

Status of Women in Medieval India

The Medieval period starts with the entry of Muslim invaders in India. The span of this period was about 500 years from the Era of Delhi Sultnate to Mughal era. In the Indian history, the medieval age is considered to be “Dark Age” for the women when many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in women’s status. Very few names of women are found in this period who became the ruler and showed their talents in various fields. One is Razia Sultan who occupied the throne of Delhi. Some other women, Gulbadan Begum, Nurjahan, Jahan Ara , Mumtaj Mahal became famous because of their intellectual talents, aesthetic values and active participation in the state affairs. Gulbadan Begum passed the poetic talent, which can be seen in Humayun-Nama, which she wrote. Nur Jahan was the famous Muslim queen of Mughal India who was the combination of beauty and bravery. Another was Mumtaz Mahal, the queen of Shahjahan who was a rare example of beauty and brain with aesthetic taste.

History of Medieval India has some women with heroic deeds. Chandbibi as a savior of Fort of Ahmadnagar, Tara Bai who resist the onslaught of Aurangzeb, Mangammal , the green memory of South India, Ahalya Bai Holkar, the genius administrator are the some examples of their bravery. The Mughul princesses like Jahanarah, Roshanara, Zebunnissa who were poetess, played their active role in supporting their brothers Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb in the administration.

Most of the princesses or daughters of high officials were skilled in art, paintings and poetry. History says that Rajput princesses were given proper knowledge of administration, art, archery, poetry, politics etc. Rani Padmavati, Jodha Bai, is some famous names in this regard. The daughter of Shahjahan, Jahanaara was an excellent in poetry. Some other women were also famous in the Mughal era. One of them was Jija Bai, the mother of Shivajee who sacrificed her life in grooming her son as a yodhdha against the Mughal rule. She was a strong-headed woman.

Mughal period brought many changes in women's lives and made her subordinate and inferior to men. The society was patriarchal which gives autonomy to male dominance. The status of women started falling with the arrival of Muslims when various customs were imposed on women like Sati Pratha, child marriage, widow remarriage etc.

Women were considered inferior to the men in this period, not only physical but mentally too. They were denied to study Vedas and could not go for higher studies. Although there are some instances that court ladies and queen's maids were able to compose very good Sanskrit and Prakrit verses. According to the famous Indian philosopher 'Vatsyayana', a woman should be expert in cooking, spinning, grinding, knowledge of medicine, recitation and many more. Even in Buddhism, Jainism and Christians, there was some liberal view on women's education, as they do not consider gender in uniting with God. According to Huein Sang , a Chinese traveller Sanghmitra, the daughter of King Ashoka, Rajyashree, the sister of Raja Harshvardhan were the famous scholars of their time. The Women from south India were more privileged and empowered than their counterparts living in Northern India. Priyaketadevi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya, Jakkiabbe used to rule seventy villages from South India were some administrators who ruled their area. Domingo Paes, famous Portuguese traveler testifies to it. He endorsed that women of that period had expertise in wrestling, blowing trumpet and handling swords with equal perfection as men. Nuniz, another famous traveler to the South says that women were so learned that they take part in writing accounts and recording the affairs of the kingdom.

To keep the preserve the prestige and purity of blood, Hindus started giving their daughters in marriage at early age, even before attaining puberty. The plight of women can be imagined by one of the shloka of Tulsidas where he writes "Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadan ke adhikari" means the animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating. The child brides were denied all social

interactions including their intellectual, physical, and spiritual development. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. But this system gave various problems like early motherhood, weak health of mothers, repeated birth, high rate of maternal mortality etc.

One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. Love and inter-caste marriages were not allowed. In the case if the girl's father could not find a suitable groom for his daughter, then she was allowed to marry with her own while living with her father after attaining puberty. Sometimes girls were permitted to opt Swayamvara. Women were dependent on male members of their family. If the husband deserts, impotent or died, women were allowed to remarry. If husband abandoned even a guilty wife, the woman will get maintenance. According to some scholars women had possessed property rights and the woman was entitled to get her husband's property after the death of her husband in case she has no son. Even daughters also had right to succeed to the properties of the widow. Sati was obligatory.

They were debarred to do take part in various activities other than farming and weaving. Lack of education, loss of the access on their streedhan or dowry made them more powerless and prone to exploitation. They were unable to take any decision on political, social or economic front. The home was considered best place for women.

There was tradition of Polygyny as Muslims followed that practice. Women were considered an object to satisfy the sexual desires of male only. Polygyny was also started in Hindus like Muslims. The wives have to obey their husbands. Social evil like female infanticides started taking place among Rajputs and higher castes, as there was a belief that birth of a son give salvation to their parents and perform the last rights. So, sons were preferred.

With the influence of Muslim culture, Pardah pratha came into existence and girls and women were supposed to hide themselves from the eyes of male members, even if they are their family members. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up

any women they wanted and kept her in their “harems”. Although we found the Pardah pratha among Kshatriya during the Dharma Sastra period. Dowry system was common and it was given by the father and relatives of the bride at the time of marriage in the form of gifts, ornaments etc. But in the medieval period, the custom was slightly changed and the custom in which the bride along with gifts and cash were given to the bridegroom was started. In Vedic period, this streedhan ensures security and it was not compulsory. The fathers of the girl were giving gifts etc as per their financial status. But in the medieval period this became compulsory in the name of dowry. This compulsion gave rise to the custom of female infanticide because it became a burden to the families having low financial condition.

Widows, especially Hindu widows had very hard and miserable life in the absence of any freedom, social contacts and worldly pleasure. There was restriction on Widow Remarriage. The widows were supposed to live a pious life in the name of their husbands. Their condition was very pathetic. Society had no good idea about the woman who go for remarriage in Hindus. This cruelty on widows was one of the main reasons for the large number of women committing Sati. Muslim widows could marry again after the death of her husband. Caste system was very strong at that time.

To save the glory and honour from the enemies, jauhar pratha was followed by the upper caste women, especially in Rajputs. Rani Padmavati is the example of this pratha who are known to place a high premium on honour for protecting the sanctity of the women and the whole clan.

Sati pratha was also one of the examples of injustice, which women faced in that period. Sati was considered better than living as a widow as the plight of widows in Hindu society. Although ‘Medhatiti’ had different opinion as he thinks that Sati is like committing suicide so one should avoid this.

The custom of Devdasi was taken place in medieval Indian history in which a woman was considered the brides of God. Actually this was the example of sexual exploitation of women in the name of religion.

Some researchers say that Hindus accepted some changes in their clothing, food habits, social customs in the influence of Muslims. The lower strata of the population was remained free from some social evils like purdah, divorce etc. women were free to remarry. Up to certain extent, Muslim women had enjoyed more freedom in the context of divorce and remarriage. They can have their share in husband's property even.

After a long gap, the liberal stream of Bhakti movement opened the door of women's freedom in medieval India with the help of some female poet-saints. They helped the women to make them accepted in the male dominated society. Akkamahadevi, also known as Akka or Mahadevi from the southern region of Karnataka and a devotee of Shiva in the 12th century CE. Mirabai, or Mira were among them who was the devotee of Lord Krishna.

But in general, the status of women had deteriorated in the society during this period and they suffered from many social evils during the period of Muslim rulers or Sultanate and became a living article of pleasure only.

