

Status Of Women In Medieval And Modern India Continuity, Change And Amelioration

Lavany Anjali Mukkerla^{1*}, Meetha Joshi², R. Bhramara Sree³

¹Asst. Prof & Head, Dept. of Public Administration, St. Ann's College for Women- Hyderabad

²Asst. prof & Head, Dept. of History, St. Ann's College for Women- Hyderabad

³Asst. prof & Head, Dept. of Political Science, St Ann's College for Women- Hyderabad

Citation: Lavany Anjali Mukkerla, et. al (2024), Status Of Women In Medieval And Modern India Continuity, Change And Amelioration, *Educational Administration: Theory And Practice*, 30(5) 14062 - 14068

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.6240

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Women have played a significant role in shaping both Medieval and modern Indian history. In Medieval times, women held positions of power as rulers, poets, and scholars, challenging traditional gender roles. Despite barriers, many made notable contributions to art, literature, and politics. In modern Indian history, women have continued to break boundaries, advocating for gender equality, education, and political representation. Their resilience and determination have made a lasting impact on Indian society, paving the way for future generations of women to thrive and succeed in all aspects of life. This paper examines the status of women in India from the medieval period to the present day, focusing on the continuity, changes, and efforts towards amelioration. The study employs a historical-comparative methodology, utilizing a combination of primary sources, secondary literature, and Policy analysis. Findings indicate significant shifts in the socio-economic, cultural, and political status of women, with ongoing challenges and progressive policy directions for further improvement.

Keywords: Continuity, Change, History, Medieval, Modern, Women.

Introduction

Indian women's standing has changed dramatically over the course of many centuries. This trip exemplifies the intricate interaction between change and continuity, beginning in the Middle Ages with patriarchal rule and societal constraints and ending in the Modern Era with gender advocacy and legislative changes. The purpose of this article is to examine these shifts and assess the efficacy of programs designed to improve women's lives. Social differentiations are an inherent feature of any human community. One would be gender-based categorization. We traditionally thought of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers and nurturers of the household. From a historical perspective, it is clear that women's status in early Indian society was steadily deteriorating. Historical research of ancient Indian women's status reveals that they were not on an equal footing with males. Only in the roles of wife and mother were women acknowledged. They were considered second class citizens. Patriarchy in India has long controlled the country's social, political, and economic spheres, and it has never supported women outside the home. From the beginning of time, women in India have had less influence and a lower social standing than males. An important step toward women holding political office was the reform movement of the nineteenth century. Educating women and passing progressive laws, according to social reformers, would be the first steps toward a more equitable society. An increase in awareness and sensitivity to gender inequality is a necessary step in ending social problems.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a historical-comparative methodology, integrating qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources, Examination of primary sources such as legal documents, literature, and records from medieval India. Analysis of secondary sources including scholarly articles, books, and reports on the status of women. Evaluation of contemporary policies and their impacts based on government reports, non-governmental organizations (NGO) publications, and statistical data. Conducting interviews with historians, sociologists, policymakers, and women activists to gain insights into the socio-cultural dynamics and policy implications.

Objectives

1. To analyse the position of women in Medieval and Modern India.
2. To study the challenges faced by the women during that Period.
3. To know about the opportunities given to women.
4. To assess the impact of government machinery in promoting the empowerment of women.

Medieval Indian women's status

The situation of women deteriorated during the Middle Ages, as time went on, instead of improving. The Muslim and Rajput communities only instituted the "Purdah" and "Jauhar" systems of female subjugation during the Middle Ages. As a first definition, "Purdah" indicates that Muslim women cover their bodies entirely to protect themselves from men. Second, if a woman is a member of the family of fallen warriors, she may choose to self-immolate with her own permission in order to protect her life and possessions from the clutches of the enemy. The community under both systems severely limited women's liberty, denying them the freedom to live or die free from fear and oppression. Raziya Sultan, the first lady monarch of Delhi, Chand Bibi, who vanquished Akbar, and other women of the period defied religious prohibitions by actively participating in society, politics, education, and religion. Even throughout this time, every moment was crucial in elevating or lowering women's status. These were the social movements of the period that sought to elevate women to parity with men. At that time, a "Guru Nanak" was the ideal person to promote gender equality. When it comes to religion, politics, education, and culture, he is an outspoken supporter of women's equality.

Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule were among the several reformers who battled for women's rights under the British Raj. In 1847, Peary Charan Sarkar, a member of "Young Bengal" and a former student of Hindu College, Calcutta, established the first free school for girls in India in the suburb of Barasat, which is now known as Kalikrishna Girls' High School. This may give the impression that the British had little beneficial impact throughout the Raj period, however that is not quite accurate. Among the missionaries' spouses, Martha Mault née Mead and her daughter Eliza Caldwell née Mault deserve special recognition for being trailblazers in southern India when it came to females' education and training. At first, locals were against this practice since it broke with custom. Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck abolished the practice of "Sati" in 1829 as a result of Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was the result of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's relentless campaign to better the plight of widows. Pandita Ramabai was one of several influential woman reformers who fought for equal rights for women. Queen Kittur Chennamma of the princely kingdom Kittur in Karnataka responded to the Doctrine of lapse by leading a violent revolt against the British. Crown Princess Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi spearheaded the Indian Rebellion that sprang up in 1857 against British rule. Many now hold her in high esteem as a hero to the country. Along with other Awadh rulers, Begum Hazrat Mahal spearheaded the uprising in 1857. After turning down agreements with the British, she eventually fled to Nepal. During this time, the Begums of Bhopal were also prominent female monarchs. They had martial arts training. Among the first Indian women to get a degree were Anandi Gopal Joshi, Kadambini Ganguly, and Chandramukhi Basu.

With the backing of the Indian National Congress, the first ever women's delegation went to see the Secretary of State in 1917 to ask for equal political rights for women. Pune was the site of the All India Women's Education Conference in 1927, which went on to become a powerful organization in the fight for social reform. A girl could not be married off until she was fourteen years old, according to the Child Marriage Restraint Act that was enacted in 1929. After falling prey to child marriage when he was only thirteen years old, Mahatma Gandhi advocated for an end to the practice and encouraged young men to wed child widows.

No nation or group can claim to be civilized if it does not respect women. Indian women have achieved great social and political prominence because our laws do not discriminate against them. Modern American women have positions of great power, including those in the intelligence community and the armed forces. Modern Indian women are active in a wide range of sports and activities, including athletics (Saniya Mirza, Sayana Nehwal, etc.), table tennis, lawn tennis, hockey, cricket, and football. A number of modern Indian women hold positions of power, including those of governor and minister. Most notably, our former president Pratibhatai Patil, Mother Teresa, Soniya Gandhi, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, M.S. Subhalakshmi, Lata Mangeskar, and many more women from recent times have attained international renown. Not only that, but women have also made it big in the entertainment industries. The number of women working in STEM fields is growing. Yeah, there is action. The contemporary era of India saw the creation of several laws meant to empower women and protect them from atrocities such as dowry killings, infanticide, brutality, and so on. The home realm was the primary domain of women in medieval India, and they had very little opportunity for economic advancement or education.

1. **Gargi Vachaknavi (circa 700 BCE):** Gargi Vachaknavi was a renowned philosopher and one of the prominent women in ancient Indian literature. She participated in the intellectual debates at King Janaka's court and is famous for her dialogue with the sage Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Gargi's profound questions about the nature of reality and the universe showcase her deep knowledge and critical thinking, highlighting the intellectual contributions of women in Vedic times.
2. **Maitreyi (circa 8th century BCE):** Maitreyi was a philosopher and the wife of the sage Yajnavalkya. She is known from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where she engages in a profound discussion with her

husband about the nature of Atman (the self) and the pursuit of immortality through knowledge. Maitreyi's inquiries reflect her pursuit of spiritual and philosophical understanding, indicating the significant role women played in ancient Indian intellectual traditions.

