Women's Social Evolution in Early Medieval Northern India-A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

The study attempts to explore the status of women in early medieval northern India, examining various aspects of their lives, including marriage, education, widowhood, and social roles. It begins by contextualising Indian historical writings, which were initially influenced by colonial perspectives and later challenged by Indian historians, particularly regarding women's status in ancient texts. The study examines the evolving attitudes towards women, reflecting both idealised portrayals and historical complexities. Examining the institution of marriage, the study discusses social norms and women's agency in selecting spouses, drawing from ancient texts and inscriptions. It explores the educational opportunities available to women in early medieval India, noting a decline during the Mahājanapada era but stressing instances of educated women excelling in various fields. The study also addresses the challenges faced by widows, particularly regarding remarriage and social expectations of asceticism. It examines the practice of Sati, providing historical accounts and literary references to illustrate its prevalence and cultural significance during the period. The study also discusses the roles of temple dancers, courtesans, and concubines in early medieval society.

INTRODUCTION

Indian historical writings, shaped by colonial rule, were initially scrutinised by European scholars. Divided into Orientalist and Utilitarian views, they portrayed India as stagnant and in need of Western influence.[1] Gender issues were highlighted to justify colonial rule, prompting Indian historians to challenge these narratives, emphasising the exalted position of women in ancient texts. However, nationalist historians sometimes idealized ancient India, projecting it as a utopian society, overlooking complexities in favour of a glorified past.[2] Early histories often reflect the perspectives of elite groups, neglecting the experiences of marginalised communities like feminists and Dalits.[3] Nationalist historians like R.C. Dutt and A.S. Altekar portrayed ancient Indian society as honouring women, but their accounts were idealized and lacked depth.[4] The status of women became a measure of civilisation, responding to Western historiography.[5] Later, feminist history emerged globally, challenging traditional narratives and seeking to understand women's roles in society. This movement gained momentum in India in the 1960s and 1980s, emphasising the importance of women's experiences in historical analysis. Gender history explores socially constructed differences between sexes, while women's history focuses on restoring women's perspectives to historical narratives.[6] Both fields continue to evolve, revealing the complexities of gender dynamics throughout history.

The status of women in early medieval northern India underscores the evolving dynamics of social progress. While Indian society traditionally holds women in high esteem, attitudes towards them have varied across historical epochs. During this period, marriage emerges as a revered institution, symbolising the social and religious union of man and woman. In ancient India, women were not perceived as independent entities. Manu's dictum stipulates that a woman is subservient to her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her son in old age, thus negating any notion of autonomy.[7] Panini's Ashtadhyayi delineates stages in a woman's life, from Kumari (unmarried) to Vriddha Kumari (elderly unmarried), illustrating societal categorizations.[8] The term *kanina* denotes offspring of an unmarried girl, emphasising social norms surrounding marriage. Notably, during this period, there existed a degree of agency for young women in choosing their spouses, as reflected in the term Patinvara (self-selected husband). The transition to marital life marked by the designation Sumangali underscores the significance of marriage rites and the roles assigned to women within matrimonial bonds.[9]

The research aims to scrutinise women's status in early medieval northern India, examining gender dynamics, educational opportunities, and cultural practices such as Sati. It seeks to elucidate the roles of courtesans and concubines in Hindu society while navigating through colonial and nationalist historiography to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences during this period.

The methodology adopted in this study involves analysis of historical sources, including inscriptions, literary works, and accounts from travellers. It employs a qualitative approach to examine the status of women in early medieval northern India, drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. The study involves synthesising information from diverse sources to construct understanding of various aspects of women's lives during this period. The study utilises comparative analysis to contextualise its findings within broader historical and cultural frameworks.

The Ṛigveda provides a foundational glimpse into the existence of educated women within ancient Indian society. Notable references to learned individuals such as Lopamudrā, Viśvavarā, and Ghoṣā indicate that women were indeed included in the educational regimen of brahmacarya. Similarly, later Vedic literature, exemplified by the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣada, illustrates rituals aimed at securing the birth of a daughter endowed with scholarly acumen, further affirming the recognition of educated women.[10] Textual evidence from works like the Taittirīya Saṁhitā[11] and Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā[12] suggests that women were instructed in various artistic pursuits such as dance and music. Additionally, the Sūtras reflect a societal acceptance of female education during this period. However, the Mahājanapada era marked a decline in the educational opportunities available to women. The cessation of the Upanayana ceremony for girls around the early second century BCE is attributed by some historians to an underlying power struggle between religious authorities and women. Moreover, the subsequent emergence of child marriage further hindered women's educational advancement.[13]

