

**WOMEN, SOCIETY AND GENDER IN INDIA  
HISTORICAL, FUNCTIONAL AND FUTURISTIC PERSPECTIVES**

**I Historical Perspectives**

**1.1 Historical Perspectives**

Women in India, like in many other societies, have passed through a turbulent range of social transformation and upheavals, historical phases and political struggles. The present status of women, both in its good and bad shapes, is the result of many years of struggle against great challenges. Women have crossed over fire and water in equal proportions to do so. They have endured a lot and taken 'service as their motto' and 'sacrifice' as their goal.

Historians have classified woman's life in the traditional Indian society into the following stages:

- a) Vedic Age
- b) Epic Stage
- c) Upanishads' Age
- d) Age of the Sutras and
- e) Age of the Rajputs (Bhagavat Charana Upadhyaya 1986)

**1.1.1 Vedic Age**

India has an ancient history of more than 4000 years. The views on status of women are reflected in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Manudharma Sastra, the Arthashastra of Kautilya, by Ramayana and Mahabharata, Purana and other writings of the Indian culture and thinking.

It is believed that women enjoyed a very high and equal status in the early Vedic, Vedic or in ancient India. There are contrasting views. Nevertheless, it on this; nevertheless, what is upheld by many thinkers is that women in those days did not suffer from much indignity and oppression. Ancient Indian Grammarians such as Patanjali<sup>1</sup> and Katyayana have illustrated this. According to a legend, Patanjali<sup>2</sup>, is the incarnation of Adi Sesha, the first expansion of

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<sup>1</sup> According to a legend, Patanjali<sup>1</sup>, is the incarnation of Adi Sesha, the first expansion of Sri Vishnu, called as Sankarshana, the first part of the Chaturvyuha (the four-fold manifestation of Vishnu).

<sup>2</sup> Maharshi Patanjali defended the Yoga. He is the son of Anasuya, wife of Sage Atri, who went through a test of her chastity and the Trimurthis who came to do this test, were converted as her children before feeding them. As a boon, she got sons who were the three Murtis, born to her – Patanjali being the first, besides Dattatreya and Durvasa.

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It is also stated that much before the commencement of the civilization, matriarchy was very much in vogue across many parts of India.

During the time of the Rg-Veda, woman was a symbol of strength (Shaksthi) and generosity. She had a share in property as a daughter and the freedom to choose her husband. The bride used to be blessed to be the 'Empress to one's father-in-law and mother-in-law; to the sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law; speak to all in the family with power and authority, be kind to both the two feet and four feet animals'. Thus, the status of a wife was very high during the Rg Vedic times.

During the pre-vedic age, it is believed that Dravidian culture<sup>3</sup> was more popular in practice. The scholars who have studied the religious aspects of Sindhu culture have felt that it had some of the earliest fossils relating to the status of women. Idols of pregnant women, women wearing head gear etc., imply that women were treated with a lot of honour during this time. The reproductive function of women was held in high esteem. They came to be worshipped as denoting the entire universe.

It is also stated that women in the Rg Vedic period were very close to men in terms of holding power and authority. The entire management of the household was in their hands. Woman was the head of the household. All servants, finances, livestock were in her hands only. She used to take care that the fire in the Yagna never gets extinguished; got educated like her brothers, learnt the use of arms, warfare etc (like her brothers); participated in Yaga-Yagnas (like her husband) and took part in warfare, ran behind enemies; whatever she used to do during childhood, like milking the cow, cleaning the food grains, knitting and embroidery, filling water – all these will be forgotten later when she gets into the duties of a wife. Now, she gets into familial and social roles; shuns the veil (purdah) and openly shows her face while participating in religious activities. She also takes part in warfare and demonstrates her courage and valour; undertakes many Yaga-Yagnas, like the male saints did.

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<sup>3</sup> It is also referred to as Sindhu culture.

Women were saints and poetesses too. They have authored many 'Mantras' (chanting) of the Rg-Veda. The Aryan women used to recite the Mantras with equal devotion and respect as they did while reciting the Mantras written by the male saints. There are examples of women sages, like Apala, Ghosha, Vishwavara, Lopamudra, Shachi-Poulami, and Vagumbhruni and so on. These names are reflected in the Rg Veda, along with the Mantras they recited. Vagumbhruni is noted for the blessings she gives to all the 10 directions – 'I will support by being Rudra's (Shiva's) arrow in his bow to kill those who hate Lord Brahma and will bring the Sun into the solar system to do good to all the people'.

Shachi-Poulami, another woman sage, says 'Just as the sun rises to the centre of the sky, even my luck is going high; the other wives of my husband are destroyed; my sons have become rulers of the 10 directions, my husband Indra has obtained his strength by virtue of the worship and prayers that I have undertaken'.

These illustrations show that women in ancient India were supposed to enjoy equal status with men in all walks of life. They received good education. There were no child marriages and women married at an adult age, freely selecting their husband. As noted already, there were several sages among women like Maitreyi, Lopamudra and Gargi.

Dharmasastras of Apastamba (450 – 350 BCE) speak about womanly behavior and state that women are enjoined to be of service to their husbands. There were also kingdoms that boasted of a *Nagarvadhu*, who was the most beautiful woman. She was respected as a goddess but was treated as a courtesan. It is argued that it was polygyny and the practice of having many wives that led to the downfall of women's status.

