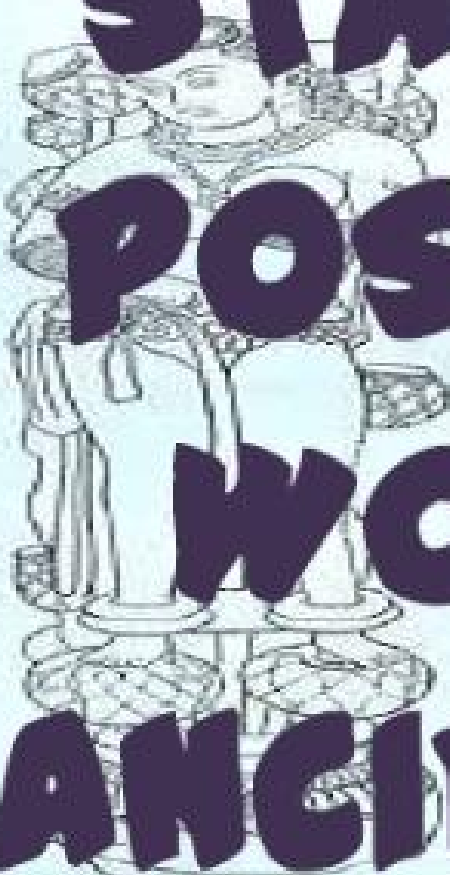


POSITION AND STATUS OF WOMEN  
IN ANCIENT INDIA



**STATUS AND  
POSITION OF  
WOMEN IN  
ANCIENT INDIA**

*Editor*

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# INTRODUCTION

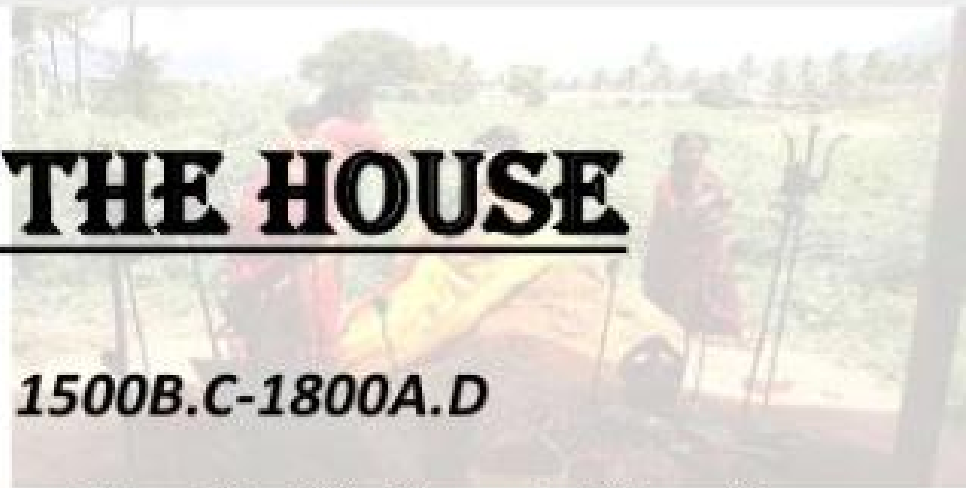
- The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful.
- The evolution of the status of women in India has been a continuous process of ups and downs throughout history. For the purpose of depicting a brief survey of the changing position and role of women in India throughout history, two broad periods are considered: (a) 2500 B.C-1500 B.C., and (b) 1500 B.C. - 1800 A.D.
- These divisions are based on degree of freedom that women enjoyed and the role differentiation within the family. Throughout classic literature on the status of women there is almost consistent opinion among great scholars that during the age of Vedas (2500 - 1500 B. C.) a woman's status was equivalent to that of a man.
- Though it is difficult to specify the exact chronological time as to when the deterioration in woman's status started, one can state that gradual changes appeared during the age of Brahamanas, 1500B.C. and by the age of Sutras and Epics, 500 B.C. to A.D. o 500 and the age of the later Srutis, A.D.500 to A.D. 1800 the status had deteriorated considerably.



