

Exclusion Of Women In Ancient Indian Socio-Cultural Tradition

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Abstract

Male and female-the homosapiens are the most wonderful components of the living species on this planet. They underwent a continuous process of evolution in their physic and psyche over thousands of years. Through this evolutionary process, they began to acquire some distinctive traits-unique to their respective sexes. Again, these distinctive traits were compartmentalized into male or female domain down the ages. The psycho-emotional attributes also differed in relation to their sexes. Thus, such differentiation came to be regarded as male or female characteristics and their respective duties in the family, society and state clearly demarcated. Barring few exception and aberration each of the domain-male and female became mutually exclusive. Because of the soft, emotional, sentimental and caring attributes, the female in the family began to perform most household and indoor activities rather than outdoor ones. The males, to the characteristics and strength in the term of their physic led them to perform outdoor activities. This led females to tend their offspring, cook food and feed the family members, observe rituals for wellbeing of their kith and kin etc. Thus, the nature of their duties brought visible income to the female counterpart. This situation put the males as the master and controller of wealth and power and female as subservient and dependant beings, thereby undermining their importance and exposure in different affairs. In the 21st century, however, Indian womanhood is at the crossroads of multifarious changes. The female psyche has been subject to huge changes, thereby painting womanhood in a new self image making panorama. But such changes can be understood by cross-examination and analysis of historical data in which the Indian womanhood passed through ages. This present paper aims at finding the Indian womanhood passing through the vicissitudes and vagaries of domination and discrimination down the ages by typical Indian patriarchal and male chauvinistic attitude.

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Key Words: *Discrimination, Smriti Literature, Chaturashrama, Purushartha, Samskaras*

Introduction

Women in Indian socio-cultural tradition are highly respected and they have been given importance of highest order by all Indians considering the references from mythological and other literary tradition. India, i.e. Bharat is therefore regarded as the motherland by all Indians. The contribution, dedication and sacrifices of the mother for her child and other family members are highly recognized. That is the reason why they placed mother and the mother land at the top most pedestal and proudly declared “*JANANI JANMABHUMISCHA SWARGADAPI GARIYASI*” or Mother and Mother land are superlative to heaven. Since time immemorial Indians used to worship women as mother in form of goddess Kali, Durga, Saraswati etc.. Still, women in since ancient times are deprived of many rights and liberties of socio-cultural importance. They have been consciously made subservient to males in respect of social, economic, religious, political and cultural engagements. Surprisingly, Indian women fitted into the patriarchal domination and discrimination as a matter of divine providence and almost acknowledged the dominance as their sacred duty. Deviating from such social norms was considered as taboo even by women themselves. The present paper is a humble attempt to delve into different perspectives of such exclusion in ancient socio-cultural tradition and the origin of the facets of seclusion from biological differences for resource utilization since hunting and gathering societies.

Objectives of the Study

It is an accepted fact that, women even in 21st century are subject to patriarchal domination and discrimination. Not only in India but also in other countries around the world they are still fighting for socio-economic, political and cultural equality with their male counterparts. Exclusion of women in socio-cultural tradition is still prominently persistent in India. The objective of this paper therefore is-

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- To trace the origin and perpetuation of seclusion through introduction of different socio-cultural traditions.
- To find out the areas of exclusion of women in different socio-cultural traditions.

Methodology and Data Collection

The current effort has employed the descriptive and library documentation methodologies from an analytical and historical standpoint. Archival materials are taken into consideration for the current study, which includes books, articles, journals, newspapers, letters, e-books, and internet archives. Both primary and secondary sources have been considered for the present study. Primary sources such as archaeological data in terms of rock art from different sites in India particularly from Lekhamunda groups of Rock Paintings in Hemgiri block of Sundargarh , Vikramkhola and Ulapgarh in Jharsuguda districts of Odisha, Rock paintings of Bhimbhetka group of caves have been studied to get an idea of resource utilization pattern of males and females. Besides these, secondary sources like books, journals, articles, Vedic literature, Smriti literature etc have been consulted for an analytical and historical perspective of the present study. This is a descriptive and analytical study to extract information regarding the facets of exclusion of women in ancient India.