### ***Women as Sahadaminis***

In the opinion of the historians, the Rg-Vedic times were the early rising of the civilization. The religious practices and ideals were simple and beautiful at that time. In the Rgveda, there is mention about a number of Brahmavadinis. There are a number of illustrations of how women scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi who tackled sage Yagnavalkya with their knowledge on Vedas.

It came to be considered appropriate only if both women and men conduct religious ceremonies together, co-operatively. The question of giving women role in religious practices never came up. There was no secrecy about mantras and education was not included under any system. Women were self-dependent in writing hymns and practices. Ghosha, Apala, Vishwawara, Indrani etc., were writers of Mantras and hymns. Another woman offered Soma shrub to Lord Indra as divine offering and got blessed and honored by him. Apala prayed to

Indra and became a clean-skinned woman. Ghosha studied and spent much time in chanting Vedas and got married at a very late age.

After the Brahmanas upheld the importance of 5 Rinas, that the Purusha came to be inevitably intertwined with the stree, one who was unmarried came to lose the power to conduct Yagnas. The Shathapatha Brahmana was one who begot sons and paid back pitrurinas and attained salvation. This feeling became dominant and in Dharma Sadhana, the role of the wife was very important. As an unmarried man's worship is not going to please the devathas, it was considered proper to have a wife and then take on Gruhasthashrama Dharma. Thus, the institution of marriage came to have a religious character. Wife became an inseparable part of husband's Dharmasadhana and attainment of heaven. The wife was a sahadharmini.

In the beginning, the woman was managing yagnas independently. Being alone, unmarried, Vedhadhyayana, Yagna Sadhana were undertaken by her. She sang the Samas, washed the sacrificial animal, arranged the Yagna Peetha etc, but these were carried out without any distinction as male or female. However, as Yagna came to be a samsthe in the Brahmanas, it became more complex. Rules, regulations, modes of carrying out all became immense in number. The process of Yagna became distributed amongst many and as division of labour came about, even people were distributed as doing different types of work. Groups were formed to do such work. Hotru, Adhvaryu, Udgathru, Brahman, Ruthvija, Purohit, etc., were engaged in developing Yagnas, Karma Kandas, etc. Unfortunately, more than the moral intention of Yagnas, external practices came to be given more importance. Thus, instead of being a means of pleasing gods, it became a means of seeking whatever the people wanted to get/possess.

Thus, in the Brahmanas, Dharma Sadhana crossed the limits of individual and family life and came to the inevitable stage of collective co-operation. This pushed women more and more towards the family and household work. All her religious activities became relevant to be carried out by different groups. Even her own rights as a wife to perform Yagnas became restricted and her identity was namesake and further came to be represented only by symbolic things.

### ***Brahmavadinis***

In the Rg Vedas, we get two types of information about women. One, that they were called as Brahmavadinis and two, as Sadhyavadhus. The Sadhyavadhus were those who did Vedadhyayana in childhood and in youth as far as possible, and got married after they attained puberty. The Rg Veda addressed them as the river which is going to join the sea.

Brahmavadinis were those who remained unmarried for a long time engaged in Vedadhyaana. They used to have Upanayana and other samskaras and participated in daily rituals. They conducted Yagnas, Yagas, rituals and understood and mastered over the meaning of Vedas, also had evinced interest in such Darshanas as Purva Meemamsa; used to bring about reform in religious sector too. Bruhat Devata gives a list of Brahmavadinis. Saamaveda has called Noida, Akrustabhasha, Sikathanivavari, Uttaratchvika, Goupyayana as Rushikas. Lopamudra, Vishwavara, Ghosha are called as Brahmavadinis. There were both married and unmarried among them. Marriage was not a compulsion before Brahmavadinis.

Gargi, Maithreyi, Kathyayini, Sulabha, Vadaba, Prachdeya, representing their times in the above scholarship and who were proficient in Vedic studies, participated in seminars like true scholars.

### ***Yagnadhikarini***

According to Altekar, in the Vedic Age, some Yagnas used to be meant exclusively to be performed by women. Seethayagna, Rudrayagna, Rudra Bali etc., are examples here. Seethayagna was performed by women to beget good harvest. Women used to pray to Rudra through Rudra yagna for their Soubhagya. Rudrabali was given to protect the livestock. Women used to join men in performing Somayagna.

### **1.1.2 Age of the Sutras**

Much before the time of the Rg Vedas, men started to change the boundaries of the matriarchal society and constructed those of the patriarchal one. They also started to bring as hostage women belonging to other castes and communities. Thus, back in their own villages and castes, it created a decline in the number of women. This led to the oppression of women. We get a number of references about the many wives of a common man during the Rg Vedic times. According to another reference, the women brought from conquered kingdoms as slaves and servants won the hearts of rural Aryans by their civilized ways of behavior and conduct. Their number increased in the palaces and the private houses of kings and nobles. Such women also became symbols of generosity of the kings and nobles towards their subjects. Chariots filled with these women were given away as gifts to the priests and court's religious officers. The children born to such women include Vatsa, Aushija and Kakshivaan.

