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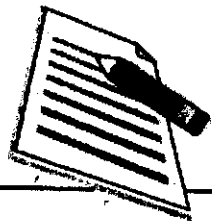
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STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY : A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For a sociological understanding of women's status it is important to keep in mind social institutions such as class, caste, family marriage and kinship in rural and urban India. Students are advised to brush up the reading material on these institutions before studying this lesson.

In the year 1950, the Constitution of India came into existence. It not only declared that men and women are equal, but also prohibited any kind of discrimination against women. What message does this convey to you; that men and women are equal! Is it not? Then you might start wondering why is it necessary to talk about status of women, in particular. Yes, it is true that in our constitution provides that men and women should have equal opportunities. The movement for gaining equal opportunities has a history of more than two centuries. Due to the efforts of social reformers, women's movements and the Constitution of India, hurdles to women's liberation have been removed. But in reality, the obstacles to the emancipation of women have not all been eliminated. This is because, many of the problems, which women have been facing, are not yet solved. Women have been facing problems for several centuries. It is not easy to find exact answers to questions such as:

- When did women start losing their status?
- Or
- Who was responsible for this situation?



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With the help of available sources of information we can try to construct a picture of the way the status of women saw ups and downs during different periods of history. In fact, tracing the status of women in India from a historical perspective is not an easy task because systematic documentation (*records of facts*) on the position of women in different social groups at different points of time began only recently. Using authentic (*reliable*) sources of information an attempt is made in this lesson to analyse the status of women during different periods of history. We have divided these into three major periods: *Ancient, Medieval and, Modern.*

OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- identify the different periods in history through which our society passed;
- state the position of women during the Vedic and Epic periods;
- describe the status of women during the period of Dharmashastras;
- visualize the situations of women during the Medieval age;
- explain what changes took place in the position of women during the British period;
- analyse the position of women in India after Independence;

To understand the status of women during different periods of time we will have to go through each period separately. Let us begin with the ancient period.

32.1 STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE ANCIENT PERIOD

Status of women during the ancient period is presented under four broad sub-periods listed below. These, however, do not follow a chronological sequence. Ancient Indians are charged with a lack of historic sense. They did not write history as it is written today.

- i) The Vedic Period
- ii) The period of the Epics
- iii) The period of Jainism and Buddhism
- iv) The Age of Dharmashastras

32.1.1 The Vedic Period

The earliest known source of information available about ancient India is the Rig Veda. The period between 1500–1000 B.C. is identified as the early Vedic or the



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Rig Vedic period. Though we can not clearly state that this age was characterized by total equality between men and women, it is evident from available data sources that many liberal attitudes and practices pertaining to women existed during this period. Women took part in religious and social activities and they had some freedom to choose their partner in marriage. Marriage was not compulsory for women. The daughter was not considered a liability or an unwelcome guest in her parental household. Girls would also be initiated into Vedic studies.

The Rig Vedic Aryans were patriarchal. The position of a husband was considered superior to that of his wife. Polygyny was permissible. A widow was permitted to marry as is demonstrated by the prevalent practice of a widow marrying the younger brother of her deceased husband. In short, it can be said that to an extent women in the early Vedic Period lived in a liberal social atmosphere.

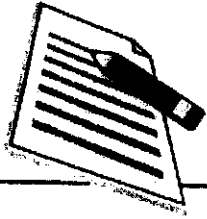
32.1.2 The Period of the Epics

Dated broadly to twelfth century B.C., the Mahabharata is older than the Ramayana, believed to be dated to fifth century B.C. Do not we all know the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata? The two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata have played key roles in moulding (*shaping*) the ideology (*beliefs*) of Hindus as well as their attitudes towards women. It thus becomes important to discuss the portrayal of women in the two epics when we are discussing the status of women. The two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have a strong influence on Indian society. Even today girls are being brought up to follow in the footsteps of Sita, the wife of Rama. Sita is considered the ideal Hindu woman because she surrendered all her personal desires and followed Rama to the forest. On the other hand, Draupadi the central female character of Mahabharata is a woman who exhibits a greater sense of independence and courage. Sita of Ramayana and Draupadi of Mahabharata are well known today. In spite of their subjugated status vis-a-vis their husbands, they are universally respected and have become role-models. The self imposed blindness of Gandhari as a mark of respect of her blind husband did not lower her status as a queen. In fact, she gives out the message that a respectable wife is one who humbles herself vis-a-vis her husband. Ancient India's march to civilisation was accompanied by the growth of social discriminations.

