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# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL SPHERE OF ANCIENT INDIA AND REFORMS

## OF VIDYA SAGAR, RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY AND JYOTIRAO PHULE IN 19TH CENTURY INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the position of women throughout history, beginning with the Rigvedic and ancient eras and continuing into the colonial era. The paper begins by outlining the specific reasons for the deterioration of women's status. It then goes on to highlight several reforms and contributors who made a significant contribution towards the progression of the notion of women's liberation. The Child Marriage Act, the Widow Remarriage Act, and the repeal of the sati pratha and purdah systems are some examples of the reforms that have been enacted. In this article, the primary emphasis is placed on the contributions made by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, and Jyoti Rao Phule. The purpose of this study is to investigate the significant factors and circumstances that shed light on a change in women's status from "one in need of a revelation" to "one that has been emancipated." Their religious practises and traditions placed a strong emphasis on their submissiveness to men, which is glorified in this article in hand as well. Although the society of the Rig Vedic period held women in high esteem and accorded them the respect that was due to them, during the subsequent Vedic period, women were subjected to practises that were discriminatory. The acquiring of educational opportunities, along with other rights and facilities, was the primary point of concentration for the observation of discrimination. Because of the prevalence of practises such as child marriage, sati, polygamy, and the purdah system, the position of women in society continued to deteriorate. In both the epics and the puranas, women are almost always depicted as being treated as property.

**Keywords:** Rigvedic, Colonial Era, The Child Marriage Act, the Widow Remarriage Act, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Jyoti Rao Phule, Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, the Devadasi system, and women's rights,

## INTRODUCTION:

There are various types of spheres, like widow remarriage, the elimination of sati, and legislation concerning the issue being discussed, age of consent. The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which Indians' perceptions of women may have been influenced by colonial laws. According to academic discourse, the British administration in India instituted regulations without considering the complex nature of Indian society. Therefore, the results either benefited the British government or were detrimental to the welfare of Indian women. Historically, women in India have been dependent on men. Their religious observances and customs, regardless of the circumstances, placed a significant emphasis on their submissiveness to male authority figures. The individuals whose rights were being violated were denied access to educational opportunities, equal treatment, and the ability to participate in efforts to promote social justice. Because of their lack of knowledge, they were also unaware of the fundamental rights that they were entitled to.

To provide women with access to political power, several authors worked towards the goal of freeing them from social conventions and practises such as sati, child marriage, female infanticide, the Devadasi system, the purdah system, and others. In the decades that followed India's declaration of independence, a growing number of women achieved emancipation and contributed to the literary canon with works that positioned female characters within the context of shifting social norms. Women have been forced to examine and establish their place in society because of advances in educational attainment and professional opportunities. In addition to the aforementioned recognition of women's rights and opportunities. These factors, taken together, have led to an expansion of women's rights and opportunities.

### 1. The position of women in ancient India.

Following the conclusion of the Vedic period, women experienced a loss of social and religious privileges. They were prohibited from engaging in social, religious, and cultural activities. Over time, the status of women experienced a gradual decline to the point where the birth of a female child within a family was considered an unfortunate event. The notion existed that the arrival of female offspring would pose a significant obstacle in the pursuit of promoting the well-being of both the household and the wider society<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, male offspring were

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<sup>1</sup> Rout, N. (2016). Role of Women in Ancient India. *Odisha Review*. Retrieved January 05, 2019 from <http://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2016/Jan/engpdf/43-48.pdf>

considered valuable resources. A prevalent perspective among individuals was that males were considered valuable assets who could elevate the social status and promote the well-being of their families and communities.

The social structure, cultural norms, value system, and social expectations in ancient India all had an impact on the role and position of women. The norms, values, principles, and standards of a society do not alter as quickly as the social structure because of the development of technology, modernization, and globalisation. One of the most prevalent aspects relating to women in Indian society is the practise of giving daughters in marriage and returning them to their marital homes after marriage. Because they are the ones who uphold the heritage and carry on the lineage, the male members are also seen as important. They are also thought to be less important than men because of the act of giving birth.

