faith in the guidelines of individual freedom, opportunity, and equality of all people independent of sex, caste creed, or religion. They went after various conventional, tyrant, and progressive social establishments and sent off friendly changes and developments to free the Indian women from their shackles.<sup>26</sup>

One such reformer was Raja Rammohan Roy, he was very particularly against sati and stood by the side of widow women. He was well-versed in Sanskrit and Persian and tried to influence people with his writings finally in 1829 due to his continuous efforts sati was banned. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was another reformer who further helped widows for the betterment of their lives, he suggested and proved that there isn't any ancient text mentioning that widows can't remarry. He raised his voice for the remarriage of women. Veeresalingam Pantulu was inspired by the idea of remarriage of Ishwar chandra Vidyasagar and took forward the movement for widow remarriage.<sup>18</sup>

### Reforms towards the education of women

Educating girls was considered a burden and useless as it would take them away from domestic work. But many reformers struggled for women's education and the abolition of child marriage.

Arya Samaj in Punjab and Jyotirao Phule established schools for girls in Maharashtra. In Patna and

Calcutta, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls. Thus slowly with the support from reformers, women started entering universities for higher education and some even started working as teachers, doctors, and lawyers.<sup>19</sup>

### **Caste System in India**

The foundation for caste system was classifying people into varnas based on their occupation. Ancient India witnessed four major varnas namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudras.

1. Brahmins were people who were involved in religious works. They worked as priests in temples and few brahmins were also appointed as chief advisors of kings. Kings always used to follow the words of brahmins, brahmins were given supreme power in decision making and they held a very important position in ancient Indian society.<sup>25</sup>
2. Kshatriyas were the ruling community in ancient India. They hold the second highest position and they were mainly warriors and aristocracy. They are supposed to develop characteristics of dauntlessness, strength, valor and liberality.
3. Vaishyas are the third of the four social groups of ancient India. Vaishyas are those people who belong to working class, they were involved in agriculture, trade and commerce.<sup>20</sup>
4. Sudras are the fourth and most deprived varna. They were considered as untouchables and are not allowed into temples. They were alienated from the village and also not allowed to drink water from the wells in village. The state do sutras was very horrible in ancient India<sup>24</sup>

### **Reforms in Caste system in India**

The leatherworkers of Central India known as Ghasidas organized a movement named Satnami movement for the improvement of their social status. Haridas Thakur's Matua was a reformer who questioned the ancient brahmin based society and fought for equality of all.<sup>23</sup>

"Oru jati, oru matam, oru daivam manushyanu" goes the popular saying of Shri Narayana Guru which means One caste, one religion, one god for humankind. Throughout his entire life he strived for equality of humankind. Dr B R Ambedkar is a well-known leader and the father of Indian constitution<sup>22</sup>, he worked for the untouchables and started many movements for the entry of untouchables into temples and for the access of drinking water from wells. Finally in 1950 Indian Constitution legally abolished untouchability. Women empowerment and removal of caste based discrimination are the two main concerns which are to be answered by the independent India as early as possible. Government has come up with many reforms and laws but it should come up naturally from the people to treat women and all races, color, caste people equally.<sup>21</sup>

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