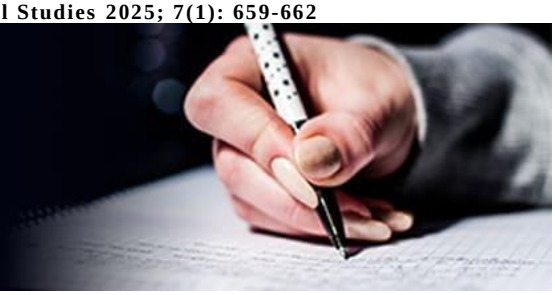
International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652
ISSN Online: 2664-8660
Impact Factor: RJIF 8
IJAHSS 2025; 7(1): 659-662
www.socialstudiesjournal.com
Received: 08-03-2025
Accepted: 12-04-2025

Dr. Gagandeep Kaur
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Guru Hargobind Sahib Khalsa Girls College, Karhali Sahib, Patiala, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Gagandeep Kaur
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Guru Hargobind Sahib Khalsa Girls College, Karhali Sahib, Patiala, India

Position of women in ancient India

Gagandeep Kaur

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i1i.249

Abstract
The position of women in ancient India underwent significant transformations across different historical periods. In pre-Aryan times, a matriarchal system prevailed where women held central roles in religious, social, and familial structures, as evidenced by archaeological findings from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and textual references from Sankhya Shastra. However, with the arrival of the Vedic Aryans, a patriarchal structure emerged where men assumed dominant roles, although women continued to enjoy access to education and active participation in religious rituals. The Rigvedic period witnessed both respect for women and a preference for male progeny, yet practices such as Brahmavadinis and Swayamvara highlighted their significant societal roles. Marriage customs varied widely, encompassing eight distinct forms as detailed in Grihya Sutras. Over time, with the growing influence of Brahmanical codes such as Manu Smriti and Yajnavalkya Smriti, the status of women gradually declined. Early marriage became normative, and women's educational and religious roles diminished significantly. Despite certain proprietary rights like *stridhan*, women faced increased restrictions during menstruation, pregnancy, and widowhood. Thus, the historical trajectory of women's status in ancient India reflects a complex interplay of empowerment, gradual subordination, and religious transformations.

Keywords: Women, Ancient India, Matriarchy, Vedic period, Manu Smriti, Education, Marriage customs, Patriarchy, Religious roles, Social status

Introduction
In the pre-Aryan India a mother dominated (matriarchal) social system was prevalent. E.B. Havell writes that the pre-Aryan social structure was different from the Aryan, "In being matriarchal instead of patriarchal. Their mothers and children formed the nucleus of the settled society. They could never realize the Fatherhood of God; the Earth Mother. embodied all their ideals of the Divine India was their mother, not their father [1]. This is also evident from the Sankhya Shastra which is a pre-Aryan work. Its antiquity is obvious when one finds that it is mentioned even in Rigveda [2]. In the basic postulates of Sankhya, Prakriti is at the forefront and though the Purusha is also there, all the strings of creation and desolation are in the hands of Prakriti [3]. Paul Thomas, an Indian scholar invokes archaeological evidence in support of the conjecture that the pre-Aryan civilization was woman centered. Many figures of goddesses discovered in the archaeological finds of Harappa and Mohan-jo-daro suggests that the popular deities of the Pantheon were predominantly feminine and that the society was matriarchal [4]. He writes, "The importance of mother-worship in religion, the abundance of female figurines with rich ornaments, the comparatively lesser importance given to males, would all indicate that society in ancient Indus Valley was more favourable to women than to men; it was possibly a matriarchate of the type of Ancient Egypt [5]. The status of woman was very high in all walks of life at that time. As no socio-religious role or power was assigned to Purusha, apart from cohabiting with the female-Prakriti for procreation [6].
The earliest known literary compositions of the Indo-Aryans are the hymns of the Rigveda. There are many indications in Vedic literature which go to prove that Vedic Aryans were patriarchal [7], and a man had almost absolute power over his wife and children [8]. Why Vedic Aryans were Patriarchal? To quote R.P. Sharma's words: scarcity of food and the daily cycle of hardships may have turned the early Aryans into professional hunters and food gatherers... They could not afford to be non-violent and vegetarian.