According to Manu's perspective, women are perceived as being primarily responsible for fulfilling the duties of a spouse and parent. In her role as a mother, she bears the responsibility of executing the requisite tasks and functions essential for fostering the development of her child. As a spouse, she bears the responsibility of fulfilling all tasks and carrying out all duties. Widows did not hold a position of reverence. They were excluded from various domains and were denied the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to social, cultural, or religious events. Additionally, there was a belief that the presence of a widow could impede the progress towards attaining one's goals and objectives. Conversely, a man who has lost his spouse is not bound by similar limitations. Within the Islamic faith, it is not permissible for women to serve as priests or to fulfil the priestly duties, including leading congregational prayers. Women are excluded from participation in religious organisations. Within the context of Buddhism, it is commonly observed that a male monk is afforded a higher social standing in comparison to a female nun.

In ancient India, women were highly esteemed and made noteworthy contributions towards promoting the well-being of both their families and society. Women were granted a prominent position in the society, which resulted in a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment among them. The individuals were afforded the chance to achieve elevated levels of intellectual and spiritual excellence. In this era, a significant number of female rishis were present. While polygamy was a belief held by the wealthier classes, monogamy was the prevailing practise. The prevalence of the system of sati and child marriage was low.

The Indian society, like numerous classical societies, exhibited a patriarchal structure. The patriarchal society placed significant emphasis on sexuality, reproduction, and social production as key considerations. The women were acknowledged for their significant contribution in executing these functions, as their role was deemed crucial. Conversely, there existed the development of regulations and protocols that restricted women from exercising specific entitlements and prospects, deeming them to be inferior to men. The manifestation of patriarchy in a nuanced manner was conveyed through symbolic representations that conveyed messages pertaining to the marginalised position of women. This was conveyed via the narratives emphasising acts of altruism. The ideal of female self-sacrifice has been historically upheld through the establishment of cultural norms and rituals. Women have been assigned significant roles as wives and mothers, reinforcing this ideal.

## **2. The phenomenon of female infanticide and foeticide in Ancient and British India**

The practise of family planning has been considered a significant aspect since ancient times. Both genders commonly entered matrimony at a youthful stage, often prior to attaining the age of 18. Consequently, child marriage was prevalent. The practise of child marriage has been found to have adverse consequences on women. Upon tying the knot, the newlyweds were subsequently dispatched to their respective matrimonial abodes. Thus, they were denied access to education and various childhood pursuits. In certain instances, females have also encountered instances of maltreatment and oppression from their spouses and extended family members. The issue of family planning was deemed to be of great importance, however, a notable challenge that arose was the prevalence of female foeticide and female infanticide practises.

The practise of female foeticide was observed in ancient India as well. In many instances, there exists a preference for male offspring among individuals, leading to the prevalence of female infanticide and female foeticide practises. Various methods of terminating the foetus were employed by families, particularly within tribal communities. The woman who underwent an involuntary abortion was subjected to severe punishment. In cases where a woman of higher caste procured an abortion with the assistance of a worker, the worker was liable to face punitive measures as well. In ancient India, abortion was not approved by religion and the community. They held the perspective that individuals who engage in abortion ought to subject themselves to self-punishment. Historically, various methods were employed to induce

abortion in ancient times. Various methods were employed by individuals, such as utilising herbal remedies, generating abdominal pressure, or wielding a formidable weapon.

During the 19th century, the British government identified certain regions as being susceptible to instances of infanticide. A study conducted in 1805 revealed a significant prevalence of female infanticide among the Rajput community residing in Saurashtra. In a village located in eastern Uttar Pradesh, a phenomenon was observed whereby the female offspring were conspicuously absent. In 1808, Alexander Walker, the primary figure of authority in Baroda, convened a meeting with the leaders of various communities to investigate the underlying cause of the practise of infanticide of female children. The Prevention of Murder of Female Infants Act was implemented by the British government in 1870. In 1898, the act of female infanticide was officially recognised as a criminal offence and subsequently, a Government order was enacted to classify it as a cognizable offence. The Government repealed the Prevention of Female Infanticide Act in 1906, citing the lack of prevalence of the infanticide practise within the communities. The legislation was rescinded as a result of certain political factors. During ancient times, the practise of female foeticide was prevalent. The act of female foeticide was deemed punishable and those who committed such an act were subjected to disciplinary measures. Thus, it can be asserted that this notion has been ingrained in the origins by the ancestors.

