



Deteriorated to a new low: An analysis of the position of the medieval Indian women

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Abstract

In this paper researcher will try to assess the new changes in the social status of women after the invasion of Mohammad of Ghor till the British conquest of India. Paper intends to highlight the impact of Muslim invasion and the induced strengthening of patriarchal control over women. Paper will focus on Hindu women who constituted the majority. Status of royal ladies of the new ruling class is outside the purview of this paper.

Keywords: medieval Indian women, polygynous

Introduction

In 11th century onwards India experienced a major change in its ruling class as well as political system. With the invasion of Mohammad of Ghor and the establishment of Sultanate, India came under the rule of Muslims, who had a different culture in comparison to their subjects. And thus for the first time in recorded history Indian religion and social customs were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite. This certainly took the position of women to a new low. With the Islamic rule getting crystallised we witness a change in Hindu society which was quite strained. Life became insecure. Muslim invader used to forcibly take women away to be slaves or to marry them to Muslim homes. This insecurity led Hindu society to act in a defensive manner, to distance itself from the Muslim culture and to keep their women chaste. So the old customs were blindly followed. It narrowed down women's social liberties further. Caste norms too were strictly followed and the deviation attracted severe punishments. Hence, Life for lower castes and women became even harder.

Although female child was unwelcome, we don't find evidences of female infanticide in ancient India. In medieval period the custom of female infanticide crept into the Hindu society. It was prevalent in *rajputs* and other high castes. Though it was not accepted as civilized but recourse to it was taken to shed of the responsibilities attached to a girl child as well as to avoid the presupposed defilement of them by Muslims invaders.

During this period role of women conformed to the laws laid down by Manu, the second century law-giver that a woman does not deserve freedom, she should always be dependent on men in all the stages of her life. Laws laid down in *Manusmriti* were strictly imposed and this rendered woman a shadow of her male relative, be it father, husband or son. Dependency of women was a prominent feature of this period. Upper caste women were not involved in any economic activity, though lower caste women were involved in agriculture and other activities like weaving because it was necessary for their survival. But the upper caste women

meekly accepted this idea that their proper sphere was home. This led to their further subjugation.

Pre-puberty marriages were already there but its scope widened. It was a tradition in both Hindus and Muslims. Hindu daughters were married off before the age of 9 or 10 and in some cases were married even before they learnt to talk. Lower castes too adopted it to claim a higher social status. Warrior or *kshatriya* class too borrowed it from *Brahmanas* but still we do have evidences that *kshatriya* girls were married at a comparatively advanced age, which allowed them to receive certain amount of military training, which was to be used in crisis. Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala and among the Kashmiris were the exception where this custom was not followed. Pre-puberty marriages did great harm to girl's physical, psychological, moral and intellectual development. Akbar seems to have disliked this tradition. It was reflected from his order as mentioned in *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* of prohibiting the marriage of girls below 14 years. This ban applied on Hindu Muslim both. Akbar condemned the vast age gap between the husband and the wife too. Though we don't know to what extent he succeeded but ethically, it was a noble attempt and quite progressive at that time.

Polygyny was already prevailing in Hindu upper caste especially royal families. The wealthy people kept several wives and concubines, apparently exhibiting the superiority of men over women. The new rulers too were polygynous. It was now adopted by middle classes too as a status symbol in case they felt it to be economically sustainable. Akbar, though polygynous himself raised voice against it but it hardly made any change. This custom deteriorated the status of women and considerably increased the number of widows.

Rigorous seclusion of women became a rule, as a result of both the imitation of the system of *purdah* which the Muslims enforced and of the sense of fear arising from the lack of general security. Though Hindu women used to cover their face or head in front of elders but for Muslims it meant complete veiling. *Purdah* restricted her movements in public places even the holy shrines that led to her seclusion. Under *purdah* system not only were women required to live in

secluded apartment in house but also they had to dress in apparel which completely covered them except her eyes. *Purdah* system became quite common among rich Hindu families of Bengal, Bihar and U.P. in 15th and 16th century. According to Sanskritisation theory propounded by M N Srinivas (*Social Change in Modern India*: 1968) lower strata of the society must have followed it to the maximum possible extent; though they have economic limitations and their women played huge part in labour force. The practice of *purdah* invented and adopted to protect women had a restrictive effect. It rendered education impossible for them. It made women more submissive, what Patricia Jeffery calls 'a frog in a well syndrome' which made women unable to cope with the world outside.

Niyoga was already stamped out in *smriti* period. Remarriage of child widows too came to a halt completely especially in higher sections of Hindu society which was eventually followed by lower sections who desired to increase their respectability. A lot of stigma was attached with the widow. She was secluded completely and expected to follow a life ascetics and celibacy and with controlled diet.