It is believed that the status of women turned from bad to worse beginning with the Rg Vedic period. They came to be mortgaged by the gamblers and when they lost in the game, women came to be taken as their dasi by the winners. The Rg Veda speaks of fallen men as Jaaras and there must be women who were known as Jaarinis. This was an example of free

society. The dancer had a leading role here. Even divine souls like Apsaras came to be referred to as Ganikeyaru.

This was also the time when somehow India became weak and came to be targeted by invaders who destroyed the males. This was the time of the Boudhyayana and Apasthamba of Vasista and Panini, Manu and Patanjali, of Chanakya and Pushyamitra; of Dharmasastras. It was also the time of social conflicts. The chaturvarnyas were destroyed. World became empty where women were in large numbers. As there were no men, women only took the bow and arrow, ploughed to engage in agricultural activities.

The efforts to bring about a new society by social reformers and to protect it from further ruining, led to strict legislation against women. For example, after the invasion by the Gurjars, 'sati' system was revived and women started to kill them to protect the honour of the family. Thus, Indian women sacrificed themselves to give a pure status to Hindu society. This courage of women made the Rajput men to live peacefully and not to be bothered about kidnapping of women. The process went on from 712 AD to 1707 AD. Women killed themselves in these 1000 years. This is how the Indian male threw the women into the fire to protect his honour. The Indian woman killed herself by self-sacrifice and taking revenge over the selfish male.

The Sati system was protested against by many particularly in Bengal, where it was gaining momentum. Women did not die much due to normal death but, it was, sadly, due to victimization in social evils like child marriage, sati etc. Child marriage led to widowhood and to sati. Women in Bengal used to be thrown into the funeral pyre of husbands by tying their hands and legs. In order to make their screams unheard by the public, drums were beaten loudly. This practice was more also due to polygyny. William Bentick brought an end to this by law, in Bengal to begin with. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Eshwar Chandra Vida Sagar raised voice against it, to be later supported by Dayananda Saraswathi.

A B Keith expresses about the status of women in the Brahmanas thus: women in India have always suffered much from all religions but by none has she been so thoroughly despised as by the Brahmins of the period of the Brahmanas. The concept of *Karmakanda*, *yagnas* and the groups which came about to practice the same, systematically separated the women from the Yagnakaryas. Child marriages that came to be imposed, complexity of marriage practices all these shortened the freedom of women in Dharmadhikara. As the simplicity of Rg Vedic times became shortened, women came to be confined to their homes. They came to be kept away from complex matters & womanly matters were thrust on them. Examples are music, dance, house-keeping, arts and crafts etc. In upper class houses, girls used to get upanayana for name-sake only. Vedadhyaayana used to be in the midst of boys together in Ashramas. Gradually, all this vanished due to imposition of Gruhya Sutras.

In the Gruhya Sutras, the Samskaras of people compulsorily had to be done. The religious and bodily samskaras that are carried out to a man from birth to death numbering 40 are explained in terms of their nature, process etc. All the Samskaras had to take place for the men with the chanting of Mantras, Mantropadesha, Upanayana, Veda studies, marriage etc. Samskaras of Ashrama life became associated with the man and his personality development. All should happen to him, but for the women, only marriage had to be conducted to the chanting of Mantras. All other Samskaras can be without Mantras like Jataka in childhood, naming ceremony, Choodakarma etc., without any Mantras. Even during the times of marriage, the purohit can speak for her. Although she was called as Yagnopaveethini, no thread was used. Only a small cloth was put on her waist from left to right.

Macdonell says that the Smritis framed and designed the wider range of rules and regulations of Dharmasastras. Their interpretation of the lives of women is more in terms of societal than religious. They have tried to keep women away from religion as far as possible. Manu, Baudhyayana, Gauthama, Parashara, Yajnavalkya, Vishnu, Narada and others' Dharma Sutras helped in framing the life and religious system of Hindu society. Their interpretation, commentary and policies are practiced even to this day. Mithakshari was written as a critique of Yagnavalkya Smritis and Medathithi against Manusmriti, Manu, Baudhyayana and Yagnavalkya have not allowed entry for women in religious sphere. The very existence or birth of women according to them is to beget progeny.

### ***1.1.3 Manu Dharma Shastra***

Manu is important among Dharmasutrakaras. He is a great social reformer/organizer. He has identified the role of women in organizing a systematic society, because, he has specific ideas about women's religious roles. First of all, Manu thinks of a woman as one who does not deserve any freedom. All her Dharmic achievements, philanthropy, freedom are irrelevant as her nature is just opposite to theirs. But he felt that all the Samskaras of men need to happen to women too and with Mantras – according to Manu. Marriage itself is upanayana to a woman. Serving husband is a life of learning to her. Agni parikriya is household work. Vivaha is upanayana and there is no need for any separate knowledge, japa, thapa, puja or home for her independently. By serving her husband well, she gets everything to herself too. Women should not conduct Yagnas and even if they did, Brahmins should not attend them. Like a spinster even a widow can perform them and attain moksha.

Thus, Manu placed women in the circle of religious practices, marriage, serving one's husband, begetting sons etc. The Dharma Sutrakaras did not prescribe Vairagya to women. Sanyasa is not for her according to them.