Besides, their surroundings may have compelled them to keep their women and children inside the caves. They had to be protected from wild beasts and the hazards of nature. They could not be allowed to accompany men on hunting expeditions. Circumstances like these may have made it expedient for adult males to assume the role of Providers and Protectors of their women and children. It was no linguistic accident that the Vedic word for 'husband' and 'brother' came to mean, 'the protector' (Bharta/Bhrata) and that for 'wife' and 'sister', the Protected (Bharya/Bhagini) [9]. Thus Rigvedic gods were full-blooded martial male deities who helped them in their campaigns, confunded their enemies, protected their fields and cattle and were generally worshipped for enhancing their welfare [10]. In spite of male dominance, woman as wife and mother was esteemed. Indeed, it may be argued that Vedic religion had an appreciation of both femininity and complementarily between husband and wife, albeit within a patriarchal structure [11].

Ordinarily girls were less welcomed than boys as one finds a very frequent longing for a male child in the Rigveda: "May we possess a family of males [12]."

It is surprising, however, that no desire for the birth of a daughter is ever expressed in the entire range of the Rigveda [13]. The Atharvaveda leaves no doubt that son was preferred to daughters [14]. But it must be added that it did not lead to female infanticide during this period [15]. Once the temporary feeling of disappointment was over, the family took keen interest in the daughter as it did in the son. The young girl was called by the name Duhitri indicating her principal duty in the Vedic family; namely, milking the cow [16]. Her name is also interpreted as the potential nourisher of a child [17]. Thus milking the cow and preparing clarified butter and curds seem to have been her chief concern. She had to perform other duties as well like working for the spinsters, weaving cloth and embroidering garments. They brought water in jars from wells and watched the standing crops in fields [18].

Girls were educated like boys. It appears that in Vedic period women were on an equal footing with men in the matter of receiving the knowledge of the sacred literature [19]. They had free access to educational opportunities and discrimination in education on the basis of sex was unknown. Upanayanam was common to boys and girls. There were women who continued studies throughout their life time, they were known as 'Brahmavadinis' [20]. Name of 23 Brahmavadinis are found in Rigveda. Some famous are Gargi, Romasa, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Apala, Atreyi, Indrani, Vak and Godha [21].

Child-marriage was unknown during this period [22]. A maiden according to the Atharvaveda after completing her Brahmacharya only, is entitled to marry a husband [23]. Educated brides of this age had an effective voice in the selection of their partners in life.

The Rigveda does not give detailed account of the forms of marriage prevalent at that time, but there are indications in the hymns, of Swayamvara, marriage by capture and contract marriage [24]. In some marriages love played an important role; there is a mention in the Rigveda of festival like the Samana to which young women went well adorned with ornaments and bright garments and possibly met eligible young men; many marriage negotiations might have started off from here [25]. Religious and sacramental conception of marriage was present [26]. The purpose of marriage was to procreate children and perpetuate the race [27]. Monogamy seems to be the general rule. Polygamy was limited to the aristocratic families only [28]. Though rare polyandry too seems to have existed in Rigvedic times. The twin Asvins (Gods of Medicine in India) had a common wife in Surya; Rodasi is mentioned as a lady attended by numerous husbands in the form of the Maruts (storm gods) [29]. Seclusion of women was absolutely unknown [30]. In social and religious gatherings they occupied a prominent position. No religious and social work was considered to be completed without the active support of one's wife. A.S. Altekar observes that her presence and co-operation was absolutely necessary in religious rites and ceremonies. To quote him, "The wife used to pound the sacrificial rice, give bath to the animal that was to be immolated... Women's participation in Vedic sacrifices was thus a real and not a formal one, they enjoyed the same religious privileges as their husbands [31].