### **3. The role of women in the ancient Indian socio-economic and political system..**

In ancient India, it was believed that the religious environment held significant influence over education. The educational system in India can be predominantly attributed to the intellectual contributions of the Aryan civilization. Moreover, the Dravidians' emotional and material nature primarily stimulated the aesthetic and vocational aspects. In the Vedic era, women held a significant position in society. In the ancient era, education was considered a crucial factor in improving one's standard of living. The prevailing belief among individuals was that education would facilitate the attainment of desired goals and lead to a more fulfilling life. To improve their existing conditions, It is imperative for individuals to develop a comprehensive comprehension of diverse elements, including but not limited to morality, ethics, academic concepts, culture, religion, norms, values, standards, and principles.

Women were motivated to pursue education due to their significant role in making sure that their families and communities were healthy and well.

They made a noteworthy contribution in various domains, including but not limited to the execution of domestic duties, healthcare provision, fostering child growth and development, attending to the needs of elderly relatives, conservation of the environment, and other related areas.

Women were entrusted with the responsibility of imparting knowledge pertaining to morals and ethics to individuals. The attainment of education has empowered women to lead a life characterised by honour and esteem. Women who were educated and well-informed were held in high regard and valued by their community. As a result of obtaining education, women have gained self-assurance, enabling them to safeguard themselves against any type of maltreatment or exploitation.

During the Vedic period, the status and conditions of women were comparatively superior to those of other historical periods. Women were allowed to pursue education even if they did not express a desire to marry, without facing any limitations<sup>2</sup>. A significant proportion of young women hailing from affluent households were afforded the opportunity to pursue formal education. The Upanayana, also known as the initiation ceremony, was conducted for both male and female individuals. It can be argued that during the Aryan period, there was a growing recognition of the importance of educating women.

There was no discrimination based on gender in terms of educational opportunities for women. The individuals expressed concern regarding the moral correctness of women's position within the societal hierarchy. The Vedas reveal that the Aryan race exhibited a collective consciousness in disseminating regulations and statutes, as well as in improving the status of women. It made a significant contribution to the collective creative potential of the general population. The Aryans exhibited a level of consciousness regarding gender power dynamics and conflicts that were prevalent during their era. The rationale behind this is that, at that juncture, the societal structure was still in a nascent phase of growth and evolution.

During the pre-Vedic era, women participated in religious rituals and offerings alongside their spouses. In the context of formal education for girls and women, it was mandatory for them to proficiently recite mantras or verses with precision and efficacy. Numerous female scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Roy, S. (2017). Educational status of women in the Vedic period: An Introduction. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3(8), 357-358. Retrieved January 05, 2019 from <http://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2017/vol3issue8/PartF/3-6-228-625.pdf>

during the Vedic era successfully navigated various limitations. During the Vedic era, individuals were afforded equitable opportunities, specifically with regards to obtaining an education. During this period, there were several notable female scholars such as Apala, Atreyiand, and Ghosha. Within affluent households, select educators have been hired to impart instruction to pupils in various artistic disciplines, including but not limited to dance, music, floral arrangement, painting, needlework, prestidigitation, poetry composition, and toy-making.

Therefore, it can be asserted that there existed a system of authority and women were held in high esteem within the societal structure. Women participated in religious, social, or cultural functions alongside their husbands. The prevailing social norms were characterised by a strong emphasis on moral conduct, and interpersonal relationships were fostered through a shared sense of goodwill and amicability.