In November 1990, Justice Ranganatha Misra of the Supreme Court of India made a controversial statement that 'women should not risk competing with men and better return to their homes. Coming from a legal luminary, the statement shook all conscientious people in India. It meant to reassure that male and female were not the same in God's view. The world will not improve if the woman also rises. It does so only when she is just a female and stays in the background.

The Hon'ble Justice withdrew his statements as they led to a lot of controversy. But he also emphasized that these words were made at a personal level. He added that traditionally women enjoyed a relatively high status, but in course of time, due to some anomalies, their status has come down. This is a fitting example of the duality in people's minds about women. Although the words of Manu have become less significant, in people's subconscious level, these dual feelings about women's status continue to persist. The double standard lingers on.

Vatsyayana's Kamasutra is quoted to have strengthened the patriarchal tendencies and subjugation of women. It stated that if the king sees any beautiful lady, he should somehow appeal to her, get her to his palace, offer liquor, get her intoxicated and then rape her.

#### ***1.1.4 Two schools of thought on women***

We have seen that two schools of thought have co-existed in Indian understanding of the status of women. One considered women as 'equal to men'; the other holds them as objects of hatred. Both arguments have drawn heavily upon ancient scripts and passages from religious literature to prove that women are so (equal to men or as someone to be hated). For example, Apastamba prescribed that 'All must make a way for a woman when she is treading a path'. This was taken to mean a mark of respect to woman as usually such behaviour indicates showing respect to someone who is very respectable. Manu also held similar views on women, showing utmost respect and honour. He is quoted to be saying that 'where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers'. Manu also went to say that 'where women are honoured, the gods are pleased but where they are not honoured no sacred rite yields any reward'. Yagnavalkya had said, 'women are the embodiment of all divine virtues on earth'; for example, Soma bestowed all his purity on them; Gandharva has given them sweetness of speech and fire has showered all his brilliance to make them most attractive'.

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata also present statements about lofty ideals of womanhood. The latter considered women as the pillars of social organization and centres of domestic life. It also held that a man is inferior to a woman before whom he should bend his will. He should serve and adore her.

### ***The Darker Side:***

The other side of the opinion about women was that they were weak-minded and unworthy of being trusted. They existed just to satisfy the physical desires of men, to serve them and to beget progeny for them. The great epic states in some context that 'there could be no more or higher sinful object than a woman. She is the root of all evil and the most sinful of all creatures. Woman is like a burning fire. She is also an illusion (Maya) and like the sharp edge of a razor.

The other epic, Ramayana is also not less severe on women. While it describes the faces of women as something like flowers, it imposes several restrictions on them.

Irish born American scholar Vendi Denizer has argued that Manu Smriti is a bundle of extremely contradicting views (quoted in C N Ramachandran's Ashaya-Akruthi). Manu says that 'where women are respected, gods live in such a place'; but he also says that women must never be trusted. Vendi quotes that Manu has given women objects like 'bed, jewelry, sexual desires, anger, wickedness, jealousy, immorality etc'. Vendi Denizer has translated Manusmriti along with American scholar Bryan K Smith, entitled 'The Laws of Manu', in 1991 published by Penguin. In the introduction to the translation they state that 'Hindu society does not respect Manu Smriti in reality. It has respected Manu only in oral terms. It has followed the Yagnavalkya Smrithi and Mithakshara Samhithe much more while determining true life situations, while resolving issues and delivering justice. It was the British who gave much more prominence and importance to Manu Smrithi than to other Dharmasastras and smrithis and who made Manu smrithi more powerful in order to suit their rule in India. They used several of its parts in their judiciary in India and particularly from the time of Warren Hastings they bred a strong belief that Manu smrithi is the supporting pillar of Hindu society. It was again the British officials who gave the label of Shasanas to the Dharma sastras.

#### ***1.1.5 Beyond Manu: Kautilya and Varahamihira***

Beyond Manu and other smritikaaras who looked at women as someone below in status than the men, it was Kautilya who believed that 'ashubhadweshanah streeshu navishvaseth' meaning that who ever expects good things to occur should not trust women or have belief in their deeds.

However, in the midst of such women-haters and those who denigrated women to a low status, we have some scholars who have taken such critics of women to task. The famous scholar of astronomy Varahamihiraacharya, in his Bruhat Samhithe has provided proof of how strong blaming women was during his times with examples and quotations. He simultaneously expresses appreciation for the good character of women as well as his sense of considering them as equal to men. Compared to many who used to comment on women blindly, he is very reasonably oriented towards them (Shobha, A).

Varahamihiracharya also says that a woman is one who has no sin or is impure. She cannot be bad or polluted as every month the bad qualities are pushed out of her body in the form of menstruation. This is how he has raised the status of women and her biological duty of menstruation which is considered as the polluted period, converted as the purifying period by Varaha. This is the specialty of this scholar.

