

INDIAN GENDER RELATIONS – Ancient Period

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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.

Indus Valley Civilisation

The status of women in IVC is unknown, although we can speculate. Based on the seemingly egalitarian nature of society at that time, it is possible example, that women enjoyed a relatively equal status with that of men. Again, we can suggest that Indus valley society would have been structured in part, if not in the main, by kinship. While we have no textual information as to the kinship system, we can assume that marriage was central. And for this we can glean some details from the scenes depicted on the seals and pottery. For example, one famous seal shows a group of people arranged around a central figure standing behind a circle or pattern drawn on the floor that resembles the floor designs used today for weddings. Some seals had holes, presumably for a string, enabling them to be worn, perhaps as a wedding pendant, as is the custom today.

Indo-Aryan Civilisation

Based on the Vedas, it appears that women enjoyed a comparatively high status. Daughters as well as sons were given education and taught the sacred texts. Female ascetics appear as frequently as male ascetics and often receive more praise. Girls moved freely in public, attending meetings and ceremonies, where they also spoke. Women could inherit property, and widows could remarry. At the same time, the role of women was to produce progeny for the blood line, and wives were subordinate to their husband. Vedic religion was dominated by male deities, which may also reflect a parallel domination by men in the social sphere.

Classical Period

Decline The status of women declined during the classical period, a change that was recorded in the *Dharma Sastras*, a compendium of Sanskrit texts providing rules and guidance of virtually every topic of life. A famous (or infamous) oft-quoted passage reads: *Her father guards her in her childhood; her husband guards her in her youth; and her sons guard her in her old age. A woman is not fit to act on her own.* On the other hand, we have sporadic mention of female sages and powerful rulers. In general, however, whereas women in the Vedic texts could own and inherit property, including land, this was no longer true by the time of the Gupta Empire. This decline is usually attributed to the consolidation of the caste system, the increase in hierarchical divisions and the formalisation of social rules. Finally, although Buddhism opened up a new social space for women, by the end of the period, the canonical laws of the sacred texts codified gender inequality.

Family The rules governing the family structure were also codified during this period in the *Dharma Sastras*. Patrilineality (in which identity and inheritance are passed down through the male line) was and continues to be the practice in most of India, although it is generally stronger in the north than south. Matrilineality (in which identity and inheritance are passed down through the female line) is found only in Kerala, coastal Karnataka and the foothills of the Himalayas. Most Indian families are also patrilocal (resident with the husband’s family), extended (including two or three generations) and often joint (the wives and children of brothers living together). Monogamy is the general practice among Hindu and Christian families, although many Muslims did and still do practice polygamy. Polyandry (more than one husband) has been the custom in parts of Himachal Pradesh and among the Todas in Tamil Nadu and Nayars in Kerala.