INTENT QUESTIONS 32.1

Answer the following Questions in One Sentence

1. Which period of the Vedic age is known as the early Vedic period?



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2. Name the two great epics.
3. What imposed blindness on Draupadi?

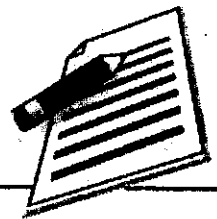
32.1.3 The Period of Jainism and Buddhism

Jainism and Buddhism took roots around the 6th century B.C. Both the religions emerged as potent religious reform movements. The post-vedic varna divided society and the ritualistic domination of the priestly class of the Brahmanas led to the emergence of Jainism and Buddhism as protest movements. Jainism emerged as a religion distinct from Hinduism. Though it recognised the existence of the gods, it placed them lower than the Mahavira (Jina). Jainism made the first serious attempt to mitigate the evils of the varna order and the ritualistic vedic religion. Women were admitted to the religious order and could give up family life to become ascetics. During the time of Mahavira, a large number of women drawn from different backgrounds joined the monastic order. In Jaina literature there are references to women who had achieved remarkable success as ascetics. Buddhism did not recognise the existence of god and soul (atman). This was a kind of revolution in the history of Indian religions. It appealed to the common people. It particularly won the support of the lower orders as it attacked the varna system. Buddhism permitted women to participate in religious discourses and seek membership in *Sangha*. Many women monks composed verses, which came to be known as *Therigatha*.

The high status, women enjoyed during the early Rig Vedic period, gradually started deteriorating in the late Vedic period between 1000 and 500 B.C. Women began to be confined to the household. Because of the importance given to values such as *purity (ritual cleanliness)* and *pollution (ritual impurity or contamination)* women began to be considered impure during certain periods of their life. They were kept away from many religious and social occasions. Lineage began to be traced in the male line and sons were the sole heirs to family property. As the economic and social status of sons began to rise, the position of women saw a steep decline. The strong belief of the day was that only a male heir could save his parents from the cycle of rebirth. Since a daughter left her parental home after marriage, it was the son who was left with the responsibility of caring for parents in their old age. This further added value to the sons.

A woman's place was the home and her primary responsibility was to bear sons and ensure the continuity of the family lineage. A husband's rights over his wife were total and he had the freedom to go for another marriage, if his wife failed to beget sons. A woman was kept constantly under male control and lost her right to seek knowledge. Over a period of time, marriageable age was also lowered.

Though there was a general decline in the status of women in the post Rig Vedic



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period. But there were still instances of women intellectuals who showed great scholarship. *Gargi* and *Maitreyi* are the most well known women scholars of this period. There are also references to women studying the Vedas and going through initiation rituals. But by and large the position of women went on witnessing a steady decline and reached an all time low during the age of the Dharmashastras.

32.1.4 The Age of Dharmashastras

During the age of Dharmashastras codes of conduct, which served as the base for prescribing behaviour norms also for women were evolved. These belong to a large body of secular literature, compiled in 500–200 B.C. This period saw the exclusion (*leaving out*) of women from both economic and religious sphere. Since education was virtually denied to women they had to be dependent on men for their survival and maintenance. The concept that women were inferior to men gained ground and women were pushed to a state of utter despair and ignorance. This period was also characterized by consolidation of religious customs and caste system assuming rigid proportions.

The Dharmashastras prescribed codes of conduct, which regulated not only family life but also life in society at large. They also prescribed punishments for violation of these codes of conduct. The two most important authoritative law codes of this period were *Manu Smriti* and *Yagnavalkya Smriti*. *Manu Smriti* upheld the view that a woman did not deserve freedom at any point of time in her life (*Na Stree Swatantram arhati*). *Manu*'s view was that 'a woman, in her childhood is dependent on her father, in her youth on her husband, and in her old age on her son'. This view of *Manu* was not just a theoretical idea but also a practice followed in toto by the society of that period. The same *Manu* also said that 'where women are respected, there the Gods delight'. This is a statement, which is in clear contradiction of his pronouncements about women not deserving any freedom.