If a wife had the misfortune to be widowed, she had to ascend her husband's funeral Pyre. The Sati custom was not in vogue at all [32]. The remarriage of a widow to the younger brother of her husband was a very common practice [33]. This is evident from a Rigveda hymn read along with one in Atharvaveda, according to which immediately after the death of a husband, the wife, lying by his side on the funeral ground, was raised by his brother and led back home to become his wife [34]. Even when she was not actually married to the brother, the latter was expected to raise issues to her in Niyoga [35].

Niyoga is the custom of the young widow allying herself with the younger brother of her husband for the sake of progeny (son). In the absence of brother-in-law, she can get offspring's by cohabiting with a Sapinda or a Sagotra relation. The practice of Niyoga known as Levirate was prevalent even among ancient Greeks and Romans.

Mother was an object of great honour at that time. In the Vedic hymns mother is called Matri [36]. Whenever she is spoken of along with father her name begins the compound i.e. matara-pitara [37].

Illegitimacy is as old as the Rigveda which is indicated in some hymns. Considerable stigma was attached to illegitimate children and one comes across references in the Rigveda of the exposure of infants [38]. A famous hymn in the Rigveda seems to indicate that marriage between a brother and a sister was not regarded with favour, though not altogether unknown [39]. There are clear references in Vedic literature to a state of promiscuity in ancient Indian society. Even the Vedic gods such as Pusan and Prajapat are known to have had incestuous relationships with either sisters, mothers or daughters [40]. The main disabilities from which woman suffered in this age was proprietary one. She could hold or inherit no property [41].

There are some denunciated hymns in Vedic literature which held women not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred [42].

"With women there can be no lasting friendship; hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women [43].

or

"Women have a fickle mind, women can be easily won over by one who is handsome and can sing and dance well." [44]

Thus it can be said that the position of women seems to have deteriorated considerably by the Rigvedic times when compared with earlier age [45].

Coming to the later-Vedic Period i n Indian Literature, one get a clear picture of Indo-Aryan social life and condition of woman from the Brahmanas, the Upanishads and the Grihya Sutras. The changes which took place during this period in the position of women were gradual. The desire for a male issue was as strong as before. At that period this belief was established that sons alone were competent to redeem their parents from hell and daughters were incapable of performing this spiritual function [46]. A passage in the Aitareya Brahmana says that while the son is the hope of the family, the daughter is a source of trouble to it [47]. Elaborate ceremonies began to develop during that period for ensuring the birth of sons [48]. Though sons were generally preferred, the desirability of having learned daughter was not entirely lost sight off, yet the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (vi, 4, 17) mentions a ritual by which a person prays for the birth of a daughter who should be a pandita or learned lady [49].

In the higher section of society the girls used to go through a course of education. There was, however, a gradual decline in female education as the period advanced [50]. Child marriage had not came into vogue by the Grihya Sutra Period. Further, some Sutras make provisions for the girl being in her menstrual period at the time of marriage. The marriageable age for the bride continued to be about 16 [51]. Marriage ceremony was made more elaborate by adding new rites and rituals i.e. introducing the fire as a witness in the marriage ceremony and other rituals the Pani-grahana and Saptapadi - seven steps or rounds together [52].

In the Grihya Sutras, first time, a definite classification of different forms of marriage was given. Asvalayana classified them into 8 and this classification has been followed by other Sutra writers as well as the authors of the epics and law codes. These 8 forms of marriage were (1) Brahma, (2) Daiva (3) Prajapatya, (4) Arsha, (5) Gandharva, (6) Asura, (7) Paisacha and (8) Rakshasa [53].

In the *Brahma form* the father carefully selected the son-in-law and married his daughter to him according to proper religious rites. In *Daiva* form a daughter was offered in marriage to an officiating priest by the sacrificer. In *Prajapatya form* the bride was given away by a guardian instead of father. *In Arsha* form the father of the bride was permitted to accept a pair of cattle, a cow and a bull from his son -in-law for facilitating the performace of sacrifices. Gandharva was a love marriage. Asura was bride purchase. Paisacha was drugging and raping of bride. Rakshasa was marriage by capture [54].

