

INDIAN GENDER RELATIONS

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WOMEN

Overview The status of women in India was and is inferior, despite significant changes dating from the early 19th century. Long-established practices, such as child-marriage, female infanticide, ban on widow remarriage, widow self-immolation (or ‘burning’) and purdah indicate the degree to which women are undervalued except as bearers of children. That later role, however, explains in part why Hinduism glorifies goddesses, why India was called ‘Mother India’ and why a song (‘Victory to the Mother’) became the anthem of the nationalist movement. The current realities of gender inequality are summed up in the statistic that there are 945 females for every 1000 males.

Postclassical Period It is generally argued that the status of women further deteriorated during the long period from 500-1500 CE. Although goddesses were feted and individual female rulers can be cited, the reality for most women was child marriage and a miserable life for a widow. The ritual of *sati* (‘suttee’), in which a widow is burnt on her husband’s funeral pyre, is the most dramatic demonstration of a woman’s status in traditional India. The practice was never widespread, but scholars believe it was prevalent among certain warrior groups (such as Rajputs) in the medieval period, and it certainly continued into the 19th century. The devotionalist movement (bhakti) that swept all over India during this period did, however, produce several excellent women poets/singers. In the Kannada-speaking country in south India, a group of devotionalist poets, both male and female, created an alternative society in which women played an equal part.

Reading

Diane Mines and Sarah Lamb (eds.), *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Indiana, 2010)

David Mandelbaum, *Society in India: Continuity and Change* (2 vols.) (California, 1970)

Maitrayee Chaudhur (ed.), *Feminism in India. Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* (Kali for Women, 2004)