

Women And Caste in Postcolonial India

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Abstract

The later Vedic period is regarded as the rudimentary base which internalized the concept of Caste in the society. The idea of discrimination stemmed from this exact period, which led to further branched consequences in the society. One of the major consequences was the narrative regarding women especially of the marginalized castes. This paper acknowledges and discusses these ideas in a detailed manner. A deeper understanding about the origin of caste is required, therefore this paper aims to explain the definition, historical background and events that led to the origin of this social ill called Caste. The second element that is discussed is the stakeholders. Who are the people who faced this brutality, what impacts did it have on the society of that time and the present day. Thirdly it aims to enlighten people about the marginalized genders as an umbrella term of women and the Dalit women under that. We as humans need to be redeemed for our past actions. Therefore, a special element considered in the conclusion is the status quo, and analyzing its impact.

Keywords: Later Vedic Period, Caste, Women, Origin of Caste, Status Quo.

WOMEN AND CASTE IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

Introduction to the Later Vedic Period

The last few years of The Early Vedic Period (1500-1000 BCE) experienced a lot of transition both in economic and political sense. In the economic sphere there was movement from pastoral farming which included farming in different lands after a certain period of time, to settled agriculture where people started having their own lands or lands under their kings, where they used to work for a certain amount of wage. In the political sphere people's caste was divided on the basis of their work but the parameters for belonging to a certain Varna changed to the hierarchical challenge to the

Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and thus emerged the caste system in the Later Vedic Period. The Later Vedic Period started around 1000 BC and ended around 500 BCE. During this period a lot of transitions took place like establishment of a strong hierarchical structure, social roles based on birth than merit and all of this impacting to a rigid caste stratification. Religious texts like Manusmriti were written which discussed how the society and its people should function. One of the worst repercussions was faced by the womenfolk. The Manusmriti, also known as the Laws of Manu, is an ancient Sanskrit text traditionally attributed to the sage Manu. It's considered one of the earliest legal texts of Hinduism, dating back to around 200 BCE to 200 CE. It provides a code of conduct for individuals and society based on varna (caste) and ashrama (stages of life). Caste in its overall sense not just divided humans but created a greater marginalisation among the bond that men and women had earlier.

Literature Review

Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens (2003), *The Penguin history of early India* (2003) and *The Manusmriti* have been the cornerstone for understanding the Later Vedic Period, the condition of women especially the marginalized section of women under this umbrella term. These books not just help us understand the feminist lens of that period but also the overall development in the status of women from that given point of time till today. These texts helped us understand the narratives regarding the caste system both by the people of that society and the current society. Lastly, we get subjective viewpoints of these writers who also help us realise the uncensored truth of the world. This research paper particularly deals with these narratives regarding women, perpetuated throughout the history of ancient and modern India.

Research Objectives

- 1) Help one understand the history and the origin of the caste system.
- 2) Help one understand the most ancient society i.e. the Early Vedic Period.
- 3) Highlighting the difference in the condition of the womenfolk during the Early Vedic and the Later Vedic Period.

- 4) Lastly, helping one understand the status quo regarding the marginalized class women under this section of caste.

Condition Of Women During the Later Vedic Period

When in my higher secondary I first read a story of Bama, I was too young to understand the deep entrenched vicious loop of caste system. The status of women in the Later Vedic period was way worse than what has been described in the story of Bama. It declined significantly compared to the Early Vedic period. During the Early Vedic Period women enjoyed a relatively higher status, participating in religious and social activities, the Later Vedic period saw a shift towards patriarchal norms, restricting their freedoms and rights. The Later Vedic Period marked a significant decline in the status of women due to the consolidation of caste and patriarchal systems. Scriptural texts like the Manusmriti reinforced male dominance, restricting women's rights to education, property, and personal agency. Practices such as child marriage, Sati, and exclusion from religious life became widespread. Marginalized caste women faced intensified exploitation, both socially and economically. Though contemporary India has seen improvements in women's rights, the historical legacy of caste and gender oppression still lingers, necessitating continued reform and awareness rooted in feminist and historical critique.

The Educational and Religious Rights

Women in the Early Vedic period had access to education and were known as Brahnavadinis (women scholars) which included women like Lopamudra, Apala, Maitreyi, Gargi and many more. However, during the Later Vedic period, their access to education was significantly reduced. The freedom of reading Vedas was restricted and they were discouraged from participating in religious rituals.

Social Restrictions

The emergence of Manusmriti (circa 200 BCE) reinforced male dominance, stating:

"A woman should be under the protection of her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her son in old age." (Manusmriti 9.3)

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The custom of Sati (widow self-immolation) and child marriage started gaining acceptance. Women were excluded from Sabhas (assemblies) and Samitis (decision-making councils), which were previously open to them in the Early Vedic period.