Another scholar of the 9<sup>th</sup> century who is also a dramatist in Prakrit, by name Rajashekar has also expressed positive views about women. His wife, Avantisundari, was well educated and a poetess. Rajashekar has illustrated a number of views about Avantisundari in his Soundarya Meemansa. The Play 'Karpura Manjari' by him is believed to be influenced by her. He says in his Kaavya Meemansa that 'women could also become poets. There is no gender difference for grasping and learning skills. We have seen and heard about princesses, daughters of court ministers, prostitutes and wives of court Vidhushakas having extensive knowledge about Kaavya, sacred texts and science.

#### **1.1.6 Avanti Sundari**

The Kaavyas written by Avanti Sundari in Prakrit were both popular and had extensive readership. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century written dictionary 'Deshinaamamaala', Hemachandra has used parts of her kaavyas to explain the meaning of Prakrit words of wisdom. It is also believed that Dhanapal wrote the Prakrit dictionary in about 972 B C, inspired by Avanti Sundari and her benefit also. Only a few parts of her poetry have remained today which were written as part of 'Deshinaamamaala'. (Bharatiya Stree Vaada ed. Manu Chakravarthy, Akshara prakashana, Heggodu, Sagara pp84-85).

#### **1.1.7 Non- Vaidik Thinkers**

In the cultural history of India, besides Vaidic thinking, a number of non-Vaidik types of thinking, like Buddhist, Jainist and that of Vachanakaaras, folklore thoughts etc are also hidden or added. In addition, from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a few strands of Bhakthi movements also have succeeded in providing certain new cultural explanations and definitions on women.

Gangadharamurthy (Indian Bhakthi Movement and Women, in Attimabbe and Contemporary Stree Samskruthi, Directorate of Kannada and Culture, Bangalore) has taken a stand that the Bhakthi movements were also led by women saints who took a key role in delivering liberation to women. There is no powerful and influential Bhakthi movement either in the north or the south that did not include a woman init. Akka Mahadevi, Meera, Avveyyar, Andal, Laal Ded or Lalleshwari and others protested against traditional forms of male female relations and condemned them or rejected them with their stand and actions. These were challenges offered by these women against deep rooted social values.

#### **1.1.8 Bhakthi Movement (Bahinabai & Meerabai)**

Susi Tharu and K Lalitha (translated by C S Sarvamangala, edited by Manu Chakravarthy), have declared that ancient and medieval literature went against Orientalist thinking. They have established that a majority of poets of the Bhakthi Movement were women. Among them many were those who were hurt by the treatment meted out to them and the accusation and abuse by their own family and its members. The songs by Laladevi describe the abuses by her mother-in-law and the drudgery of the whole day long household work. The young woman Bahinabai is deep into the family bondage and household work when she is attracted towards the other life by Tukaram (Lord Krishna). Meerabai also protests against the impositions on her by the family and marital life. All such women received assurance about an alternative life. Most of the life-histories of the saints of the Bhakthi movement open up with their breaking the bonds of family and society and initiating a new wandering life. But women had to fight to get into or get accepted by these movements. There is proof in literature for this. At times, women who were in the Bhakthi movement had to engage in intellectual discussions and debates with their male counterparts to prove their worth.

#### ***1.1.9 Buddhism***

What about Buddhism? It is argued that it gave women followers (Bhikshunis) equal rights and opportunities. There is also an opinion that Buddha did not have a definite stand and clarity about women's issues. Although he accepted the court dancer Amrapali as a Bhikkuni (woman saint), the Bhikkunis were segregated in the Sanghas or Ganas as separate group or unit. More than Buddha himself, his disciple Ananda is quoted to have insisted on this separation (of male and female followers) again and again. Beliefs like 'naari narakakke daari' or a woman is the route to hell strong among Hindus are found in Buddhist literature also. It was all the time closely attached to male chauvinist viewpoint and considered woman as an object of sex and eternal pleasure, marriage is death and woman is another form of diversion or distraction. They have given quite a lot of propaganda to the above negative quality of a woman. Kunaliyathaka went to the extreme and quoted woman as, by nature, wicked and somebody taken birth to destroy man. A male role in the jataka story by name Aanithigandha is somebody taken birth only to destroy women, just as the birth of Parasurama to destroy the Kshatriyas. As woman is not trustworthy, in order to keep the young men away from the attraction of love, marriage and family and to enable their studies, to protect them from unhappiness and tragedies the anti-women jataka stories have been propagated, according to Gyaret Jones (Indian Bhakthi Movement and Women, Gangadharamurthy, Attimabbe and Contemporary Stree Samskruthi, Directorate of Kannada & Samskruthi).

#### ***1.1.10 Jainism***

The Jain culture or Jainism also did not give women any high status. They were considered as taking sinners in the past who took birth as females only because of the past bad deeds or generations of Karma. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, both Attimabbe and Queen Shanataladevi took to Jainism and became its ardent followers. Subsequently, Jainism has branched off into

certain conventions. According to the branch Digambara Jainism, 'there is no Moksha for women after death; in case a woman desires to attain moksha, she has to be born again as a man in her next life'. This is a clear evidence of the strong stand taken by Jainism about women's status.

But Shwethambara Jainism, on the contrary, declares that for a woman Moksha is attainable after her death, there is no need to be born as a man to obtain Moksha. Thus, it enunciates equality of sexes. It also justifies that Bhagawan Mahaveera was a married man, a Gruhastha, for this very reason (Jain Culture in Karnataka-the face of existentialism, by Padma Shekar, Attimabbe and contemporary culture, Directorate of Kannada and culture, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore pp 8).