Literature Survey and Research Gap

Studies on women history sincerely started in the seventies around the world with the seminal works of Gerda Lerner, the Godmother of women history. To gain theoretical ideas and general trend of exclusion of women, several works like “The Theory of Patriarchy” by Millet; “The Cult of True Womanhood” by Welter; “Just a Housewife” by Mathews, “Anthology of Black Women in White America” by Gerda Lerner etc was consulted. Back in Indian context several works on women movement for securing rights and liberties like “ Gender Politics in India by “Nivedita Menon,” “Girl Child in Indian Society” by Mita Bhadra; “ Kanya: Exploitation of Little Angels” by V.Mohini Giri; “Where Daughter are unwanted” by Kishwar Madhu; “ Victimisation of Girl Child in the Home” by Sreenath Lalitha etc were consulted.

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These works deal with an array of problems concerning women, stretching from domestic violence on women at home, workplace etc to prostitution, child prostitution, child marriage, dowry deaths, and rights of girl child. Therefore an attempt has been made to study the exclusion of women in Ancient India from historical perspective.

Discussion

Socio-cultural tradition is an evolutionary process and is shaped by multitude factors. The ancient Indian socio-cultural tradition goes back to the pre-historic age and Harappa culture. But, in the absence of any literary or epigraphic records, we are not clear about the exact socio-cultural practices and the position of women in pre and proto-historic period. During the Vedic and post Vedic age, we come across several literary records in form of Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads, epics, Smriti literature and early grammatical work etc. which make clear references to socio-cultural tradition of ancient India. Many social and cultural practices developed by the people during this period as per their social, cultural and religious needs. With the Persian invasion the socio-cultural practices underwent drastic changes particularly in relation to the status and position of women in the social structure. The Persian soldiers had no respect for the modesty and chastity of the Indian women and the Indians therefore, prescribed strict law for women in order to protect their modesty and chastity. A number of restrictions were imposed on women, their by greatly reducing the status and position of Indian women. Again the *epic* and *Smriti* writers prescribed canonical law for women to practice highest standard of ideals, morals etc. in order to protect their chastity and modesty, which further deteriorated the position of status and position of Indian womanhood. Hence, a detail study and analysis of these practices is essential to get a clear picture of the ancient Indian socio-cultural tradition and the position of women in it.

The highest standard of learning, culture and all-round progress attained by Indian women during the Rig Vedic age has been a recognized fact. *Gargi, Apala, Ghosa, Lopamudra* was the bright example of Indian women excelling in education and other socio-cultural

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activities. Women received education either as *Brahmabadinis* or *Sadyavahas*. The former were lifelong students of theology and philosophy, while the later pursued their study till their marriage. But during Later Vedic age and onwards, there was a marked deterioration of position of women in India. Women were bracketed with the *Sudras* and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter vedic mantras and to perform vedic rites. The *epic* and *smriti* writers prescribe strict canonical laws setting highest moral standards for women. Gradually, they were considered a weak creature unable to protect themselves and made subservient and dependant to their male counterparts being protected by father during childhood, husband during youth and son during old age. She was considered not fit for freedom as a separate individual entity in the society.
¹(Basham, 1959)

The women in general were completely excluded from some of the socio-cultural practices in ancient India. The practices like *Chaturashrama*, *Purushartha*, *Gurukul system*, *some Samskaras* excluded the women participation. Although, these practices were commonly in vogue, the involvements of women in such activities were neglected. Subject to prominence of male social structure women were relegated to the background and were restricted to performance of subservient social obligations, as if the above practices were essential for male not for female folk.

