

## **INFLUENCE AND IMPACT: WOMEN'S CHANGING ROLES IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper explores the changing roles of women in ancient and medieval India, focusing on their social, economic, political, and cultural changes from the Vedic period to the Medieval era. It highlights the resilience and agency of women in navigating challenges and limitations. The study uses ancient texts, inscriptions, and historical accounts to reveal the intricate relationship between women's evolving roles and broader societal transformations in Indian history. Women's changing roles not only mirrored these shifts but also significantly influenced the trajectory of Indian civilization. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical backdrop to fully understand the challenges and achievements of women who have made a lasting impact on the cultural landscape of India. The aim is to enhance existing knowledge on women's history in ancient and medieval India, shedding light on their evolving roles and lasting impact on society.

**Keywords:** *Ancient India, Medieval India, Social Change, Historical Transformations, Resilience, Cultural Impact*

### **Introduction**

From the Vedic to the Classical ages, women's roles in ancient India evolved significantly. Women played crucial roles in religious and household sectors during the Vedic era, where they were given prominent roles in sacrifice rites as spouses and daughters. However, their social standing was tied closely to patriarchal values, and they in political or economic matters. During the classical period, from around the 4th century BCE to the 6th century CE, women began to make their presence felt in male-dominated fields. Women writers and thinkers like Gargi and Maitreyi began to appear, contributing to Sanskrit poetry and play. Queen Nayanika of the Sat vahana dynasty was an example of an extraordinary woman who wielded political authority and controlled areas. Women's involvement in the economy, particularly in commerce and entrepreneurship, gained more attention through inscriptions and archives. Despite these advances, women in ancient India still faced obstacles and restrictions. In many contexts, such as inheritance, marriage, and property ownership, patriarchal norms and practices hampered women's ability to make decisions independently. The varna (caste) system also played an important role in establishing women's place in society. The historical background of women in ancient India reveals that their positions were varied, impacted by both religious and cultural traditions. This historical setting informs our understanding of women's shifting positions throughout successive centuries in India. The examination of the position of women throughout three distinct epochs in ancient history, namely the Matriarchy era, the Vedic period, and the post-Vedic period, is a viable endeavor.

### **The matriarchy periods**

In ancient times, women were perceived as having a similar role to men, with a lack of awareness about the role of males in disaster production. However, women played a significant role in the development of agriculture, leading to societal stability and a resolution of water issues. This led to the emergence of the matriarchal system within civilization. In a matriarchal society, gender equality was observed, with women playing prominent roles in martial arts, Ayurveda, and statistical philosophy. The Anarya culture had feminist characteristics, while the Aryan civilization had a patriarchal social structure. Women, such as Shurpanakha and Tratika, were the primary decision-makers and leaders in the Anarya society, receiving respectful treatment in both societal and familial contexts. In the primitive Gana society, women actively engaged in tasks such as constructing Yajna and laying bricks and had

the authority to allocate responsibilities associated with their position. Women's contribution to human society was evident in the development of geometry. However, advancements in agricultural technology led to the displacement of traditional farming practices, as plows and animals became prevalent. The role of men in birthing became evident, and the concept of the feminine mahatma ceased to exist, leading to the displacement of motherhood by a patriarchal culture within society.

### **The Vedic periods.**

The North Vedic era, from 1500 BC to 500 AD, was a period of significant societal transformation for women. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata emerged during this time, and the concept of "Manuvachan" emphasized women's rights and equality. The Aryan and Anaryas' lifestyles stabilized, leading to a decline in women's involvement in economic and political spheres. Female education decreased, and female involvement in public affairs had limitations. Non-Aryan men entered the service of the Aryans, leading to unions between males of Aryan descent and women of non-Aryan descent. Aryan theologians opposed non-Aryan women's involvement in religious practices, and child marriage was allowed due to the rigid caste system. Religious texts like the Manusmriti reinforced women's subordination, and the average age at which women entered marriage declined. The Puranic era also saw unfavorable conditions for women, attributed to factors such as Brahmin culture, caste inflexibility, joint family structures, limited access to education, inclusion of non-Aryan women as wives in Aryan families, and foreign invasions.

### **The Post Vedic period**

The North Vedic era, from 1500 BC to 500 AD, was a period of significant societal transformation for women. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata emerged during this time, and the concept of "Manuvachan" emphasized women's rights and equality. The Aryan and Anaryas' lifestyles stabilized, leading to a decline in women's involvement in economic and political spheres. Female education decreased, and female involvement in public affairs had limitations. Non-Aryan men entered the service of the Aryans, leading to unions between males of Aryan descent and women of non-Aryan descent. Aryan theologians opposed non-Aryan women's involvement in religious practices, and child marriage was allowed due to the rigid caste system. Religious texts like the Manusmriti reinforced women's subordination, and the average age at which women entered marriage declined. The Puranic era also saw unfavorable conditions for women, attributed to factors such as Brahmin culture, caste inflexibility, joint family structures, limited access to education, inclusion of non-Aryan women as wives in Aryan families, and foreign invasions.