Economic and Property Rights

Women lost their economic independence, as property rights were largely transferred to male members of the family. According to Arthashastra (4th century BCE), women had limited rights to inheritance, except in cases where no male heir was present. Romila Thapar in her book “A History of India, 2002” states that the proportion of women in decision-making roles decreased by nearly 50% compared to the Early Vedic period.

Status of Marginalized Caste Women During the Later Vedic Period

Caste system was extremely rigid during this time and the major people suffering were the women. But it was just not women, there was a multi-layered level to it and thus even within the marginalized section of women there were the so called “lower caste” women. These were the major impacts that these women faced during the Later Vedic Period.

Exclusion From Religious and Social Life.

Women from lower castes were systematically excluded from Vedic education and religious practices. Unlike upper-caste women, who were restricted but still had limited access to rituals, marginalized caste women were entirely barred from participating in yajnas (sacrificial rituals) and temple activities.

The Manusmriti stated that "No collection of wealth must be made by a Shudra, even if he is able to do it; for a Shudra who acquires wealth gives pain to the Brahmins." (Manusmriti 10.129). Women from marginalized castes were relegated to roles as manual laborers, servants, or agricultural workers.

Economic and Labor Exploitation

Marginalized caste women were primarily engaged in menial and degrading jobs, such as cleaning, carrying water, or working in fields for upper-caste landowners. They had no rights over property

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and were often treated as hereditary laborers, bound to serve upper-caste families. The emergence of jati-based professions ensured that lower-caste women remained trapped in poverty and servitude for generations.

Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Marginalized caste women were more vulnerable to sexual exploitation as they were not protected by social norms that governed upper-caste women. The Devadasi system, which later institutionalized the sexual exploitation of lower-caste women in temples, is believed to have its roots in this period. Historical accounts suggest that women from oppressed backgrounds were often subjected to forced labor and physical abuse without any legal or societal protection.

Complete Ostracization from Education

While some upper-caste women were allowed to receive limited education, marginalized caste women were completely denied literacy. They were forbidden from learning Sanskrit and could not participate in oral traditions of knowledge transmission. The cultural practices and traditions of lower-caste communities were often demonized or excluded from mainstream Vedic literature.

The Status Quo and the Later Vedic Period

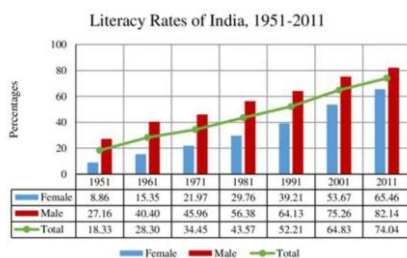
The feminist movement has achieved significant growth and height. It has not reached its apex but definitely brought in magnificent changes in the lives of women and other genders regardless of their caste, creed and religion. Today we see women working in areas where once they were prohibited to enter, today there are innumerable campaigns for educating women. But this paper is not just about women, it is also about those underprivileged section of women who were regarded as the “untouchables.” While contemporary India has seen advancements in women's rights and opportunities, challenges persist, especially concerning safety and workforce participation. In the Later Vedic period, women's status experienced a decline compared to earlier times. Educational opportunities for women diminished, and societal norms became more patriarchal. Practices such as child marriage became prevalent, and women's participation in religious and public life was curtailed. The caste system also became more rigid, further restricting women's roles and freedoms.

Contemporary Status of Women In India

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Today, Indian women have made strides in various sectors, including education, politics, and the economy. However, disparities and challenges remain. The literacy rate among women has improved significantly. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's "Women and Men in India 2023" report, the female literacy rate has seen a substantial increase over the past decades.



Despite advancements, women's participation in the workforce remains limited. As of recent data, women constitute approximately 30% of the labor force in India. Safety concerns and societal norms often restrict women's employment opportunities, particularly in sectors requiring late working hours.

Safety remains a significant concern. In 2022, there were 31,982 reported rape cases in India, highlighting the ongoing issue of gender-based violence. High-profile incidents, such as the tragic case of a young doctor's rape and murder in Kolkata, have sparked nationwide protests and discussions about women's safety.

Women's representation in politics has seen gradual improvement. The "Women and Men in India 2023" report provides insights into the participation of women in decision-making roles, indicating a positive trend, though parity is yet to be achieved.

Conclusion

Power and women have always been considered as oxymorons, with society struggling to acknowledge that women possess the same capabilities as men. Subtle yet pervasive misogynistic

attitudes continue to shape our perceptions, making it difficult for this realization to take hold. This is especially true for women who belong to marginalized classes, who endure exploitation both within their families and within society at large. India's progress, particularly in terms of caste equality, owes much to the tireless efforts of figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who fought relentlessly for the rights of Dalit communities and their women. The women of modern India have advanced in many ways, but this progress has only been possible due to the measures that have been implemented. India, a country which is diverse in all its senses, filled with rich culture, has definitely come a long way to cater to the needs of the marginalized class and remove every aspect of discrimination related to caste and class. There is definitely a lot more that needs to be achieved but India has come a long way and the journey is nothing short of magnanimous growth.

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