**2500B.C-1500BC**

## **POSITION IN THE HOUSE**

- This period is usually referred to as the early Vedic period. During this age a woman had a great extend of freedom like man, and her sphere of role relationships was not circumscribed by too many restrictions.
- At home, generally the mother was the mistress of the house. She had her usual routine of cleaning the house, decorate the house with lime powder etc. The Vedic Samhitas refer to women taking active part in agriculture and other crafts like leather work, weaving mats, sewing etc. They were also in charge of household finances and farm laborers.



**1500B.C-1800A.D**

- Though it is difficult to say at which specific point of time deterioration in the status of women began, still there would be probably little disagreement among the experts if it is stated that women enjoyed a relatively -higher status in the early Vedic period.
- Traces of deterioration are found in all periods following 1500 B.C. But it became much more marked after the beginning of the Christian era.
- In short, the role of women conformed to the dictum laid down by Manu, the great law giver of second century that "a woman does not deserve freedom" and that her life should throughout be one of dependence on man. Another similar dictum laid down by Manu was that woman should be subservient in all stages of her life- "in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and his elderly kins and to the son when widowed".

# PROPERTY

## ***2500B.C-1500BC***

- The Vedic hymns inform that both husband and wife were joint owners of family property.
- In Rig-Veda, a daughter retained her right of inheritance and could substitute a son.
- Women were permitted to have separate property of their own which came to be designed in later Smritis as Stridhan.

## ***1500B.C-1800A.D***

- Though according to the early traditions both husband and wife were joint owners of the property by this time in real practice the husband was the sole owner of the family property and no legal remedy was there for the wife to claim a share even under unjust circumstances.
- During this period the sole ownership of the women's Stridhan was also questioned. The right to inheritance was denied to women. But some women of influential houses defied the Brahmanical rules and held property such as Prabhavati Gupta daughter of King Samudra Gupta of the Gupta dynasty.



# EDUCATION

## **2500B.C-1500BC**

- Some of the high class women were highly educated and actively participated in intellectual philosophical discussions. One comes across references to lady sages like Gosha, Gargi and Maitreyi.
- During the Vedic period girls and boys were initiated into the Vedic studies by performing a rite of passage called upanayan ceremony. It is believed that there were as many as twenty women being credited for composing the hymns of the Rig Veda.
- During Upanishad period there were Brahmanyadinis, lifelong students of Philosophy and Sadyodvaha, those who prosecuted their studies till their marriage. One renowned scholar was Gargi who challenged Yagnavalkya and asked many subtle and intricate questions. Upanishad also includes a conversation between Yagnavilkya and one of his two wives Maitreyi over division of property at the decision by the sage to renounce the world.
- Women were also active participants in the Vidhata.

## **1500B.C-1800A.D**



- The main reason for the deterioration of the status of women in this period is denial of education. The high note about the education of women was not to continue for long. The discontinuance of upanayan and the lowering of marriageable age prevented them from acquiring Vedic knowledge.
- They came to be held in low esteem and the education that was given to them was the one that suited them to fulfill their duties in the household of her husband. In other words, the education that was imparted to girls was entirely domestic and vocational in the sense that they were being trained for that which was considered a woman's main or principal work, the duties of the household.
- There was also a decline in their participation in the assemblies.
- Since higher education was not permissible to girls, they were given training in fine arts like music, dancing and painting from early times. Some women went in for military and administrative training.

# MARRIAGE

## 2500B.C-1500BC

- It is ordained that the woman whose hand is accepted in marriage should be treated with respect and kindness and all that is agreeable to her shall be given to her.
- All these indicate that a woman held a status equal to man and there were considerably less restrictions on her activities outside the home.
- Though marriage was of great social and religious significance, it was not mandatory as the extensive use of the word "Amajur", which means a girl who grew at her father's house, suggests this.
- The Vedas include references to unmarried female rishis like Apala and Aitreya. Girls were regarded as objects of good women. The grown-up daughters during the temporary absence of the parents managed household and received the guests. Girls were allowed to marry late and even choose their life partner.