Further developments were even more disastrous. *Sati* system became a common fashion among *kshatriyas* and signified highest devotion to the deceased husband as well as chastity. We see that sati system starts getting popular even before the advent of Muslims. It became frequent in Northern India and quite common in Kashmir (*Rajtarangini*); though the practice was not common in Deccan till 1000AD. In medieval period this custom was adopted by brahmana families too. Commentaries written on *Yajnavalkyasmriti* (by Aparārka) and *parasaramriti* (by Mādhava) lay down the rule of sati for *brahmana* widow. South Indian digest writers of 12th and 14th centuries supported it. So we can say that this custom penetrated the south India as well. Sati was not performed every time voluntarily, medieval travelers like Manucci, Nicoli Conti, and Bernier etc. recorded many cases of force being exercised. Many times force exercised was in a subtle form like societal pressure.

The practice of tonsure also got fossilised during this period. With the complete ban on widow remarriage society tried to make the widows look ugly to diminish their prospects for further marriage. In general opinion, if a widow didn't perform sati she should tonsure and wear white clothes only. She was forbidden to wear ornaments. She had to sleep on bare floor and was supposed to eat once in a day. It is painful to imagine what would have been the ordeal of a child widow who didn't even understand why she was made to follow these strict norms whole life. Women thus found life more dreadful than death and chose to be sati rather.

Another system of *jauhar* was highly popular among royal Rajput ladies. They prepared their pyre with their own hands and bade farewell to their men when they went to war. They preferred to die to fall in hands of invaders and used to perform *jauhar*. If they died "they performed this honour by self-invited death" (Devendra: 1994)^[9]. There are two aspects to *jauhar*. Though the brave rajput ladies showed exemplary courage in performing *jauhar* but other aspect of this tradition highlights the position of woman in Hindu society, who has always been considered and appendage to her husband. Practically they didn't have any option except to burn

themselves. On one hand they could have been captured by Muslim invaders who in turn would have forcefully married them or made them slave. On the other hand if somehow they escaped, they would lose their respect on the pretext of not being the ideal wife which was supposed to be sati or perform *jauhar*. This ultimately made their condition dreadful.

During this period *stridhana* now took the shape of dowry. *Stridhana* which comprised of the gifts given by father and relatives to the girl at the time of marriage and was in custody of the girl provided some sort of security and little bit wealth to the girl. In Medieval period this term acquired different meaning. It now comprised of gifts presented as *Dakshina* to the bridegroom along with the bride which ultimately belonged to the in-laws. Bride didn't have free access to this wealth. Dowry soon became status symbol which in other ways encouraged the trend of female infanticide. Another negative effect of dowry was that it commoditised woman; she lost her importance as a human being.

Prostitution got institutionalised in Southern India through *devdasi* system. *Devdasis* were the dancing girls dedicated to the temples and were considered to be married to the temple deities. *Devdasi* system came into vogue by about the 3rd century, for *Kalidasa* refers to dancing girls in his play *Meghdutam* (I, 35). *Devdasi* system though almost wiped out from North India due to continuous attacks by Muslims, remained intact in Southern India. Although these girls were appointed to perform in temple but they were supposed to entertain the kings, priests and even the upper class. Since the worldly norms of chastity did not apply on them, they were still considered auspicious and were made feel that they were serving god. Generally they were lower class and lower caste girls who were either donated by their parents for the sake of punya or simply to shed off the responsibility of a girl child. The fact that they were exploited by male dominated society is clearly evident from the testimony of Albaruni that the kings make them attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons.

During this period two schools of law emerged- *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga*, the exponents of these schools were *Vijnaneshwara* and *Jimutvahana*, who tried to give a definite share of property to women. However in the setting of utter subordination, those meagre rights hardly brought any significant benefits to women. Legal position of Hindu women, especially from the point of view of inheritance was unsatisfactory. Though *stridhana* was liberally interpreted by some schools of Hindu law, women were generally excluded from succession to property and this led to their dependence on men. A silent revolt from all the *brahminical* norms imposed upon women as well as lower caste can be seen in *Bhakti* movement but that too was incapable of changing the general attitude of society towards women.

Lower caste women faced double oppression first within their own community because of being women; second, they were exploited by upper caste on the pretext of being Dalit. Often they were expected and forced to submit themselves to the sexual advances of their upper caste men. In some regions they were not even allowed to wear a breast cloth. They were considered to be devoid of any 'honour'. On the other hand, upper caste women had to bear the burden of upholding the 'honour' by conforming to the patriarchal codes of the society.

In both the situations, women ultimately suffered and their human rights were crushed under male chauvinism.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this period can be marked for the utter mistreatment and overall deterioration in the status of women. With all the social evils being at their peaks, like female-infanticide, child-marriage, polygamy, *pardah*, dowry, sati, enforced widowhood, tonsure made their life like hell. Education became a distant dream. Insecurity of being kidnapped, fear of forced marriage and conversion to Islam made them lead their life in a state of physical and psychological insecurity. This encouraged tighter norms of chastity and morality for women. The utter downfall in the period did far reaching damage to the status of women whose ramifications we experience even today.

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