3. **Apala (Rigvedic Period):** Apala is a notable figure from the Rigveda, one of the earliest Vedic texts. She is remembered for her hymn to the Ashvins (divine horsemen) where she requests the gods to cure her kind is ease and make her beautiful. Apala's story illustrates the presence of female voices in Vedic rituals and literature, highlighting their involvement in religious and spiritual practices.
4. **Kunti (circa 3rd -4th century BCE):** Kunti is a significant character from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic. She was the mother of the Pandavas and is known for her wisdom, devotion, and resilience. Kunti's role in the epic underscores the influence of women in dynastic politics and familial duties. Her prayers and interactions with divine beings also emphasize the spiritual aspects of her character.
5. **Draupadi (circa 3rd -4th century BCE):** Draupadi, another pivotal character from the Mahabharata, is renowned for her courage, dignity, and strong will. Married to the five Pandavas, she played a crucial role in the epic's narrative, particularly during the events leading to the Kurukshetra war. Draupadi's unwavering commitment to justice and her powerful speeches reflect her significant influence and assertiveness in a predominantly patriarchal society.
6. **Gautami (circa 5th-6th century BCE):** Gautami, also known as Maha Pajapati Gotami, was the first woman to seek ordination as a nun in Buddhism. She was the Buddha's aunt and foster mother. Her determination to join the monastic order led to the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, the community of Buddhist nuns. Gautami's story highlights the early challenges and eventual inclusion of women in Buddhist monastic life.
7. **Sulabha (circa 3rd-4th century BCE):** Sulabha was a philosopher and yogini mentioned in the Mahabharata. She engaged in a philosophical debate with King Janaka, advocating for the principles of renunciation and the nature of the self. Sulabha's intellectual prowess and her advocacy for spiritual liberation underscore the role of women in ancient Indian philosophical traditions.

Analysis and Themes

These case studies illustrate several themes regarding the status and roles of women in ancient India:

1. **Intellectual and Philosophical Contributions:** Women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Sulabha were respected for their intellectual abilities and engaged in significant philosophical debates.
2. **Spiritual and Religious Roles:** Figures like Apala and Gautami show the active participation of women in religious rituals and the establishment of monastic orders.
3. **Epic Narratives and Moral Strength:** Characters like Kunti and Draupadi highlight the influence of women in epic narratives, showcasing their moral strength, resilience, and leadership.
4. **Societal Influence:** These women, through their wisdom, devotion, and actions, had considerable influence within their families and communities, challenging the conventional roles assigned to women.

The case studies of women in ancient India reveal their diverse and influential roles in various aspects of society, from philosophy and spirituality to family and epic literature. These women not only contributed significantly to their respective fields but also challenged and shaped the societal norms of their time. Their stories continue to inspire and provide valuable insights into the rich tapestry of ancient Indian culture and thought.

The status of women in India has evolved significantly from medieval times to the modern era. This transformation reflects changes in social norms, legal frameworks, education, and economic participation. Here is a comparative analysis of the status of women in medieval and modern India:

Medieval India: Social Status

1. **Patriarchal Society:** Medieval India was predominantly a patriarchal society where men held most of the power and influence both in the family and in the public sphere.
2. **Marriage and Family:** Women were often married at a young age. Practices like child marriage were common, and women's primary roles were confined to household duties and child-rearing.
3. **Sati and Purdah:** Some regions practiced Sati (the self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) and Purdah (seclusion of women from public observation by means of veiling and segregation).

Education and Work

1. **Limited Education:** Education for women was largely restricted, with few exceptions among certain communities or royal families.
2. **Work and Economy:** Women's work was primarily domestic. However, in rural areas, they also participated in agricultural work. Artisan and craft activities were common among lower castes and tribal women.

Legal Status

1. **Property Rights:** Women had limited property rights and inheritance was typically through male lineage.

- 2. Legal Rights:** The legal status of women was largely governed by the Dharmashastras and customary laws which placed women under the guardianship of their fathers, husbands, or sons.