### ***1.1.11 Vachana Movement of the 12<sup>th</sup> century***

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Vachana movement is considered to be far more inclusive as far as women are considered and has promoted a lot of gender equality. According to Sumitra Bai, it has expressed a notable ideological protest against gender unequal system of the time. Vachana literature initiated a period of self respect based women's literary tradition and has also provided a very useful framework for the current day concerns of feminism. The Shivasharanas were able to establish that all social barriers of caste, class, gender, religion were instruments of segregating the people from one another are only symbols of individuals' external differences and have nothing to do with the internal or their soul achieving the height of glory and equality. This mentality and philosophy of the Sharanas' led religious movement kept its route of attaining or opened up the gates of, Moksha to women also. As a result of this, we were able to obtain a dimension of women equality and progress that was unique in the cultural history of the nation and the state (Stree vaada, Sahitya Paarishika Maale, Karnataka Sahitya Academy, pp 95-96, Kannada Bhavan, Bangalore).

According to Vijaya Dabbe, the Veerasaiva Marga is an extension of the Bhakthi Panth tradition and has gone a step ahead of it in including them in the movement. But it did not include in itself, the social, economic, political and cultural equality of women in its thinking and ideology. It only accepted such equality only philosophically and to promote spiritual growth and satisfaction by women also. It believed that a woman's personality is not inferior only because she is by birth a woman. There is equal capacity and worth to her spirit and capacity (chaitanya). This was the stand taken by the Veerasaiva Marga or thinking or philosophy. It never bothered or thought about other forms of equality to women vis-à-vis men and never extended its support or attention towards such thinking and promotion. (Vachanakkaarthyaru, Ondu Vimukthi para chintane, Stree vaadi sahitya vimarshe, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, Seemanthini Niranjana, Kannada Sangha, Christ College, Bangalore pp 205).

Some of the other statements in the vachanas of this time also tell much about the low status attributed to women by the Bhakthi movement. For example, in one vachana it is said

that I am not a fellow who is caught in the web of wealth, women, mud (earth) and other karmas and get lost and troubled. As I was settling in my devotion towards You, these Mayas were distracting me; just as the village washerman beats the cloth to get off the dirt and purify it, with out realizing that it was not his but of others, I was under the spell of believing that this is my wealth, my women, my land; this mentality signified that woman belonged to man just as he possessed land, wealth, cattle etc. This attitude of ownership of women was deep rooted among the vachanakaaras and was reflected in the views of vachanakaarthi too.

In Akka Mahadevi's vachanas there is a mention of man haunting a woman as Maya (just as the men believed that woman haunted him and distracted being a maya). But just as a woman is viewed as being equal to property, land and other material objects of wealth, such a notion never prevailed about men as such. The women writers also argue that imagining such a belief was also not practical and like going away from the reality. Women were never the owners of any property and to imagine them to own men was totally impossible. Akkamma mentions about vratas undertaken that a man never gets himself attracted to other women and other's wealth. Likewise, there are vachanas upholding true womanhood and ideas to watch proper following of the practices of such womanhood. Monogamy and the insistence that a pativrata has only one husband etc were popular. A woman was supposed to have one husband only. But it was not insisted upon likewise for a man and as sathivrata. The traditional framework never allowed such thinking at all. All the rules were for the women to follow.

Only in Allama Prabhu's vachanas that we find a mature thought about women's status. He mentions all forms of distractions for a man coming in the way of attaining Moksha and renouncing the worldly things such as manovikaara, Thanuvikaara, Indriyavikaara, Maayadha Baleyalli Silukidha Marula. But he never brings in woman as a vikaara or distraction. It is rare that such vachanas as saying people loose their divine attainment due to such vikaaras as honnu, hennu & mannu.

It was then that a sort of reformative vachanas arrived on the scene, which held that women are not responsible for distractions. Jedara Daasimayya says `if one has a form depicting a woman (breasts) or man (beard & moustache) but the in between soul which is present in both of them is neither male nor female. Likewise a few vachanas put to analysis the secondary position of women only because of their biological features. A vachanakarhi by name Satyakka says mere physical features (breast) will not prove to be a woman and having moustache and beard cannot prove a man; these are worldly beliefs, not the prescriptions of wise people. Any fruit will be liked if it has taste and sweetness. Only you know it all Shambujakkeswaraa. Thus, she questions the gender division and sex-based order in society.

In Neelavva's vachanas also we get similar views about biological features dictating gender-based differences. Akka also mentions them expressing refusal of womanhood and/or going

beyond that. The expression 'I am not a woman' testifies to this. Her stand here is not to bemoan womanhood or feel inferior about it. It is not something to be ashamed of being a woman. The vachanas of Akka here do not see woman only as a female and with a female body and being blind to the other features of female body or being a female. Her Vachanas see women as beyond this male-female distinction and pose an answer to the historical stage when women's worth was not acknowledged and the various dimensions of her personality were not recognized. She says 'if a woman is behaving like a woman then she needs a male company/companion; if a man behaves like a man, he needs a female company/companion; but if the man and woman come over the instincts of the mind, then the body will not be behaving as a female or male'.