During ancient times in India, women were educated and possessed a significant level of knowledge and information. The categorization of learned women was divided into two distinct groups: the Brahmavadinis, who abstained from marriage and dedicated their lives to the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to the Vedas. Brahmavadinis were individuals who dedicated their lives to the study of philosophy and theology. The second group referred to as Sadyodvahas, devoted their time to studying the Vedas until they entered matrimony. These female individuals pursued their academic endeavours until they entered matrimony at the ages of fifteen or sixteen.

Women who engaged in the study of the Vedas were commonly referred to as paninis. The term "Upadhyaya" or "Upadhyayi" was used to refer to female teachers. The hymns were composed by the Buddhist nuns. Females have been known to compose Sanskrit dramas and poetry, in addition to demonstrating exceptional aptitude in various other domains such as the visual arts, music, and portraiture. There is evidence to suggest that rulers and monarchs placed significant value on the education of women and ensured that both male and female offspring received an education.

Women held a significant position in the realm of politics. Women hailing from the aristocratic strata were afforded the chance to refine their educational aptitude and competence, and derived enjoyment from various other pursuits. However, it was the women who were considered common that endured hardship and disgrace. Women from the ruling classes were

primarily involved in political and administrative roles within the state. They exhibited sufficient expertise and were actively involved in the decision-making procedures.

The primary objective of this study is to assess the involvement of women in politics and their societal status in ancient times. To achieve this, a concise overview of the satisfactory system was provided, with particular emphasis on the varna and caste systems.

The Rig Veda provides insight into the perceived societal expectations of women through the depiction of a maiden and bride in its imagery. The young women and female servants were praised for their luminosity and attractive embellishments. Therefore, in the execution of political duties, it was imperative for women to make a substantial contribution towards advancing the well-being of the community and the nation, through the appropriate decision-making and effective execution of administrative functions.

The significance of women's economic contributions was recognised in ancient India. During the execution of seasonal tasks, women provided support to the male members of the community. The participation of women in diverse professions and their role in generating revenue is considered a crucial element in maintaining their means of subsistence.

#### **4. The contributions of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in 19th century social reform of India.**

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a multifaceted individual. He was a notable social reformer in addition to being a great scholar. In particular, women's regeneration served as the inspiration for many of his ideas and creations that were part of his social reform initiatives. He researched the honour and social standing that women once held. In his own time, he also examined the underlying causes of their plight and came to the conclusion that releasing women from the hardships of social injustices and malpractices would be necessary to restore their freedom, accord them the respect and honour they deserve, and bring them within the bounds of equality. He placed a strong emphasis on women's education.

Women were subject to social injustices as a result of their lack of education. As a result, they were denied their human rights and had no idea what life was all about. According to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar himself, education. Vidyasagar began his social movement from Bengal in both the fields of women's education and freeing them from social evils, dealing with

education and its fundamental spirit at its core, i.e., the realisation and development of virtues within everyone equally. His efforts to advance the welfare, empowerment, and elevation of women proved to be a major accomplishment, and he became a major source of inspiration for others.

In those days, women's social status, particularly among Hindus, was pitiful. As has been mentioned, social ills caused a hellish environment for women across the nation. The male-dominated culture of that time framed those malpractices.

Vidyasagar promised to improve women's status and laid the foundation for second marriages. It was a difficult task. But Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who was dedicated to the admirable cause of humanity, was successful. His tireless efforts led to the Indian government passing the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. Following the Sati Regulation Act, it was in fact yet another revolutionary social step.

He pushed his only son Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyay to marry a widow in order to gain support for the implementation of the widow remarriage provision.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also actively opposed polygamy and campaigned against the sin of child marriage<sup>3</sup>. These two social ills had a negative impact on women's self-respect and dignity. He started a campaign to combat these social ills. The Child Marriage Prevention Act was passed in 1929 as a result of the combined efforts of later legendary Indian figures like Swami Dayananda Saraswathi (1824–1883), and Swami Vivekananda. Numerous steps were taken to end polygamy, but it wasn't until India gained its independence that this practise could be ended. Ironically, not all facets of society are adhering to it in the same way.