The birth of a son became necessity at that time. For this, it became obligatory for a man to marry again and raise sons to himself if first wife failed to give birth to a son. Thus the practice of polygamy seems to have planted itself more firmly.

Sati custom was altogether rare and widow had the option of remarriage. Grihya sutras, which describe in great detail important ceremonies of domestic life including the cremation ceremony, are silent about it [55].

Their proprietary rights continued to be unrecognized, the only exception being in favour of marriage gifts of moveable property (Istridhan) [56]. In the Satapatha Brahmana it is mentioned that a disobedient wife is enjoined to be taught obedience by physical force. The Maitrayani Samhita places woman on par with dice and drink, and describe her as one of the major evils in society [57].

Thereafter the decline in the status of women started when the grip of priest class (Brahmans) became more and stronger on society with the writings of many Smritis and Purans [58]. Many of the religious ceremonies earlier performed by woman then were shifted to the priests (Brahmans) [59]. The sentiments of 'Suchi' and 'Asuchi' came into existence. A woman was began to be considered generally 'Asuchi' (impure) and particularly so during their menstrual periods, pregnancy and child birth. She was not eligible to perform religious acts like Homas during this period [60].

Among the Smritis, Manu Smriti is the most important. Manu is emphatically in favour of marrying girls at a tender age. He states that a man aged thirty years shall marry a maiden of twelve or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age [61]. Yajnavalkya was of the opinion that the parents of a girl who did not give her away in marriage before puberty "will be visited by the sin of the destruction of the foetus at every time of her menses [62]."

By this time marriage was also made compulsory for a woman without which she could not hope to go to heaven. For a girl, it became equivalent to the Upanayanam for boys, and the age of 8 was considered ideal for both, marriage (for the girl) and Upanayanam (for the boys). Because of early marriage in that period the girl students almost seemed to have disappeared [63]. One does not come across such a word as Brahmavadinis anywhere in the codes of Manu and Yajnavalkya. The woman was considered incompetent to study Vedic lore. This incompetency of woman reduced her to an inferior status of Shudra, who was also debarred from performing any sacrificial act. This is the reason why in numerous metrical texts of the Smritis and Epics Stri and Shudra are generally classed together in one category [64].

After marriage, the husband's family often looked on her as a dangerous figure, a temptress, until she bore her first child, preferably a son, after which she was safe [65].

The practice of polygamy was treated as a privilege reserved for the twice born classes in the time of Manu. And in this regard Brahman was considered as the most fortunate who could keep as many as four wives. Likewise a Kshatriya could marry three wives. Similarly a Vaishya was entitled to two wives. A Shudra was allowed one wife only [66].

The subjugation of woman started in the Smriti period. Manu and Yajanavalkya prescribed a subordinate social role to woman. Manu stated, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband; when her lord is dead to her son; a woman must never be independent [67]."

The same idea has been developed by Yajanavalkya. He advised men, never to entrust three things to the control of others i.e., riches, books and women, for he added, they are spoiled and defiled by them [68].

Manu is of the view that the main duty of wife is to serve her husband because with the service of the husband she can get salvation. He says, "There is no sacrifice, pious practice, or fast which concerns women in particular; she must cherish and respect her husband and then will she be honoured in heaven [69].

Manu and Yajnavalkya discouraged the act of self-immolation (Sati) by equating it with suicide. The legislator commands the wife whom death had deprived of her support not to contract new ties. Manu's objection to widow remarriage was that a gift could be given away only once [70]. He submitted widow to an ascetic life, whereby through prayer and penitence she might rejoin her husband whom she had lost [71]. He approved divorce under certain condition, "A barren wife may be superseded in the 8th year,

she whose children all dies in the 4th year, she who bears only daughter in the 11th year, but she who is quarrel- some without delay [72].

He raised the status of mother above the father. He said, "A mother is more to be revered than a thousand fathers [73]. Thus it may be said that Manu has assigned to woman a dependent though not a dishonourable status in society [74].

The position of woman was improved in the sphere of proprietary rights in this period as Manu advocated that the widow should be recognized as an heir to her husband's property [75].