### **Medieval period:**

The medieval period, spanning from 1200 to 1818 AD, was marked by significant disparities, injustices, illiteracy, and a religious foundation. Epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata emphasized caste determination based on paternal lineage. The caste system led to adversity for women, who had a duty to uphold caste purity. Women's educational rights were revoked, leading to intellectual servitude. The practice of vrat-vaikalya, linking female virginity with religious beliefs, emerged to prevent inter-caste marriages. Child marriage emerged to prevent interethnic marriages, while the prohibition on widow remarriage aimed to prevent interethnic marriages. The practice of sati also emerged, limiting women's societal expectations. The emergence of Islamic governance in India during this time impacted the evolution of religious practices, exacerbated by cultural disparities between Hinduism and Islam. Hindu women were restricted to domestic spaces, while Muslim women faced a life confined by the burkha, leading to significant impoverished living standards.

- This research is to analyze the evolving roles of women in ancient and medieval India, encompassing their social, economic, political, and cultural transformations from the Vedic period to the Medieval era.
- Also, emphasize and explore the resilience and agency demonstrated by women in effectively navigating societal challenges and limitations throughout these historical periods.

## Literature Review

The portrayal of women in Indian history is a complex and diverse narrative that encompasses several epochs and mirrors substantial social changes. According to Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), women in the Vedic era had significant positions in both religious and household domains. In spite of the patriarchal attributes that were intrinsic to ancient and medieval Indian society, women demonstrated a proactive stance rather than acquiescing to their circumstances. In contrast, the individuals demonstrated a proactive approach in engaging with their surroundings, exhibiting resilience and self-determination in successfully navigating many challenges and limitations (Halim et al., 2015). In order to have a thorough comprehension of the dynamic social roles of women in ancient and medieval India, it is essential to undertake an examination of the historical backdrop in which these transformations occurred. The Vedic period, characterized by the composition of the Rigveda and the emergence of early Hinduism, laid the groundwork for the core concepts that shaped the socioeconomic and cultural norms pertaining to women's roles and experiences (Thakur et al., 2014). The examination of ancient texts, such as the Vedas, Dharmashastras, and notable epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, offers valuable insights into the social norms and expectations that were placed upon women within the context of ancient Indian culture (Ballakrishnen, 2019). The analysis of inscriptions and historical documents may provide valuable insights into the lives of women and their methods of negotiating societal constraints. The investigation of women's experiences allows for a comprehensive understanding of their resolute resolve, proactive engagement, and adaptability in response to the ever-changing and fluid circumstances they faced (Dutoya & Sintomer, 2019). The historical narrative of women's experiences in India is a multifaceted tapestry that interweaves diverse encounters, accomplishments, and obstacles. The novel serves as a portrayal of the tenacity and self-determination shown by women in response to social limitations. An in-depth examination of the changing positions of women in Indian society, with a specific emphasis on their social, economic, political, and cultural transformations spanning from the Vedic period to the Medieval era, might provide valuable insights into the influence exerted by women on the course of Indian civilization (Pathak & Varshney, 2017).

## Research method

This study explores the evolving roles of women from ancient to medieval India using a qualitative and descriptive research approach. The research begins with the collection of historical material, including writings, inscriptions, and narratives. The qualitative analysis is used to understand the social, economic, political, and cultural changes of women throughout various historical epochs. The descriptive methodology is used to provide a comprehensive portrayal of women's experiences, focusing on significant occurrences, cultural standards, and the consequences of these social positions. Historical contextualization is used to understand the influenced variables. Comparative analysis is used to identify similarities and differences in women's roles across different historical eras and places. Case studies are used to illustrate women's responsibilities. The study integrates perspectives from other academic disciplines, including history, anthropology, and sociology, to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's evolving roles. The study concludes by highlighting the significant impact of women's evolving roles on Indian culture.

## Conclusion

This study explores the evolving societal roles of women in ancient and medieval India, examining social, economic, political, and cultural changes from the Vedic period to the Medieval era. It highlights the resilience and agency of women in managing various problems and social constraints. The study reveals the complex interplay between women's changing positions and larger social shifts throughout Indian history. Women have significantly influenced Indian culture, shaping the cultural, social, and political environment of their respective eras. The research emphasizes the need for understanding the historical context to gain a deeper understanding of the obstacles and accomplishments of women who have had a lasting impact on the cultural fabric of India. The research acknowledges the invaluable contributions made by women, highlighting their fortitude, perseverance, and determination in navigating a multifaceted historical landscape.

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