
CONDITION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY AND EGYPTIAN SOCIETY DURING ANCIENT TIME: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The human civilization has always catered women as objects in major part of history. But the condition of women was not such during the Ancient times. Specifically in India, women were treated with dignity and were at par with their male subordinates. Also in society of ancient Egypt, the status of women was much better and they enjoyed the same rights as of men. Women played both traditional and prominent roles in ancient Egyptian society, power structures and religion. Therefore this article explores and focuses on understanding more about status and condition of women during ancient period in Indian society and Egyptian society.

Keywords: Condition of Women, Ancient India, Ancient Egypt, History.

Introduction

“Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities¹.”

- M.K. Gandhi

The human societies across the globe have treated women in different ways. In general, the role of women has been largely subordinate to that of men; however, there have been different cultures and societies in which women has played a more equal and dominant role, for instance in ancient India and ancient Egypt.

Today the world has drastically changed with respect to condition and position of a woman in almost every region of the world. Where in many countries the condition of women has been revived as that was during ancient period but in many other regions the condition of women has improved and ennobled contrary to of what was their position in ancient societies.

During the ancient period, women in India enjoyed a dignified position. Also according to Indian culture women is considered to be goddess. Similarly in Egypt during the ancient times, women hold equal position to their male counterparts. It can be said that women in ancient Egypt society were ahead of their time. They hold premier position in the society. Also women were engaged in both domestic and physical labour work.

Condition of Women in Ancient India

The ancient period in India can be traced back from the Indus Valley Civilization to Vedic Period and so on till the decline of Gupta dynasty around 6th century B.C. During this long time period, the society dealt with women differently within different time line. From Sita, Draupadi, Kunti or Mandodari in Itihasas and Vedic Rishikas like Gargi and Maitreyi to Kshatriya women like Lakshimibai and Rudhramadevi or saints like Meera and Andal, represented various facets of

¹ Woman's Status and Role in Society, *available at*:

<https://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap60.htm#:~:text=Woman%20is%20the%20companion%20of,as%20man%20is%20in%20his.> (last visited on September 4, 2023).

womanhood and served as an inspiration for generations of women.²

1. Indus Valley Civilization (circa 3300-1300 B.C.)

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) or Harappan Civilization was one of the world's earliest urban societies. It existed in northwest India and modern day Pakistan.

In IVC, the women were treated respectfully. Worship of 'Mother Goddess' which was symbol of earth was performed.³ The woman was given equal honour and enjoyed full freedom.

2. Rig Vedic Period (circa 1500-300 B.C.)

The period marked the arrival of Indo-Aryans in Indian Subcontinent, and when oldest sacred texts of Hinduism were composed.

During this period women were highly regarded and were given equal education opportunities. They could also attend assemblies. The position of wife was an honoured one in the household. Practice of widow remarriage was also practiced, child marriage was unheard of and Sati Pratha was rare.⁴ Many upper-class women would hold *Swayamwars* to select the husband of their choice.

Although it was observed that families in Rig Vedic period were patriarchal one, therefore no desire is expressed for daughters. Also, some female divinities such as Aditi and Ushas were seen as less important than the male gods. But in general, women and men were in equal footing during Vedic period.⁵

3. Later Vedic Period (circa 1000- 500 B.C.)

In this period, the position of women slightly degraded although the marriage and

² Four Women Icons From India's Dharmic Tradition, *available at*: <https://www.indica.today/long-reads/four-women-icons-from-indias-dharmic-tradition/> (last visited on September 4, 2023).

³ Ram Sharan Sharma, *Ancient India* 62 (NCERT, Delhi).

⁴ *Supra* note 3 at 75.

⁵ *Supra* note 3 at 76.

educational rights remained same. In family, male ancestors came to be worshipped; women were generally given a lower position.

In the great Indian Epics of Ramayan and Mahabharat⁶, it is well observed that woman was considered to be a living commodity, but many references from these epics also reflect that women were highly respected and used to guide men on religious and social questions.

Women in later Vedic period were asked for dowry and widow remarriage was not always encouraged. Further, she was not permitted to leave the four walls of her home and was forced to work as housewife.

4. Maurya Empire (circa 322-185 B.C.)

It was the first major empires in ancient India. The founder of this empire was Chandragupta Maurya under the guidance of his teacher Chanakya or Kautilya who wrote 'Arthashastra'. It states that women had property rights to the *stridhan*, which was gift made to a woman the time of her marriage by her parents and afterwards augmented by her husband.⁷

Under Maurya Dynasty, widow could remarry but they lose rights to any property inherited from their deceased husbands.

One remarkable point during this period was that women formed part of military. Pantanjali mentions of women spear bearers. Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador, writes about women soldiers who rode elephants and horses.⁸ He also mentioned that women could move out in night without fear. It is said that women in India were safer than in Greece and west during this period.

⁶ Women in Ancient India, *available at*: <https://www.insightsonindia.com/society/role-of-women-and-womens-organization/women-in-ancient-india/> (last visited on September 5, 2023).

⁷ *Supra* note 6.

⁸ Women During Chanakya/Maurya Era, *available at*: <https://kreately.in/women-during-chanakya-maurya-era/> (last visited on September 5, 2023).

5. Gupta Empire (circa 600 B.C. - 600 C.E.)

The Gupta period is often referred to as a “Golden Age” of Indian history. During this period, women were expected to be educated, to give and to receive sexual pleasure. The practice of *Swayamwars* was abandoned.