References

1. Havell EB. The history of the Aryan rule in India. New Delhi: K.M.N. Publishers; 1972. p. 11-13.
2. Singh J. Gender discrimination and Sikh ethos. Abstracts of Sikh Studies. 2000 Apr-Jun;II:28.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. Thomas P. Indian women through the ages. Bombay: Asia Publishing House; [date unknown]. p. 6.
5. Ibid., p. 7.
6. Singh J. Gender discrimination and Sikh ethos. p. 29.
7. Sharma RP. Woman in Hindu literature. Delhi: Gyan Publishing House; 1995. p. 60.
8. Thomas P. Indian women through the ages. p. 50.
9. Sharma RP. Woman in Hindu literature. p. 14-15.
10. Thomas P. Indian women through the ages. p. 40.
11. Young KK. Hinduism. In: Sharma A, editor. Women in world religions. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications; 1995. p. 61.
12. Bader C. Women in ancient India. Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office; 1964. p. 23.
13. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. New Delhi: S Chand and Co.; 1933. p. 4.
14. Mudgal SVS. Women and society in ancient India. Faridabad: Om Publications; 1999. p. 35.
15. Ibid.
16. Bader C. Women in ancient India. p. 24.
17. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. p. 5.
18. Ibid.
19. Indra MA. The status of women in ancient India. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass; 1955. p. 134.
20. Janapathy V. Indian woman through the ages. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House; 2002. p. 50.
21. Ibid.
22. Mudgal SVS. Women and society in ancient India. p. 159.
23. Indra MA. The status of women in ancient India. p. 134.
24. Thomas P. Indian women through the ages. p. 51-52.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 50.
27. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. p. 93.
28. Indra MA. The status of women in ancient India. p. 56-57.
29. Thomas P. Indian women through the ages. p. 52.
30. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. p. 48.
31. Altekar AS. The position of women in Hindu civilization from pre-historic times to the present day. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1959. p. 197-198.
32. Ibid., p. 339.
33. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. p. 49.
34. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
35. Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 112.
36. Bader C. Women in Ancient India. p. 52.
37. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. pp. 150-151.
38. Ibid., p. 198.
39. Mudgal SVS. Women and Society in Ancient India. p. 40.
40. Thapar R. Looking Back in History. In: Jain D, ed. Indian Women. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; 1975. p. 7.
41. Altekar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. p. 339.
42. Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 9.
43. Upadhyaya BS. Women in Rgveda. p. 159.
44. Altekar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. p. 339.
45. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. p. 54.
46. Ibid.
47. Mudgal SVS. Women and Society in Ancient India. p. 48.
48. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. p. 57.
49. Mudgal SVS. Women and Society in Ancient India. p. 5.
50. Altekar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. p. 340.
51. Ibid., p. 341.
52. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. pp. 66-8.
53. Ibid., p. 62.
54. Altakar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. pp. 37-47.
55. Mudgal SVS. Women and Society in Ancient India. p. 175.
56. Altekar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. p. 340.
57. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. p. 58.
58. Singh M. The Status of Woman in Hindu and Sikh Societies. Stud Sikh Comp Relig. 1990 Apr;9:134.
59. Janapathy V. Indian Woman through the Ages. p. 55.
60. Ibid.
61. Manu Smriti, IX. Cited in: Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 94.
62. Thomas P. Indian Women through the Ages. pp. 224-225.
63. Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 142.
64. Thapar R. Looking Back in History. p. 9.
65. Young KK. Hinduism. p. 81.
66. Manu Smriti III-12. Cited in: Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 6.
67. Manu Samriti. Cited in: Majumdar RC. Ancient India. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1960. p. 474.
68. Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 205.
69. Bader C. Women in Ancient India. p. 17.
70. Indra MA. The Status of Women in Ancient India. p. 97.
71. Bader C. Women in Ancient India. p. 65.
72. Ibid., p. 60.
73. Ibid., p. 63.
74. Sagoo HK. Position of Women in Indian Society as Reflected in Guru Nanak's Hymns. Stud Sikh Comp Relig. 1997;17:25.
75. Altekar AS. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. p. 353.