Contrary to the prevalent notion of the "dark ages" for women between the 6th and 12th centuries CE, emerging insights from both inscriptions and literary sources of the 7th to 13th centuries suggest a different narrative. Numerous instances attest to the presence of educated women who demonstrated their proficiency across various disciplines amidst political instability. These educated women excelled not only in the fine arts but also exhibited prowess in administrative, military, and religious domains. Their involvement extended to economic spheres as well, with expertise in languages such as Prākrit and Sanskrit serving as a testament to their intellectual capabilities.[14]

During this period, women's education faced significant challenges, particularly due to the lowering of the marriageable age to as early as 9 or 10 years old, which severely limited opportunities for formal education. Although a window of two or three years remained available for potential learning, societal focus on marriage overshadowed educational pursuits for both girls and their guardians. Notwithstanding these obstacles, Vatsyayana delineates a comprehensive curriculum for women, encompassing a wide array of subjects including music, dance, linguistics, logic, and craftsmanship. This educational framework extended to various strata of society, from the daughters of high officials to courtesans and concubines, highlighting the breadth of knowledge expected from women in elite circles.[15] However, access to such education was largely contingent upon familial wealth and status. Affluent families could afford specialised tutors for their daughters, whereas those from ordinary backgrounds, often married off by age 10 or 11, had limited educational prospects.[16] Girls of ruling families used to receive some administrative training. We learn from legends of the medieval coinage, the names of the queens – "Didda and Sugandha" of Kashmir and "Somaladevi" of Rajputana, who took part in the administration of the states.

Nonetheless, certain disciplines were deemed essential for women, including singing, dancing, music, painting, and administrative training for those in ruling families. Legends and literary works of the time, such as Kadambari by Bana, depict women engaging in religious rituals and exhibiting literary prowess, exemplifying their multifaceted educational pursuits. Moreover, historical accounts and literary narratives showcase highly accomplished women, such as the protagonist Malaya Sundari in Dandapala's Tilakamanjari, who symbolises erudition and is likened

to the goddess Saraswati herself. These examples underscore the presence of educated and skilled women, both in fiction and reality, despite prevailing societal challenges.[17]

Rajashekhara, a prominent figure of his time, was married to a Kshatriya woman who distinguished herself as a proficient literary critic and poetess. Notably, the literary landscape of the period was enriched by the contributions of female courtiers, including the creation of a drama centered around a significant political upheaval in Patliputra. Sanskrit anthologies mention several poetesses such as Marula, Morika, and Subhadra, further underscoring the presence of women in literary circles. In his works, Bana highlights the remarkable talents of Harsha's sister, Rajsri, who excelled in a multitude of arts including painting, dancing, singing, grammar, writing, and playing the veena. Rajsri's intellectual acumen extended to philosophical debates, where she actively participated in discussions during Harsha's general council.[18] Yuan Chwang, a Chinese traveller, also attests to the intelligence and accomplishments of Rajyasri, further corroborating her significance in contemporary intellectual circles. Additionally, historical records from the period of Harsha's rule mention several female scholars who participated in Buddhist councils, among them poetesses such as Shilabhattarika, Vikatanitamba, Vijayanta, Prabhadevi, and Subhadra.[19]

During the historical period under consideration, the practice of Purdah was not widespread, nor was it as stringent as its contemporary manifestation. Evidence from Harsha's accounts indicates a certain degree of freedom in social interactions, with village women engaging in activities such as gathering forest flowers and travelling between nearby settlements without apparent constraints.[20] Moreover, the customs observed by women from affluent backgrounds suggest a less rigid adherence to Purdah norms. Accounts by Yuan-Chwang, for instance, mention instances where high-ranking women like Rajyasri participated in religious gatherings without veiling themselves. Similarly, references in Ratnavali by Harsha allude to certain women taking vows to only reveal their faces to their husbands, rather than indicating strict adherence to a formal Purdah system.[21]