Women were allowed to listen to the Ramayan and Mahabharat and the Puranas.⁹ Also royal women were visible on coins and seals, for instance, coin depicting Chandragupta I and his wife Kumaradevi.¹⁰

Importance of women education was given in royal families to princesses and other elite women as referred by Vatsyayana. The art of this period suggests that purdah system was not prevalent at that time.

Various literary texts such as Kamasutra,¹¹ Katyayana Smriti mentions that a good wife serves her husband and must always live with her husband.

Therefore, it can be said that the status and position of women largely remained same in few aspects but drastically changed till end in other important aspects of life.

Condition of women in Ancient Egypt

Among the oldest civilizations, the Egyptian Civilization was also the one where the women were given equal importance. It is pertinent to note that the women in ancient Egypt were ahead of their time. They could not only rule the country, but also had many of same basic human rights as men¹². The respect with which women were treated in Ancient Egypt had its basis in religion. For the Ancient Egyptians, balance and equality were intrinsic to their belief system – as were feminine concepts such as fertility and rebirth. The Egyptian *pantheon* included many, many female deities, each with a different area of expertise. Egyptian art, architecture, religious practices, and even

⁹ *Supra* note 3 at 190.

¹⁰ Gupta Period (320 CE–550 CE)| Important Facts, *available at*: <https://panaceaconcept.in/gupta-period-320-ce-550-ce-important-facts/> (last visited on September 5, 2023).

¹¹ Written by Vatsyayana.

¹² Women of Ancient Egypt, *available at*: <https://www.ushistory.org/civ/3f.asp> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

governmental agencies all exhibit a perfect symmetry of balance and this can also be seen in gender roles throughout the history of ancient Egyptian civilization.¹³

There were many famous Egypt's female rulers such as Cleopatra, Queen Nefertiti, and Hatshepsut who was one of the first women to hold rank of pharaoh in 1500 B.C.

In the ancient Egyptian society, women whether married, unmarried, divorced or widowed was nearly identical with that of Egyptian men. In the legal arena both men and women were responsible for their own acts. Women could enter into contracts by their own name, can initiate civil court cases and be sued by their name¹⁴.

But there were some kind of disparity too between men and women. For instance, in the literary text entitled "The Instructions of the (Vizier) Ptahhotep," a man's wife is seen basically as a dependent, of whom it behooves him to take good, and loving, care.¹⁵

The women worked in food processing, its preparation, and agriculture. They also wove garments for sale as well as for use at home. They could carry out their husband's duties on his behalf. They performed as dancers and musicians for both entertainment and ritual purposes. Women could even work as professional mourners for funerals.¹⁶

Overall, women in ancient Egypt played an important role in many aspects of daily life and religion. They had equal rights to men with regards to the property and in court cases, but the average woman's focus was on a traditional role as wife and mother. Women at the upper echelons of society could reach the same level as men, sometimes ruling the country and playing a prominent role in religious cults.

¹³ Women in Ancient Egypt, *available at*: <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/623/women-in-ancient-egypt/> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

¹⁴ Women's rights and their money: a timeline from Cleopatra to Lilly Ledbetter, *available at*: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/us-money-blog/2014/aug/11/women-rights-money-timeline-history> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

¹⁵ Women's Legal Rights in Ancient Egypt, *available at*: <https://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777190170/> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

¹⁶ Women in Ancient Egypt, *available at*: <https://www.ees.ac.uk/women-in-ancient-egypt#:~:text=Ancient%20Egyptian%20women%20had%20a,the%20banks%20of%20the%20Nile.> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

Conclusion

Women in ancient India and ancient Egypt lived in very different societies with distinct cultural, social, and religious norms.

In ancient India, women's roles were primarily centered on their family and household duties. However, women could also play active roles in society as scholars, poets, and even rulers in some cases, like Queen Didda of Kashmir.¹⁷ Ancient Egyptian women had more diverse roles in society. They could be priestesses, musicians, dancers, and some even held high-ranking positions in the royal court. Women in Egypt had legal rights and could own property, inherit, and initiate divorce.

In India, arranged marriages were common, and women were expected to marry within their caste or social group. The practice of "Sati" (widow self-immolation) was observed in some regions and time periods but was not widespread. Egyptian women had more autonomy in choosing their partners, and divorce was relatively easy to obtain. They had property rights, and inheritance was often matrilineal. Women could also act as legal guardians for their children.

Women in ancient India played significant roles in religious rituals and practices. They were often seen as embodiments of goddesses and could serve as priestesses in temples. Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata feature strong and influential female characters like Sita and Draupadi. Egyptian religion had a pantheon of goddesses, and women were often associated with divine qualities. Some women held the title of "God's Wife of Amun," which was a prestigious religious position. Women had opportunities to participate in religious ceremonies and rituals.

Education for women in ancient India was not as widespread as it was for men. However, there were exceptions, and some women received education in fields like philosophy, literature, and mathematics. Egyptian women had more access to education, and some women from elite families were literate. They could become scribes and contribute to administrative tasks.

In summary, while women in both ancient India and ancient Egypt faced certain societal expectations and limitations, the level of freedom, rights, and opportunities varied significantly

¹⁷ Queen Didda: The Woman Monarch Of Kashmir, *available at*: <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/05/13/queen-didda-kashmir/> (last visited on September 6, 2023).

between these two civilizations. However, it's essential to note that these differences also depended on factors such as social class, region, and time period within each civilization.