## 1500B.C-1800A.D

- The marriageable age of girls was lowered from 15-16 years to 8-9 years. The ideal marriage was considered the one in which the bride was 1/3<sup>rd</sup> the age of the groom-thus a man of 24 should marry a girl of 8. Thus child marriage was gaining popularity. Marriage was regarded as the substitute of upanayan for girls.
- Wives were considered subordinate to husbands. They had no voice in the opinions of the house and had to live under the complete control of the husband and other elders of the family.
- Marriage was considered necessary and compulsory for girls and ascetic life was not allowed under any condition.
- The bride's major duty was to make efforts to merge her personality with that of her husband's in matter both mundane and spiritual, and also to adapt herself to the traditions and sentiments of the family of which she had become a full fledged member. Her position was one of honorable subordination. It was expected from her to show respect to and obey all the elder members of the family.

# PROSTITUTION

## *2500B.C-1500BC*

- A class of women who mixed freely with both men and women were called Ganikas and Vesyas.
- They are depicted as beautiful, accomplished, wealthy women enjoying a position of fame and honor. She had to be trained in the sixty-four kalas.
- They were honored by village assemblies for their expertise in arts of music and dance.  
E.g. Ambrapali.

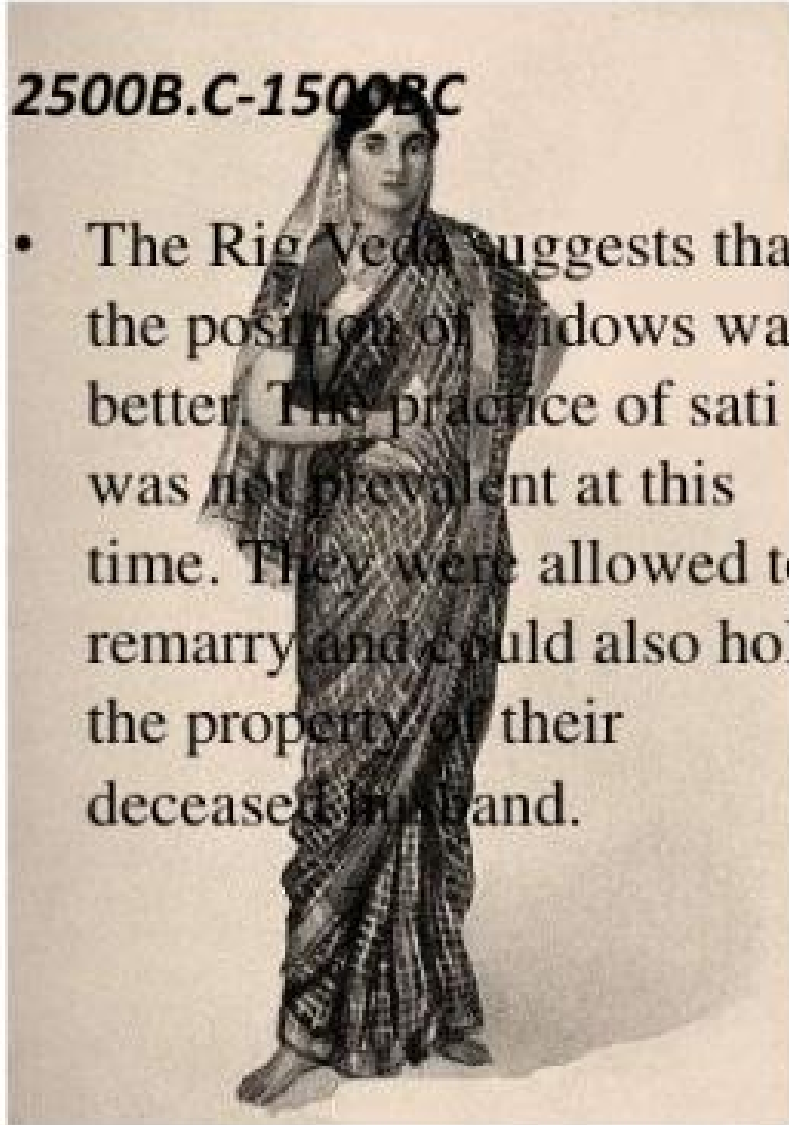
## *1500B.C-1800A.D*

- They came to be looked down upon when the dancing girls attached to the temples fell into immorality
- These fine arts came to be regarded as fit only for such girls.
- The murder of a prostitute was not considered as a sin and the murderer incurred no punishment at Law.