The Chaturashrama system developed during the later vedic period was one significant feature of social structure, where women found complete exclusion. *Chaturashrama* in ancient Indian social system implied four stages in the journey of life. The first *Ashrama*, *Brahmacharya* was mostly devoted to education and acquisition of knowledge. During this period the students stayed with the *gurus* (teacher) in *Gurukuls* where the teacher looked after the physical, mental and psychological development of the pupil. The *Grihastha Ashrama* or the second stage is meant the individual to set up a family, lead the life of a household and beget offspring's. Manu has observed, "the duties of this order (*Grihastha*), which cannot be practice by men with weak organs of sense, must be carefully observed by him who desires imperishable bliss in heaven and constant happiness in life".

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In the third stage, i.e. *Vanaprastha*, the individual used to retire to forest residence and utilized time in the study of *Upanishadas*, *Smriti* and other branches of knowledge. It was believed that a person who died while pursuing *Vanaprastha* attained *Moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In the fourth stage i.e. *Sanyasa*, the individual used to renounce the world, live like an ascetic in the forest and spent time in meditation for ultimate salvation.² (Bhadra, 1999)

In almost all scriptures and literature dealing with the system of *Chaturashrama*, the women were not given any importance. The practice was confined only to the males in the society as if women did not require or deserving of attainment of *Moksha* or liberation. Women were excluded from performing the *Ashrama* system. Education in the *Gurukul* also was the prerogative of the male child. Even, the reference of *Brahmavadinis* or female seers who attained high standard of learning were not educated from the *Gurukuls*. They used to learn by their personal effort. Female child used to learn mostly domestic work, knowledge on rituals and behavior from the elders. So, it may be noted that, women were excluded from the performance of *Ashrama* system and also receiving education from *Gurukul* tradition.

Another outstanding feature of social life in ancient India was the large number of *Sanskaras* or personal ceremonies in the life of the individual where we find social exclusion of women. Some of the *Sanskaras* were performed before the birth of a child like *Garbhadhana* or to promote conception, *Pumsavana* or to procreate male child and *Simantonayana* or to ensure the safety of the child in the womb. At the time of the birth of the child *Jatakarma* ceremony was performed. This was followed by *Namakarana* (naming of the child) and *Niskramana* (showing the sun for the first time) etc. Other *Sanskaras* like *Annaprasanna* (in the sixth month), *Chudakarana* (in the third year), *Vratopanayana* (in 5th or 7th year) and *Samavartana* (at the completion of education) etc. were performed³(Choudhury,2011). These ceremonies were meant only for the male child. It is doubtful, if they were performed in the case of girls even in the higher class. Although some practices like *Namakarana*, *Annaprasanna* were performed for the girls, they were completely excluded from the performance of other *Sanskaras*. In ancient period

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the possession of a son was considered essential for the funeral rites and also for the continuance of family lineage. The women were not allowed to perform funeral rites where as even an adopted son was entitled to perform the same. Patriarchal dominance deprived the female of this rite in ancient Indian social tradition.

Purusartha, another concept which was practiced in ancient Indian social tradition bore the tag of male dominance. The concept meant attainment of four things i.e. *Dharma* (religious merit), *Artha* (economic prosperity), *Kama* (sexual pleasure) and *Moksha* (salvation). The entire individual in the society strived for attainment of these characteristics. But like other practices, women were excluded and not given importance to strive for the attainment of *Purushartha*. The name in itself denotes masculinity i.e. *Purusa* and *Artha* not *Narisartha*. It may be presumed that it again reflect the male domination over the social practices.