Modern India Social Status

- 1. Gender Equality:** The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all citizens and prohibits discrimination based on gender.
- 2. Marriage and Family:** Legal reforms have addressed issues like child marriage (Prohibition of Child Marriage Act), and there is a growing acceptance of women's autonomy in marital choices. Dowry, though still practiced, is illegal under the Dowry Prohibition Act.
- 3. Social Movements:** Various social movements and organizations work towards women's rights and gender equality, addressing issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination.

Education and Work

- 1. Increased Access to Education:** There has been significant progress in female literacy rates and access to education at all levels. Government initiatives like Beti Bachao, Beti Padoos aim to improve the education and welfare of girls.
- 2. Workforce Participation:** Women participate in diverse sectors including education, healthcare, IT, politics and more. Laws ensure maternity benefits and equal pay for equal work.

Legal Status

- 1. Property and Inheritance Rights:** Modern legal frameworks, such as the Hindu Succession Act, grant women equal inheritance rights. Women can own and manage property independently.
- 2. Protection Laws:** There are several "laws aimed at protecting women's rights, including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act," and various amendments to the Indian Penal Code addressing crimes against women.

Examining case studies of women in medieval India provides a deeper understanding of their varied roles and statuses in society. Here are some notable examples:

1. Razia Sultana(1205-1240)

Razia Sultana was the first and only woman to rule the Delhi Sultanate. She reigned from 1236 to 1240 and was known for her administrative skills and military prowess. Despite facing opposition from the nobility due to her gender, she managed to assert her authority and led several successful military campaigns.

2. Meerabai(1498-1547)

Meerabai was a Hindu mystic poet and devotee of Lord Krishna. Born into a royal Rajput family, she renounced her privileged life to devote herself to spiritual pursuits and compose devotional songs. Her defiance of social norms and dedication to her faith made her an important figure in Bhakti movement literature and spirituality.

3. Rani Durgavati(1524-1564)

Rani Durgavati was the queen of the Gondwana kingdom and is remembered for her valiant resistance against the Mughal forces led by Emperor Akbar. After her husband's death, she ruled the kingdom with great competence and fought bravely until her death in battle in 1564. Her leadership is celebrated as a symbol of courage and resistance.

4. Rani Padmini(13th-14th century)

Rani Padmini, also known as Padmavati, was a queen of the kingdom of Mewar. She is legendary for her beauty and her tragic story of committing Jauhar (self-immolation) to protect her honor from the invading Sultan Alauddin Khalji. Though the historical accuracy of her story is debated, it reflects the severe constraints and valorization of female honor in medieval times.

5. Akka Mahadevi(1130-1160)

Akka Mahadevi was a prominent figure in the Veerashaiva Bhakti movement in Karnataka. She is known for her poetry and philosophical writings that challenged social norms and expressed deep devotion to Lord Shiva. Her choice to lead an ascetic life and her critique of patriarchal structures made her an influential spiritual leader.

6. Jijabai(1598-1674)

Jijabai was the mother of Shivaji, the founder of the Maratha Empire. She played a crucial role in Shivaji's upbringing, instilling in him values of courage, self-reliance, and patriotism. Her influence was instrumental in the establishment of the Maratha Empire, and she is revered as a symbol of maternal strength and wisdom.

7. Chand Bibi(1550-1599)

Chand Bibi was a regent of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate and later Bijapur Sultanate. She is known for defending Ahmednagar against the Mughal forces. A skilled diplomat and military leader, Chand Bibi's leadership was crucial in maintaining the independence of her kingdom during turbulent times.

Analysis and Themes

These case studies illustrate several themes regarding the status and roles of women in medieval India:

1. **Leadership and Valor:** Women like Razia Sultana, Rani Durgavati, and Chand Bibi demonstrated remarkable leadership and valor, challenging the conventional roles assigned to women.
2. **Spiritual Influence:** Figures like Meerabai and Akka Mahadevi show the significant impact of women in spiritual and religious spheres, often challenging social norms through their devotion and writings.
3. **Patriarchal Constraints:** The stories of RaniPadmini and others highlight the severe constraints and expectations placed on women, especially concerning honor and purity.
4. **Maternal Influence:** Jijabai's role underscores the powerful influence of maternal figures in shaping the future leaders and warriors of their time.