# WIDOWS

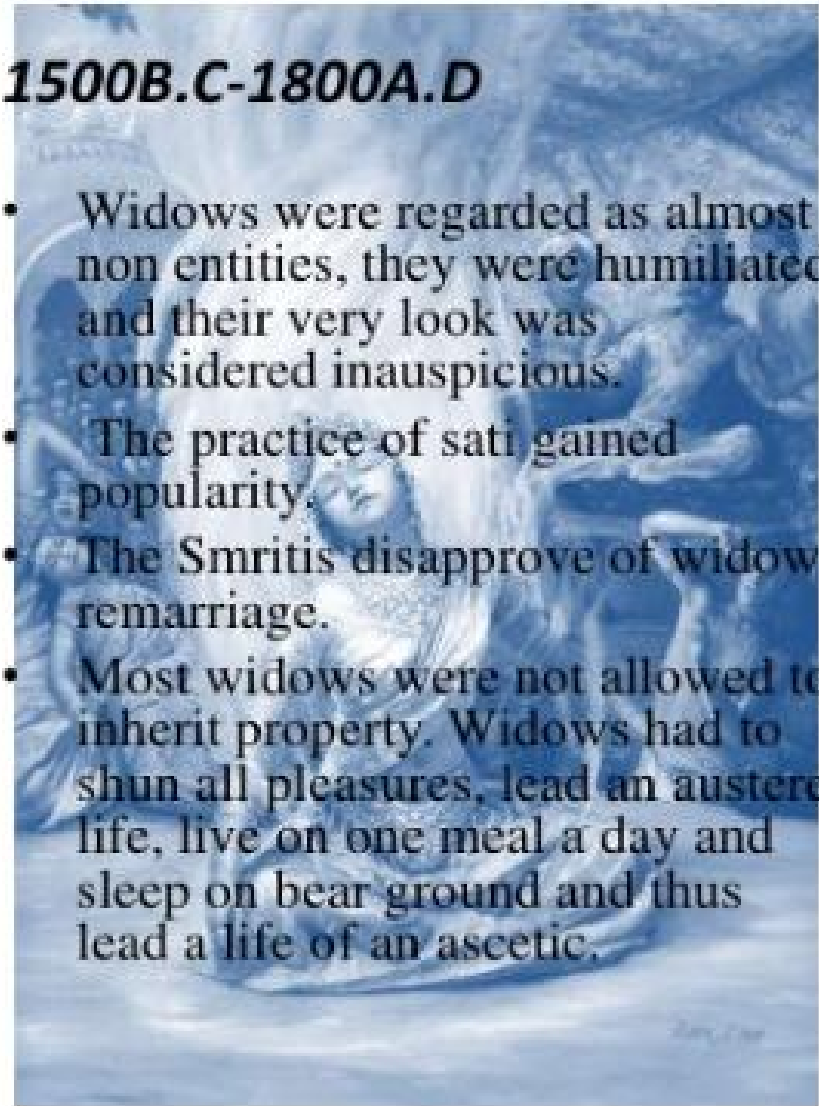
**2500B.C-1500BC**

- The Rig Veda suggests that the position of widows was better. The practice of sati was not prevalent at this time. They were allowed to remarry and could also hold the property of their deceased husband.



**1500B.C-1800A.D**

- Widows were regarded as almost non entities, they were humiliated and their very look was considered inauspicious.
- The practice of sati gained popularity.
- The Smritis disapprove of widow remarriage.
- Most widows were not allowed to inherit property. Widows had to shun all pleasures, lead an austere life, live on one meal a day and sleep on bear ground and thus lead a life of an ascetic.





# CONCLUSION

- The equality in status and position with her opposite sex that women enjoyed during the Rig Vedic age was short-lived and then onwards she began to be treated as a second class citizen
- The society was unsympathetic to her cause and the small mercies that were shown to her from time to time were shown only grudgingly.
- The only silver line in this sordid picture is that the lower orders of the society, which constituted nearly 80% of the population, were free from many of these encumbrances.