

INDIAN GENDER RELATIONS

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

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 Nayers in Kerala.

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.

Early Modern Period

The status of women during the Mughal Empire was generally, despite dozens and dozens of princesses, quite low. In addition to the child marriage and ban on widow remarriage, which continued from earlier Hindu tradition, the practice of *pardah* further restricted the social mobility of women. Again, this was formalised within the royal courts by the *zenana*, or separate women's quarters.

19th Century

Sati Campaigns for women's right began in the early 19th century, as part of the Bengal Renaissance. When the Bengali reformer Ram Mohun Roy witnessed the *sati* (burning of wife on her husband's funeral pyre) of his brother's widow, he was appalled and began to campaign for its abolition. Three years later, in 1829, after writing and speaking against this custom, he finally persuaded the British to ban the practice.

Nationalist movement In the later part of the century, a separate Women's Council was formed within the Indian National Congress, and several women (notably Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Tarabai Shinde, 1850-1910, and Saroj Nalini Dutt, 1887-1925) campaigned for women's rights and education.

Breast-cloth controversy The battle for women's rights was also fought in more isolated parts of India. When low-caste women, recently converted to Christianity in south India, attempted to wear a breast-cloth or a jacket in imitation of higher-caste women, they met with violence and Christian schools were burned. Eventually, in 1859, the government of Travancore ruled in favour of the low-caste women's right to dress as they chose.

20th Century

The status of women in modern India presents a mixed picture. Through the socialist era of the 1950s and 1960s, new legislation granted women the right to divorce and to inherit property, while declaring dowry illegal. More recent legislation has outlawed polygamy, domestic violence, unequal pay and sexual harassment. It is undeniable that many Indian women today enjoy more freedom and occupy more powerful positions than they would have 50 years ago, but most women still struggle to achieve a good life. While the ratio of 945 females to every 1000 males is an improvement, it underlines the ongoing reality of female infanticide and poor health conditions. Child marriage and dowry, despite legislation outlawing them, are still common, and female illiteracy (35%) is widespread.

Discussion/questions

1. Some scholars claim that Indian society has responded to modernity by developing two spheres. In the outer sphere of economic, politics and public life, people borrow and adapt Western culture, while traditional culture is preserved in an inner core, which includes gender roles for women (and men). This division into public and private spheres, it is argued, has hindered the development of an effective women's movement in India.
2. Certain aspects of traditional Indian culture appear to privilege women. Although society is generally patriarchal, several high-castes are matriarchal (most notably the Nayar in Kerala), goddesses dominate Hinduism and *shakti* ('energy', 'power') is feminine. Are these realities superficial or do they actually represent pockets of female power?

3. The life of Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) offers a window into the history of women's movements in India. Born into a well-educated, politically motivated family as the oldest of eight children, she studied in England, married into another caste at age 19 and had five children. She later joined the nationalist movement and was arrested several times before becoming the first Indian woman to head the Indian National Congress. She also campaigned successfully for legislation that permits widow remarriage, raised the legal age of marriage (in order to prevent child-marriage) and gave women the vote. Along the way, she published several highly-regarded collections of poetry.

Reading

Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1999)

Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Colonial India* (D C Books, 2004)

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)