Terms such as 'Antahpur' and 'Avarodhika' imply some level of seclusion for women, albeit not absolute. Accounts by Arab travellers, including Abu Zaid, corroborate these observations, noting instances where women from royal harems attended court proceedings without veils in the presence of courtiers and the public. Moreover, descriptions of mixed-gender interactions during Hindu festivals and celebrations further underscore the relatively relaxed social norms surrounding gender segregation during this period.[22]

Once a woman ceases to be a wife (especially if she is childless), she ceases to be a 'person', neither daughter nor daughter-in-law.[23] Finally, it is only death (through neglect and overwork) that brings peace to the anguished widow. For everyone else, the widow's death is a relief, especially since the family honour of both households, the natal and affinal, has been upheld through a 'sacred' widowhood. Widowhood, which became a complete inauspicious sign in the life of a woman of the early medieval period, was not considered bad during the Vedic age as she was allowed to remarry. But gradually this practice came into disrepute during 300 BCE to CE 200.[24] Due to the process of texualization and codification of various rules, transformation in the status of women was noticed. The growing influence of the ascetic ideals, the opposition to widow remarriage began to grow stronger from CE 200 onwards.[25] Manu lays down that a widow should not even think of remarriage after her husband's death.[26] The second husband was not permitted to

good women.[27] Manu even referred to the Vedic mantras, where neither niyoga nor remarriage for the widow was prescribed.[28] This way he closed the doors even for child-widows for the re-marriage who did not know even the meaning of being married or widow. Most of the smṛtikāras of the early medieval period have cited Manu for condemning the remarriage of the widow.

Nārada (CE 500) recommended that the girl's marriage could take place only once.[29] About CE 600, the prejudice against widow remarriage began to become deeper reaching up to CE 1000.[30] Even a child widow was not allowed to remarry, about whom once smṛtikāras and Dharmaśāstras had a very soft view. In consequence of the prohibition of remarriage, many young widows found it a hard ordeal to lead a life of 'enforced celibacy' and began to prefer to die with their husbands rather than live after his death. It was nothing less than a 'forced suicide' both ways. Widows were treated as bad omens on sight. Secondly, the question of chastity came time and again in a widow's life. Thirdly, austerities were to be performed in such a way as the penances for the sins which she might have committed in her previous birth due to which she was to suffer widowhood.[31]

During the early medieval period, stress on fasts and austerities proves the societal outlook where a widow had to lead a life of celibacy in the hope of reunion with her deceased husband in the next world. The widow's asceticism, bearing no personal results equivalent to that of the male ascetic, is nevertheless necessary in order to ensure the peace of mind and happiness of her dead lord. Devotion and loyalty to her husband remain the key point of a widow's life and require celibacy; the widow's asceticism is thus negative not positive.[32] This dual approach of the society even in the matter of celibacy and asceticism proved a widow completely únwanted'even if she died performing the austerities. Inscriptions clearly demonstrate that a few royal families where widows survived, even they had to follow strict rules regarding fasts and austerities. The Sirpur stone inscription of the time of Mahāśivagupta (Raipur district of Central Province) dated to the ninth century, informs us that the mother of Mahāśivagupta was Vāsṭā, who was a widow and caused a temple of Hari to be constructed; the same to which this inscription was affixed.[33]

The inscription gives a vivid description of fasts and austerities observed by a widow in the hope of reunion with her deceased husband. Such austerities were to be observed even if they caused bodily weaknesses. Perhaps, it was a step towards slow suicide, which was being performed by the widows in the form of fasts. Nowhere in the inscriptions was the pain felt by a widow elucidated, but the diversion of her energies more towards the religious side shows that she tried to seek solace in religious and spiritual activities. Because such activities put her at some convenient socially acceptable evel and were also a way out to channel her energies towards spiritual benefits, thus widows inclined towards religion and spirituality. Another inscription of CE 1142 speaks of the life of the woman after her husband's death. It was due to polygamy or widowhood that a lot of women were attracted towards religious activities for seeking terminal salvation. In the present inscription, the dowager (a woman holding a title) queen Lāhiṇī renovated an ancient temple of the Sun and stepped well, both of which were out of order, for her own spiritual welfare.