The social value thus propounded by the Vachanakarthis during the times of Vachana movement came to, in course of time, be distorted. This is captured by T R Chandrashekar taking the reference of 12<sup>th</sup> century poetess Kadira Remmavve's vachanas and the vachanas of 15<sup>th</sup> century saint or sharana sree Thontada Siddalingeswara. This vachanakarthis lady Kadira Remmavve says that 'all wives cook for their husbands, but I don't cook for my husband; all wives bear children to their husbands but I don't get pregnant by him; all husbands have testicles and make wives pregnant but my husband has none of them; all husbands are up/above/superior but mine is down/inferior, kadira Remmeyodeya Gummeshwaraa!!

These words of Remmevve shook the traditional social value about women and man-woman relationship that was deep-rooted. According to Chandrashekar, Remmevve was not prepared to accept man-woman relationship against the background of fertility and begetting progeny. This is clear in the 4-6 lines of the vachana. The statement 'I will not beget children to my husband' shows her stand that a woman is not just destined to beget children. Conventionally a woman has to bear a child, because a man has the capacity to provide the seed. But in the view of the vachanakarthis Remmevve, she was not prepared to become pregnant as his husband had no seed giving capacity. This does not mean that he was impotent or something like that. The male-female relationship is taken to go beyond the bodily pleasures and to the spiritual realm. Thus, she has given the issue of marital relations a rethinking and re-judgment. She has questioned the efficacy of motherhood and aggrieved by the low status given to women in the society. To put forth her dissent against the established practices of gender inequality and segregation, she has given the example of sexual practices in her Vachanas with out any shyness and by so doing she is trying to conquer what is prescribed by tradition (Chandrashekar).

By the time of 15<sup>th</sup> century sharana Thontada Siddalingeswara, and his Vachanas, the societal view about women had altered substantially due to the impact of the preceding vachanakarthis. Some of the vachanas propound the deep seated patriarchal values found in the society. This set of vachanas also portrays the changes in the position of women by the time of 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **1.1.12 Sanchi Honnamma**

After the vachanakarthi, the female voice protesting against gender based oppression of women, is that of Sanchi Honnamma. Her 'Hadibadheya Dharma' is a poetry written about the then prevalent stree dharma of the times. But it also went beyond that to mention about a number of progressive views about women. She says 'is it not woman who gave birth to us? Is it not woman who took care of us and brought us up? Then why people condemn a woman and they are blind about her contribution to society'. She questions why women are looked down upon when many a popular men became popular only because one or the other woman in their lives. 'Himavantha (father of Parvathi) became important because of his daughter (she married lord shiva); a woman only taught a good lesson to the wicked sage Brighu; Janakaraya got so much worry as well as popularity because of his daughter sita or janaki; then why is a woman condemned?? Asks Honnamma.

### **1.1.13 Folk Literature**

Thus, in the mainstream of social life we find the vehicles of Sanskrit thinking were the prevalent puranas, janapada literature, and proverbs but all represented the male view of life and society. Take any of the mythological stories and the male female roles in them: Rama-Sita, Nala-Damayanti, Savithri-Satyavaana etc – all uphold the Sati dharma, importance of Pativrattya, women's purity, sacrificial nature of women and the ability to bear difficulties. A woman in trouble is expected to reconcile to the fact that as compared to what was endured by Sita, her own difficulties are negligible. Besides, Purana, stories, poetry, drama and other such traditional means, these social values are heralded by the modern modes like the television also. But at the same time, there are janapada or folk Ramayana where sita is portrayed differently. Some of the matters that shishta (conventional) Ramayana does not possess are hidden here. While the latter very carefully preserves and imposes the value that a woman should not see the face of an alien man, folk Ramayana disputes it and propagates an opposite view. Sudra women do not believe in the values transferred by Vaidic culture. In some folk versions of Ramayana, sita is made to have a different image of Ravana. This shows the creativity of a woman (R Sunandamma, Stree Kendrikrutha Kavyagalaagi Janapada Ramayana, Samatha Adyayana Kendra, Mysore pp 39).

Likewise, part of the native poetry that has come out against the background of matriarchy has put forth views against historical patriarchal values. The Siri Paddhana of Tulunaadu is a powerful folk Purana that centres upon the power of woman and creativity. It highlights women's strength and creativity and explores her tensions, dilemmas, her fight against oppression, inner feelings etc. it also goes on breaking the thinking based on patriarchal

values and culture such as chastity and fidelity of women, concept of male dominance etc and goes on trying to establish the matriarchal values (Gayathri Navada, Paddhana as stories of establishing a new womanhood, the women's world of folk literature,, ed by R Sunandamma, ....).

However, folk literature is more filled by such feelings and values like 'athe maavariganji, suthelu nereganji, mathe aluva doreganji a woman has to live her life in the husband's house. She tells her mother in law that in the atheya maniyage aravathu gangaala belagatheenathi, by beda, thavaravaru saramuthu maadi salavyara. Thus, literature at that time was more filled by ethics for women surrounding her life in the family with husband, children and household responsibilities. Proverbs like 'women and mud are as they are kept (maintained); 'a girl born is like a wound on the body', 'a girl given away in marriage is away from kin and family', etc. These sayings have reaffirmed faith in the patriarchal system of family prevalent in the society.