In Bengal, he founded a large number of educational institutions. Additionally, emphasis was placed specifically on promoting values among girls. They were instructed on the fundamental beliefs of Indian culture as well as the country's former glory.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar established 35 educational institutions for females across the Bengal region. In pursuit of this objective, the individual in question instituted a

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<sup>3</sup> Sanghamitra Basu Roy (2022); AN ANALYSIS OF ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR AS PIONEER OF WOMAN EDUCATION *Int. J. of Adv. Res.* 10 (Jan). 512-513] (ISSN 2320-5407). [www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com) <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/14069>

commemorative endowment known as the Nari-Shiksha Bandar. The establishment of Bethune School in Calcutta in 1849, which was the first women's school in India, can be attributed to the inspiration of the individual in question. In 1879, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune established the institution, which subsequently became the inaugural women's college in Asia.

## 5. Abolition of Sati in India.

The act of Sati involved the self-immolation of a Hindu woman on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Despite lacking Vedic sanction, this practise has gained prevalence in certain regions of India. According to cultural beliefs, the act of a widow ascending to heaven was regarded as the ultimate sacrifice and a testament to a woman's unwavering loyalty to her spouse. A number of instances of Sati<sup>4</sup> were undertaken willingly, while others were carried out under duress. Raja Rammohan Roy, a prominent Hindu reformer hailing from Bengal, actively opposed various societal malpractices that were prevalent in the Hindu community of Bengal. Notably, the practise of Sati was among the primary issues that he sought to address.

The individual had personally observed the act of self-immolation of his familial relation, specifically his sister-in-law. In 1812, he initiated his campaign against this particular custom. William Carey, an English missionary, also opposed this uncivilised custom. In the year 1817, an estimated 700 widows were subjected to the practise of self-immolation. Despite the initial British allowance, the prohibition of it was implemented in Calcutta in 1798. Nevertheless, the tradition persisted in the adjacent regions. Raja Rammohan Roy was an outspoken advocate against the practise of Sati. The individual presented a contention that the practise of Sati was not endorsed by the Vedas and other antiquated Hindu texts. The author composed pieces in his publication *Sambad Kaumudi* espousing the prohibition of the aforementioned subject matter.

He advocated for the prohibition of this practise to the East India Company administration. In 1828, Lord William Bentinck assisted Raja Rammohan Roy in eradicating several prevalent societal malpractices namely Sati, child marriage, polygamy, and female infanticide. The

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<sup>4</sup> Midgley, C. (2000). Female emancipation in an imperial frame: english women and the campaign against sati (widow-burning) in India, 1813–30. *Womens History Review*, 9(1), 95–121.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020000200234>

enactment of a law prohibiting the practise of Sati throughout the jurisdiction of the British East India Company in India was carried out under the leadership of Lord Bentinck.

The act of sati, which involves the burning or burying alive of widows in Hindu culture, is considered repugnant to human sensibilities. It is not mandated as an obligatory duty by the Hindu religion; rather, a life of purity and seclusion is emphasised and preferred for widows. The practise is not universally observed among the majority of Hindus in India, and in certain regions, it is non-existent. In areas where it has been prevalent, numerous instances of heinous acts have been committed, which have been deemed unlawful and immoral by the Hindu community. The act of suttee, which involves the immolation or interment of widows in Hinduism, is hereby deemed unlawful and subject to prosecution by the criminal justice system.

Following the enactment of this law, comparable legislation prohibiting this practise was subsequently introduced in various princely states throughout India. Following the British Crown's assumption of control over India in 1861, Queen Victoria promulgated a comprehensive prohibition on the practise of Sati throughout the country. In 1987, the State Government of Rajasthan enacted the Sati (Prevention) Act, which criminalised the act of burning or burying alive widows, whether voluntary or forced. Additionally, the law made it illegal to glorify such acts or participate in any procession related to Sati. The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 was passed by the Indian Parliament in 1988, thereby becoming an official Act.