The widow resided at Vaṭapura under her brother's protection.[34] Very importantly this inscription specifies that a queen is residing in her maternal village under the protection of her brother. Does that mean that the queen left the house of her deceased husband or that she was thrown out by her in-laws after the death of her husband? After coming back to her maternal home, she tried to seek solace in such activities as temple renovation for her spiritual benefit. It seems that

neither society nor the smṛtikāras gave any chance to the widow to lead a normal life. For observing certain fasts, the Vṛddha-Harita detailed a complete chart of what a widow should do all her life. This chart was supported by most of the smṛtikāras and their commentators. According to this chart: She should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to her eyes; she should wear a white garment, should curb her senses and anger, she should not resort to deceits and tricks, should be free from laziness and sleep, should be pure and of good conduct, should always worship Harī, should sleep on ground at night on a mat of Kuśā grass, she should be intent on concentration of mind and on the company of the good.[35]

In the descriptions of contemporary literature of the early medieval period, the widow's life seems to be following this chart. The Vikramāṅkadevacarita speaks of the physical appearance of widows,[36] and the Navasāhasāṅkacaritam narrates asceticism being followed by widows.[37] Aparna Chattopadhyaya's observations in this regard carries weight as she noted remarkably that law-givers prescribed the life of asceticism for widows, which laid emphasis on giving up good food, good dress, etc., instead of spiritual contemplation, meditation and study of religious works.[38] It seems that in such a situation they found the option of committing satī more suitable than that of living a miserable life as a widow.

As far as the concept of tonsure of widows was concerned, it was an attempt to make the outwardly appearance of widow ugly as well as to control her sexuality, and it was not in vogue in the society discussed here, though an inscription of the ninth century makes it clear that widows did not decorate their hair. The undated praśasti from the reign of Mahendrapāla (Haryana) of CE 882 tends to indicate it.[39] This inscription clearly says that curly hair were not decorated and they became straight. This shows that only oiling and decoration was stopped, but tonsure was not done. Some smṛtis like that of Vedavyāsa, which was composed probably later than this period, began to recommend that if a widow does not become a satī, she should tonsure her head.[40] Obviously many widows who found it very difficult to observe the life of celibate asceticism suitably opted for satī.

A comprehensive examination of the status of women in historical contexts necessitates an exploration of the practice of Sati. Sati, denoting the act where a widow immolates herself alongside her deceased husband, held significant prevalence during certain periods. Epigraphic records from the early medieval era offer insights into the prevalence of Sati, with post-Gupta smriti laws often advocating for such self-sacrifice, albeit with exceptions such as for Brahmana widows who were prescribed a life of vows and celibacy while still being allowed to inherit their husband's property.[41] Accounts by Arab travellers further corroborate the existence of Sati within Hindu society. Sulaiman, a merchant, remarks on the voluntary nature of Sati among queens, while Alberuni presents a contrasting perspective indicating compulsion, particularly among royal women.[42] Kalhana, the chronicler, records instances of concubines and servants, besides queens, immolating themselves with their deceased kings, underscoring the pervasiveness of the practice.

Bana mention about the sati of Harsha's mother queen 'Yasomati'. He wrote that she gave away her ornaments, took a sacred bath, put on all the marks of a lady with her husband living (avidhavamaranachitrnamuduahanti) and entered the funeral pyre.[43] There is a description about the sati and queen Yasomati as "she was wearing a red scarf which was a sign of sati women (Maranaprasadhana), and she wear a necklace of red thread round her neck, she applied lots of red

saffron on her body, one corner of scarf, the red flowers tied to worship fire, she wear garland and holded a painting of her husband".[44]

We also find the information that after the treacherous assassination of Grahavarmana, Rajyasri his wife, was prepared to entire the pyre but saved by her brother Harsha.[45] Among the Rajputs this custom became very popular between 9th to 12th century CE. The average Rajput Princess welcomed the opportunity to become a sati and would not allow her husband to be cremated alone.[46] We find about the sati of the mother of the Chahmana king chandramahasena, she became a sati in 842 CE. The next case is that of Somapalladevi, who became a sati at Ghaliyala in Rajputana in 890 CE. An inscription from Haveli (Jodhpur) refers to two cases of Sati of Rajaputa queens.[47]

Between 700 and 1100 CE, Sati witnessed a notable increase in occurrences across northern India. Literary works by renowned authors such as Bana, Kalidasa, Bhasa Sudraka, and Kalhana suggest a gradual rise in the prevalence of this custom within the royal households of northern India spanning from 200 CE to 1000 CE. It is evident that during this timeframe, there was a growing acceptance and adoption of Sati practices among the aristocracy. Notably, historical accounts reveal instances where queens chose to immolate themselves following the deaths of their husbands in battle, a practice termed "Jauhara." This phenomenon underscores the profound cultural significance attached to Sati, especially within the context of martial sacrifice. Such accounts offer valuable insights into the evolving socio-cultural landscape of medieval India, particularly regarding the role and status of women within royal circles.