## Conclusions

Two schools of thought on women:

We have seen that two schools of thought have co-existed in Indian understanding of the status of women. One considered women as 'equal to men'; the other holds them as objects of hatred. Both arguments have drawn heavily upon ancient scripts and passages from religious literature to prove that women are so (equal to men or as someone to be hated). For example, Apastamba prescribed that 'All must make a way for a woman when she is treading a path'. This was taken to mean a mark of respect to woman as usually such behaviour indicates showing respect to someone who is very respectable. Manu also held similar views on women, showing utmost respect and honour. He is quoted to be saying that 'where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers'. Manu also went to say that 'where women are honoured, the gods are pleased but where they are not honoured no sacred rite yields any reward'. Yagnavalkya had said, 'women are the embodiment of all divine virtues on earth'; for example, Soma bestowed all his purity on them; Gandharva has given them sweetness of speech and fire has showered all his brilliance to make them most attractive'.

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha also present statements about lofty ideals of womanhood. The latter considered women as the pillars of social organization and centres of domestic life. It also held that a man is inferior to a woman before whom he should bend his will. He should serve and adore her.

### ***The darker side:***

The other side of the opinion about women was that they were weak-minded and unworthy of being trusted. They existed just to satisfy the physical desires of men, to serve them and

to beget progeny for them. The great epic states in some context that 'there could be no more or higher sinful object than a woman. She is the root of all evil and the most sinful of all creatures. Woman is like a burning fire. She is also an illusion (Maya) and like the sharp edge of a razor.

The other epic, Ramayana is also not less severe on women. While it describes the faces of women as something like flowers,

#### ***1.1.14 Current Scenario***

By 1950, the principles of gender equality as a concept came to be enshrined in the Constitution of India, in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. Besides granting equality to women, the Constitution also makes the State empowered to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

It was only from the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) that the approach towards women's issues saw a shift – from the welfare to development approach. Since hen empowerment became a central issue in determining the status of women. The government set up the National Commission for Women by an Act of Parliament in the year 1990. The Act was introduced to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. Further, the 73rd and the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments provided for reservations of seats in he local bodies (Panchayats)

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, also a century of media and information technology, people of all societies are exposed to different cultures and traditions. It is common to find a daughter-in-law preparing food that she is not familiar to in her culture, by referring to books, using outside agencies to carryout her domestic duties of cooking and child care Use of washing machines and other such gadgets is also common. Media (both print and audio-video) is filled by advertisements and features where women empowered; the husband also assisting the woman by washing dishes and using the washing machine, especially when the wife is busy outside at work. Such scenes are common today.

In recent times, the newly embraced economic processes like liberalization, globalization and structural adjustment policies have further affected the above scenario. There is greater commercialisation of every aspect of life and sensitive human values are taking a back seat. As opposed to this, we have extremes of communalism, terrorism, and other such processes also putting mankind to a complex situation. The extremities of communalism have imposed a number of restrictions on women in the name of protecting culture. They are in fact condemning women to a very low and powerless status. Restrictions on the dress women have to wear are very significant here. There was a revival of the veil or the burqha in several parts of the country like in J & K. There are also restrictions on women wearing jeans. Culture and society in the current times are those ruled by religious fundamentalists, corporate companies and one makes an adjustment with the same. Women thus, continue to

be perceived as property and property of men. Honour killings and propaganda to protect women from external forces are becoming the order of the day.

According to F R Lewis, who was the foremost thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'culture is a creative thing and only a few people from the society will be aware of this and only they will be able to save the traditional culture from total extinction. They are a minority with strong belief in ancient culture and who are in the centre of society. Any effort to push them to the corner or border will make the society not work well and develop meaningfully. They have the responsibility to protect the tradition of a whole century and to make the current life meaningful. But the new developments in the modern, global world like technological changes, big giants in the trade and commercial sectors, etc have become enemies of the above mentioned minority culture and are becoming detrimental to its destruction (Ramachandran C N, post-colonial thinking, Karnataka Sahitya Academy, Bangalore, p 4).

According to the critic Prof.D R Nagaraj, a culture is the light music that promotes livelihoods'. It is also notable here that culture is also a means of making profit and capacity. We have got habituated to defining and discussing culture only in the negative sense. We take it only as a producer of rules and restrictions. But it is correct and more useful to define culture as a joint production centre of both restrictions and capacities. If we define it as only a builder of capacities then we will be falling prey to its blind and ignorant worship. Likewise, by defining it as an arena of restrictions then we will fall into the deep pit of disappointment (Hinnudi, Madhukeeshwar and Desi feminism: a few primary notes, Manushiya Maathu, Madhukeeshwar's select writings; ed; and translated by L G Meera, Akshara Prakashana, Sagara).

The words of Simone De Beauvoir are relevant here: she says "one is not born a woman, one becomes one". A woman is not born as a woman but she is framed as one later. Culture plays a major role here. Multi-linguism, multi- tradition characterizes Indian culture. In such a culture, there is need for a more rigorous introspection about the diverse and contrasting views about women in the modern society.