Stridhana, is yet another practice in ancient social structure which is again biased in favour of males. Women had some economic rights in the form of *Stridhana*, which constituted the offerings which was made to her during her marriage. *Stridhana*, included jewellerys, cows, clothes and sometimes landed property and other valuable items donated by her father, brother and other relatives. Although, *Stridhana* was meant for utilization by the women, practically their husbands utilized *Stridhana* in times of need or natural calamities or anybody suffering from diseases. Besides that, the inheritance to property of her father was also not allowed to women. In exceptional cases only when a women had no brother, she could inherit paternal property. One of the most notable thing of the social system in ancient period was that, the women were regarded as property. In some cases women were being mortgaged in order to repay the debt or to get rid of financial burden incurred by father or husband. Even during the marriage of his daughter, father used to donate her (*Kanyadana*) in the hands of his son-in-law. So daughter was regarded as a sort of property (*kanyaratna/ kanyadhana*) under father's custody, so that he could make her as offering to some other individuals. By such offerings, the father used to earn virtue (*kanyadana mahapunya* or donating daughter to earn great virtue was practised). In the *Daiva* marriage system also, father used to donate his daughter as a price (*Dakshina*) for the

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sacrifices made by the priest. In such cases, women used to accept the decision of their father or husband with pride and devotion to uphold the prestige of their families.⁴ (Giri, 1999)

Women were excluded from various liberties and freedom which the males enjoyed in the society. Women used to perform ‘*Sati*’, sometimes forcibly, after the death of their husband. Women had to accompany their husbands by entering in to the funeral pyre and used to prove them *Sati* or chaste. During the marriage both husband and wife vowed to live together for seven births. But husbands never used to upkeep their vows and did not remain widower till their death. But women were required to remain as widows with numerous restrictions till their death. A widow was regarded as inauspicious and not allowed to perform any sacred activities. Remarriage of widow was generally not favoured where as there were no any restriction for males for the same. Even, polygamy was practiced by a large section of the people, particularly in the higher echelon of the society including kings, nobles and rich class. At the same time though polyandry was known, it was rarely practiced.

Another **deterioration of women position in ancient India** was marked by the prevalence of *Purdha* system of seclusion of women’s face under the veil to protect their chastity. Whenever, they came out of their house in public or before the elders, women used to cover their face under the veil. This system greatly undermined the freedom of movement, self esteem and dignity of women as an individual. Eight forms of marriages like *Brahma*, *Prajapatya*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, *Rakshasa*, *Paisacha*, *Asura* and *Gandharva* were in practice in ancient period. Generally the marriages were fixed by the parents and the girls were deprived of taking decision as regard to their marriages. It was only in *Gandharva* form of marriage that the girls decided their marriage but this system was not encouraged. Even, the *Swayambara* system practiced in ancient India was to show the power and prosperity of the ruler. Moreover in maximum cases, the conditions outlined for *Swayambara* were decided by fathers not by daughters.⁵(Jha, 2010)

The status and position of women found further deterioration with the practice of concubines and *devadasi* system in ancient Indian social structure. The kings, nobles and rich

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men could keep concubines which eroded the self-esteem of the women. In the profession of priesthood also we notice marked exclusion of women in ancient India. The daughter of the priest was not entitled to priesthood, even if she was found to be eligible.

Findings

As evident from the pre-historic Rock Art, resource utilization favored the males in hunting- gathering society. The hunting scenes in rock shelters reveal the involvement of only males may be because of biological characteristics. The hunt was the only source of income and the females were at the receiving end. The categorization of hunting as an outdoor work for male and the housekeeping, child rearing as the indoor work of the female brought about disparity among males and females. In course of time females were considered to be the proud possession of males. Further, the Smriti writers prescribed several norms for the females and they were supposed to be the caretaker of the family. For the wellbeing of the family they are to undertake several rituals which were otherwise not prescribed for the males. The women in ancient India were considered as one of the Ratna (gem). So they had to be secluded and confined to the four walls of the house.

Conclusion:

The above analysis showed that although the contribution of women admired and upheld in high esteem, equality was not conceived in totality. For the law-givers and so called guardians of social and moral laws, equality meant a consideration on the basis of pity and not based on justice. Womanhood in ancient Indian society existed in half humanity and the other half was marred by subjugation, subservience, prejudice and willful discrimination.



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