During this period, there is evidence of the existence of temple dancers in northern India, a tradition that dates back to ancient times but gained prominence particularly after the 8th century CE. Kalidasa's Meghaduta provides descriptions of female dancers performing before Siva idols during ancient eras.[48] As the ruling aristocracy grew more affluent and religious rituals became increasingly elaborate during the early medieval period, the practice of temple dancing became more widespread and prominent.

Historical texts such as the Rajatarangini make reference to highly skilled courtesans who served as devadasis and resided in regions like Pundhravardhar (Bengal) during the 8th century CE. Additionally, the 'Pavananduta' composed by Dhoyi contains mentions of devadasis dedicated to temple service.[49] These references underscore the integral role played by temple dancers within religious and social contexts during this period. The presence of dancing girls within Jain temples is documented in texts such as the "Kumarpala Pratibodha" and the "Upadisa Rasayana." This phenomenon was also noted by Arab travellers, with Ibn Asir reporting that three hundred female dancers performed at the entrance of the temple of Somanatha.[50] Alberuni, another Arab scholar, similarly observed and critiqued the widespread practice of employing dancing girls within temples.[51]

The "Devapara Prasasti" of King Vijayasena of the Sena dynasty records that the monarch allocated one hundred beautiful girls for temple service. Additionally, accounts from travellers like Hiuen-Tsang mention the presence of dancing girls in temples, such as the one in Multan.[52] A royal decree issued by the Chahmanas of Nadatula in 1147 VS sheds light on the role of courtesans in temple festivities during that era. It stipulates that numerous courtesans were affiliated with each temple, and during religious celebrations, these courtesans from various temples were summoned to

perform music and dance in homage to the deity. Literary works spanning from Kalidasa to later compositions like the Rajatarangini also depict the integration of courtesans, including temple dancers, into society.[53] These women were not only prominent within their communities but also renowned for their musical talents during the period under examination.

The social status of courtesans, known as Ganikas, and concubines held a significant place in Hindu society, as evidenced by archaeological findings depicting their beauty and opulence. Inscriptions, sculptures, and paintings portray their involvement in music and dance, highlighting their prominence in high-class circles. Notably, Bagh paintings and Pahadarpur sculptures vividly depict the elaborate attire and lively dance performances of these women.[54] Historical accounts, such as those by Vatsyayana, reveal that widows often sought financial support by becoming mistresses to affluent individuals, underscoring the role of courtesans as a means of livelihood for women. In times of conquest, women from defeated kingdoms were often relegated to concubinage, as illustrated by Bana's narrative of the fate of the women of Malwa after defeat by Rajyavardhana.[55]

Public women were categorised into two groups: ordinary harlots, primarily professional dancers and singers, and accomplished courtesans or Ganikas, who enjoyed a higher social standing. Literary works by Dandin provide intricate details of the lives of Ganikas, highlighting their multifaceted roles and elevated status.[56] By the 11th century CE, critiques by scholars such as Al-Biruni and satirical writings by Kshemendra reflect concerns over the proliferation of prostitution and moral decline, attributed in part to the flourishing courtly culture.[57] While viewed as sinful by some, this lifestyle was often tolerated and even embraced within courtly circles, reflecting the prevailing moral attitudes of the time.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of women in ancient Indian society reveals complexity of social norms, educational opportunities, and marital customs. Texts like the Rigveda and later Vedic literature depict instances of educated and scholarly women, while the decline in educational opportunities during the Mahajanapada era poses challenges to women's intellectual development. The practice of Sati emerges as a significant cultural phenomenon during the medieval period, with evidence suggesting its prevalence among royal households and the aristocracy. The cultural significance attached to Sati underscores the societal values and norms surrounding women's roles and duties. The roles of temple dancers, courtesans, and concubines reveals the socio-cultural backdrop of medieval India, which signifies the diverse contributions of women to religious rituals, artistic expression, and courtly culture. The integration of these women into various aspects of society reflects the complexities of gender dynamics and social hierarchies prevalent during this period.

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