In Sum up:

The case studies of medieval women in India reveal a complex tapestry of roles ranging from rulers and warriors to poets and spiritual leaders. Despite the overarching patriarchal framework of society, these women managed to carve out significant spaces for themselves, leaving lasting legacies that continue to inspire.

Challenges and Progress

Despite these advancements, women in India still face challenges:

1. **Gender Disparities:** Persistent gender disparities in education, employment and healthcare.
2. **Violence and Discrimination:** High incidence of gender-based violence and societal discrimination.
3. **Economic Participation:** Lower participation in the formal work force and wage gaps.

The status of women in India has seen considerable improvement from medieval times to the modern era. Legislative reforms, educational advancements, and social movements have contributed to this progress. However, ongoing efforts are necessary to address the remaining challenges and ensure true gender equality.

Modern Period

Like other oppressed groups, women's empowerment aims to improve their material conditions by fostering economic growth, which is a crucial component of any comprehensive plan for social and economic advancement. When we talk of women's empowerment, we should mean the expansion of their economic opportunities, which unlock the door to their full potential, as well as their capacity for self-realization, self-image, and identity. No longer is the empowerment of women a regional or even a national concern. A major projection of the United Nations Charter was that gender discrimination should be a matter of universal concern. The Charter's preamble states that it will defend fundamental rights, including human rights and gender equality, in order to root it out. That the international world cares so deeply about women's rights and their pursuit of gender parity is evident from this. The basic freedoms and rights guaranteed by the declaration are accessible to all people, regardless of gender. Consequently, the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights was equally crucial in defending women's rights.

The modern era, especially post-independence, marked a significant shift with efforts towards gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution and various legal reforms. Laws against dowry, domestic violence, and for women's property rights have been pivotal. Increased access to education has been a critical factor in improving women's status. Growing participation of women in the workforce and entrepreneurship. Reservation policies and increased representation in local and national politics.

The status of women in modern India has seen significant improvements with the emergence of influential figures across various fields. Here are some notable case studies of modern Indian women who have made remarkable contributions and have been instrumental in advocating for gender equality:

1. **Indira Gandhi (1917-1984):** There has never been a prime minister of India other than Indira Gandhi, who held the position from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her murder in 1984. Her commanding presence during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, which resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh, made her a pivotal role in Indian politics. Her tenure also saw significant economic reforms and the controversial Emergency period (1975-1977). Despite criticism, her role as a female leader in a male-dominated political landscape was ground-breaking.
2. **Kalpana Chawla (1962-2003):** The first woman of Indian descent to travel into space was Kalpana Chawla, an Indian-American astronaut. She made her Space Shuttle debut in 1997 on the Columbia as a mission specialist and main operator of the robotic arm. Unfortunately, tragedy struck on her second trip in 2003 on STS-107, when the Columbia spacecraft broke apart upon re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. Her space travel accomplishments have encouraged many young women, both in India and beyond, to think about STEM fields as potential career paths.
3. **Kiran Bedi(1949-):** Kiran Bedi is a retired Indian Police Service (IPS) officer and social activist who became the first woman to join the IPS in 1972. She is known for her innovative policing methods, including her role in transforming the Tihar Jail in Delhi. Bedi has also been involved in various social causes, including anti-corruption and women's rights movements. She served as "the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry" from 2016 to 2021.
4. **Arundhati Roy (1961-):** "Arundhati Roy is an acclaimed author and activist. Her novel 'The God of Small Things' won the Man Booker Prize in 1997," bringing her international fame. Besides her literary

achievements, Roy is known for her outspoken activism on environmental issues, human rights, and anti-globalization. Her work highlights the complexities of social and political issues in India, often giving voice to marginalized communities.