## **6. The contributions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 19th century social reform of India.**

Raja Ram Mohan Roy vehemently opposed the societal injustices pertaining to women's rights and unfounded superstitions. The individual tried to emancipate women from unfounded beliefs. Lord William Bentinck, in conjunction with others, abolished the practise of Sati-Daha as a means of protesting against the conservative norms prevalent in society. He has endeavoured to prevent the practise of child marriage and polygamy.

He successfully organised a collective of individuals who were engaged in protesting. The individual vehemently objected to the conventional beliefs, irrational practices, and idolatrous tendencies prevalent within the community. The 'Atmiya Sabha' featured discussions on a range of topics including idolatry, sati practice, discrimination on the basis of caste, and

polygamy. The individual in question obtained public backing through the translation of Hindu scriptures.

The individual endeavoured to disseminate the concept of 'Vedic monotheism' due to their disbelief in the existence of multiple deities. The individual in question expressed a desire to impart knowledge to the Indian populace through religious reforms, with a focus on exploring the fundamental tenets of Hinduism, Muslimism, Buddhism, and Christianity, which are the universal truths of religion.

## **7. The contributions of Jyoti rao Phule in 19th century social reform of India**

Jotirao observed that women and individuals belonging to the Untouchable caste had been subjected to exploitation for numerous centuries. Jotirao initially made the decision to establish a school for female students. His perspective was that the lack of education among women would hinder the overall education of society. The influence of an educated mother on the wisdom and character development of a child surpasses that of a thousand teachers or masters. Therefore, he deduced that the lack of education among women, who constitute half of the population, would impede the development of India<sup>5</sup>. A significant proportion of female students enrolled in the school belonged to the marginalised communities commonly referred to as the "untouchable" and other socially and economically disadvantaged castes.

Joti Rao observed that individuals belonging to marginalised castes, including Mahar, Matang, Mang, Pasi, Bhangi, and Chamar, were experiencing significant emotional distress and a lack of clarity. During a conversation with Jotirao and Shri Govande, Miss Farrar conveyed her melancholy regarding the exclusion of women from the realm of education. He assumed the responsibility of enhancing their circumstances. Jotirao initiated the instruction of his spouse, Savitribai, subsequent to his visitation to the missionary girls' school located in Ahmednagar. Upon acquiring sufficient knowledge, Jotirao extended the offer of a teaching position to Savitribai. Savitribai acquiesced to this proposition with delight. Upon sharing Joti Rao's responsibility of educating women, Savitribai attained the distinction of being the first female teacher in modern India.

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<sup>5</sup> Shiladhar Yallappa Mugali and Priyadarshini Sharanappa Amadihal Proceedings of the Indian History Congress Vol. 69 (2008), pp. 691-700 (10 pages) Published By: Indian History Congress <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147232>

## 8. Conclusion

Women were given importance and recognition in old India but were also subjected to numerous restrictions. The women from well to do families contributed significantly to improve the family and community's quality of life. They received educational opportunities, entered the teaching profession, and improved their administrative and political function-carrying skills and abilities. Female infanticide and female foeticide were frequently practiced, which was one of the key reasons for the decline in the number of girls. With time, these behaviours were recognised as criminal behaviour, and programmes and measures to stop them from occurring were developed. Numerous things happened to women that had a negative impact on their wellbeing. These include sati, polygamy, forced child marriage, the purdah system, and illiteracy. They were reliant on the male family members and were barred from making any decisions on their own.

In ancient India, the status of women had both positive and negative effects. In addition to receiving opportunities, they also encountered prejudice. There was a link between women's status and their financial standing. This in turn depends on the freedoms and opportunities to participate meaningfully in economic activities. In India, the agricultural sector employed a large portion of the workforce. Additionally, both sexes worked at jobs like weaving, crafting, pottery making, and other occupations. Therefore, women were typically married off at a young age, denied the opportunity to pursue an education, and expected to manage household duties and tend to the needs and requirements of the family members. Women typically stayed at home because they spent most of their time taking care of the household. In addition to these, they worked in the production and manufacturing sectors to help support the family.

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