

Status of Women in Ancient India

INTRODUCTION: -

From the Early-Vedic period the society was assumed as of highly egalitarian in nature. The example that sets the statement valid is that the Early-Vedic period was pastoral and semi nomadic and there was no distinctive kind of discrimination on the basis of gender as the verna system was not that prevalent at that time. The distribution of the labour was more or less equal at that era. The women were usually busy with the men working in the field. The era of change happened to unfold its loops as slowly the verna system started to overlap the non-discriminatory society. As the verna system emerged rapidly the distinction between the men and that of the women steered hard. The men were usually pointed to the outside works and apparently the women were subjected to the household works. The society from the Early-Vedic to the Later-Vedic period started to be somewhat authoritative and when there is the mention of authority there comes the presence of rules and regulations. There is a need of some person or a group of people to maintain those rules and regulations to keep a check on the society, whether obeying the norms or not. As the society then was divided into clans and due to the primitive-civilisation the clans were then ruled by the clan head or the group of members selected by the clan as the head as the representative. From here the context of rule and ruler begins indicating towards the conquering nature of the society. A society needs to be in surplus to survive its existence, thus acquiring of more and more position is important. Somewhere the physical ability and resistance mattered and making steep division between men and women.

THE ESSENCE OF SUPREMACY AND DOMINATION: -

The organisation of society is directly proportionate to the development of the society. The sense of orientalism was being prevalent at that time. The word 'orientalism' was based on the western development and they slowly started to emphasis on the word 'occident', which characterised the presence of the east. The concept given by the western scholars and philosophers were that the east was a 'highly uncivilised, savage, dangerous, lazy, cruel, aggressive, mystic and infantile' society and the 'brown men' in the east were very much dominant over women, treated then violently and brutally. They for self-exaggerating themselves exclaims that the saving of the eastern women from the brown men was of their responsibility. Contrarily their treatment to the women were not well than that of the slaves. They always tried to criticize the eastern society, thus then arose a need for the eastern society to show and prove them that the thought of the culture that was created by the western writers was not the desirable way to express the eastern society.

EMERGENCE OF THE HISTORY OF WOMEN: -

The emergence of the history of the women was shaped from certain political events from the 'late nineteenth century' and the beginning of the 'early twentieth century' as inferred from many narratives at that period. No religion at that time was totally egalitarian or the

acceptance of the women was not that fully acceptable, there exists some specific kind of discrimination, especially misogyny. The patriarchy was the predominant form of society structure as they existed the government system. At that time all the teachings, preaching and texts were there to perpetuate the patriarchal values. This resulted in the heavy domination of man in the public and private domain. There were certain discrepancies in the Rig-Vedic period which shows that there were transactions of marriage between the Aryans and non-Aryans where they created a division of superiority within the household amongst the women. Hence, we can refer that the state of women was gradually degrading.

THE CONDITION OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY VEDIC PERIOD: -

The men as well as women at that time were allowed to participate in the important rituals and ceremonies equally. There were evidences of rituals where, females were worshiped so as to prosper their fertility. During that period women were also aligned with the decision-making process and were also active members of the 'Sabhas' and the participants of the tribal assemblies. They stayed engaged in different economic practices due to the material culture at that time and even partially dominated the society. They were even that much authorised that they can even select their own partners. These statements can also be proved through the sacred texts of 'Mahabharata' where it states that 'Dropadi' had been permitted to select her own life partner through a special selection process named 'Swayambar'. There are also evidences of women scholars who were involved with studies notably Vedic corpus and literature. Few were named as 'Gargi, Mytrei, Ghosha, Lopamudra'. Though the presence of male gods as deities and in religious hymns was predominant at the time, there was an apparent existence of female deities such as the 'Mother goddess'. However, the society at that time was said to be egalitarian in nature, the social setup was slightly prejudiced due to the influence of the social ills like child marriage, polygamy and rigorous treatment to the widows.

THE CONDITION OF WOMEN IN THE LATER (RIG) VEDIC PERIOD: -

From this sphere of time the patriarchal society started to grow extremely stronger with the domination of men in the most important areas of the society. This period was very female dominating as the women unlike that of the early Vedic period cannot take part in the decision-making process and were also excluded from the administrative holds. They were also removed from economic contribution. The preference of a son was supported over a daughter. The daughters were presumed to be the break of the kinship. People at that time performed several rituals and sacrifices so to get blessed with a son child. Women during this period were recognised to be non-autonomous beings and were prescribed to stay under someone that her father or husband. As the women being so were not eligible to perform any ritual practices and were only eligible to do so when she performs it with her husband (a male member). It can be stated with a hymn as evidence from 'Manu' that how much a son was preferred in the society i.e.; "Through a son one wins the worlds, through a grandson one gains eternity and through grandson's son one reaches the realms of the sun.". Not that a male child was expected without reasons, one of the reasons was the utility of son in the military and economic activities and another is to maintain the

perpetuation of the lineage. The married women with sons were eligible to inherit but in the name the son.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW REFORMATORY GROUPS AND THEIR BACKDROPS: -

The two main sects in the periphery started to behold their roots named the 'Buddhist' and 'Jainism' with a different belief system. They emerged as a sect with more liberalism in it and also with a character of inclusiveness. They were firmly against the discrimination and prejudice prevalent in the vedic society especially the verna system. They partly awarded the women the freedom of theirs and were also granted to profess the religious texts and practices as nuns. These sects were too much disciplined with their monastic life. They were somewhat contradictory to themselves as even after giving the freedom to the women they criticised the women. They stated in the 'Bodhisatwa-bhumi' that the women can get enlightenment through salvation but after then they will rebirth as men. They meant that the power and wisdom to get enlightenment was only capacitated by the men. Thus, the monks were always kept prior to the nuns and it was understood that the nun were incapable to protect them and that the monks always protected the nuns. These newly emerged sects also stated at moments that women acted as distraction in the path of men to attain the extreme extent and a threat to celibacy of the monks as they were mentioned as temptress, seductress, lustful, etc. This shows that the community was misogynist in nature. The religious texts were usually mentioned to the men. They concluded their notion with the verses that 'monks were the embodiment of *DHAMMA* [birth]' and 'nuns were the embodiment of *SAMASARA* [deaths]'.

CONCLUSION: -

The hierarchical system of verna influenced to the most and resulted in a huge distress for the women in the society, as the status of a 'women from a brahmin family' was different rather was more sophisticated than that of a 'women from the shudra community. By the medieval period every religious text or preaching would indicate towards women as polluting at the same time they would venerate women as life-giver, goddess. Many reforms took place at that time as great reformers and leaders like 'Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ram Mohan Roy and many more' revolted hard against the society to abolish the 'Sati Pratha' and 'Poligamy' and struggled for the application of the 'Widow Re-marriage Act'. The society had an ambivalent perception towards women, which further makes it difficult to state the absolute status of women in the east and made apparently perceptible that the state of women were not constant and changed with passing time.