5. **Mary Kom(1982-):** Mary Kom is a world-renowned Indian boxer and “the only woman to become World Amateur Boxing champion six times.” She has also won an Olympic bronze medal in 2012. Mary Kom's achievements in boxing, a sport traditionally dominated by men, have made her a national icon and an inspiration for women in sports.
6. **Chanda Kochhar (1961-):** Chanda Kochhar is a prominent banker and former CEO of “ICICI Bank, one of India's largest private sector banks. Under her leadership, ICICI Bank expanded significantly.” She has been recognized globally for her contributions to the banking sector, although her career faced controversy due to allegations of impropriety, which led to her departure from ICICI. Despite this, her rise to one of the top positions in banking highlights the increasing presence of women in high-level corporate roles.
7. **Sushma Swaraj (1952-2019):** Former Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) senior leader Sushma Swaraj was a powerful figure in Indian politics. From 2014 to 2019, she was the only woman to occupy the position of India's Minister of External Affairs, after Indira Gandhi. Her work in foreign policy and consular services earned her widespread recognition, and she became famous for her accessibility and adept use of social media to engage with Indian nationals overseas.

Analysis and Themes

These case studies illustrate several themes regarding the status and contributions of modern Indian women:

1. **Leadership and Governance:** Women like Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, and Sushma Swaraj broke barriers in political and administrative leadership roles, showing that women can lead effectively at the highest levels.
2. **Science and Technology:** Kalpana Chawla's achievements in space exploration highlight the contributions of women in STEM fields.
3. **Literature and Activism:** Arundhati Roy's success as a writer and activist underscores the influence of women in shaping cultural and social discourses.
4. **Sports and Athletics:** Mary Kom's accomplishments in boxing illustrate the growing presence and success of women in competitive sports.
5. **Corporate Sector:** Chanda Kochhar's rise in the banking industry showcases the increasing participation of women in the corporate world.

The case studies of modern Indian women reveal significant progress in various spheres, from politics and science to sports and business. These women have not only excelled in their respective fields but have also become role models, paving the way for future generations to challenge gender norms and achieve their full potential. However, ongoing efforts are essential to address the remaining barriers to gender equality in India.

Findings

1. Despite significant progress, certain patriarchal attitudes and practices persist:
2. Continued gender bias in various socio-economic contexts.
3. High incidence of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence.
4. Persistent wage gaps and limited access to high-paying, leadership roles.
5. Substantial improvements in female literacy rates and educational attainment.
6. Increased presence of women in various professional fields.
7. “Progressive laws aimed at protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality.”
8. Implementation of schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and reservations for women in local governance.
9. Active role of NGOs in advocating for women's rights and providing support services.
10. Grassroots Movements: Community-driven efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

Suggestions

1. Enhancing Education and Skill Development
2. Policy Implementation: Strengthen the implementation of existing educational policies with a focus on rural and marginalized communities.
3. Vocational Training: Promote skill development programs tailored for women to enhance employability and entrepreneurship.
4. Economic Empowerment
5. Financial Inclusion: Facilitate women's access to financial services, credit, and market opportunities.
6. Workplace Equality: Enforce strict anti-discrimination laws and promote gender-sensitive workplace policies.
7. Legal and Social Reforms
8. Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Ensure rigorous enforcement to laws related to violence against women, property rights, and employment equality.

9. Public Awareness Campaigns: Conduct nationwide campaigns to challenge and change patriarchal norms and attitudes.
10. Political Participation
11. Reservations and Representation: Ensure effective implementation of reservation policies and encourage women's participation in politics at all levels.
12. Leadership Training: Provide training and mentorship programs for aspiring women leaders.

Conclusion

The status of women in India has seen remarkable transformations from the medieval period to the present day, marked by both continuities and significant changes. While legal reforms and educational advancements have contributed to improving women's status, persistent challenges remain. A multifaceted approach encompassing education, economic empowerment, legal reforms, and political participation is essential for further amelioration. Policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders must work collaboratively to create an inclusive society that fosters gender equality and empowers women across all strata of society.

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