Yagnavalkya laid down that parents who did not get their daughters married before they attained the age of puberty would be committing an unpardonable sin. The Dharmashastras planted the impression that an unmarried woman could never attain salvation from these worldly obligations if she remained single. As a result, marriage came to be considered an unavoidable ritual for a woman. While girls had to be married at a very tender age no such restrictions were imposed on men. The husband was even given the right to enforce the obedience of his wife by resorting to physical punishment.

During the period of Dharmashastra, child marriage was encouraged and widow marriage looked down upon. The birth of a girl came to be considered an ill omen and many parents went to the extreme extent of killing their female infants. The practice of Sati became quite wide spread because of the ill treatment meted out to widows.



It was during the period of the Dharmashastras that the status of women completely deteriorated. Women led a life of total subjugation (*subordination*) and had virtually lost all hopes of emancipation (*freedom*). This situation more or less continued until the 19th century when the social reform movements launched a struggle to improve the conditions of women.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.2

State whether the following statements are 'true' or 'false'

1. The Dharmashastras prescribed codes of conduct.
True False
2. Yagnavalkya said that a woman does not deserve freedom at any point of time in her life.
True False
3. Buddhism did not permit women to participate in religious discourses.
True False
4. During the late - Vedic period women's status began to decline.
True False

32.2 THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The 11th Century saw the emergence of Islam, which created hopes of promoting the interests of the oppressed groups, but it also introduced certain values and practices, which did not help to enhance the status of women or emancipate them from their bondage. The system of *Purdah* (using a veil to cover the head / face / entire body / mostly remaining indoors), which was generally prevalent among royal families, nobles and merchant prince classes prior to the advent of Muslims spread to other classes also. These customary practices of the upper castes, particularly the twice born castes were considered as the practices of all Hindus. The lower castes gradually adopted upper castes customs. The strict observance of purdah resulted in the seclusion of women from men who did not belong to their family and also the world outside.

Marriage was a contract among the Muslims and it was a man's prerogative to divorce his wife. In a system, where there was no provision for payment of alimony (*maintenance after divorce*), the wife was left to fend for herself. Among the

Muslims marriage, divorce or inheritance questions are decided as per the provisions contained in the Muslim Personal Law (*Shariat*). Even today, in the absence of a uniform civil code, *Shariat* governs Muslim family life. The fact that a large number of Muslim women have still not been able to access opportunities for education leaves them at the mercy of rigid patriarchal values and practices.

During the medieval period, practices such as polygyny (*the marriage in which a man has more than one wife*), *sati*, child marriage, ill-treatment of widows already prevalent during the Dharmashastra age gained further momentum. The priestly class misinterpreted the sacred texts to their advantage and created an impression that all these evil practices had religious sanction. Since women were denied the right to education and kept away from participation in life outside the home, they could neither know the reality nor question the existing practices.

32.3 THE MODERN PERIOD

The modern period began with the onset of the 19th century. The British came to India in 1600 A.D. For nearly 200 years in their East India Company incarnation there was no real effort made to address questions of social inequality or social oppression. Social evils such as *sati*, suppression of widows, denial of the right to education for women, and child marriage flourished unchecked. With the dawn of the 19th century an era of change began and it was during this period that many efforts were made both by the British rulers and progressive sections of Indian society to put an end to social evils.

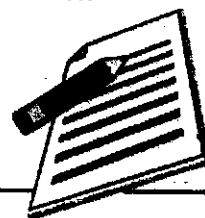
The Modern Age can be classified into two periods. These are:

- i) The British period (1800-1947).
- ii) The Period after Independence (1947- till date).

Let us start with the British Period first.

32.3.1 The British Period

The British set in motion an era of social reform when they imposed a ban on the inhuman practice of *sati* (*the practice of self or forced immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband*) in the year 1829. The famous social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy's fight against *sati* received a positive response from the then Governor General Lord William Bentick who took the lead in enacting the *Sati Prohibition Act*. Religious fundamentalists and traditionalists put up a stiff resistance to this Act by claiming that the British government had meddled with a custom sanctioned by religion. But the voices of reason prevailed and the British government refused to withdraw the Act. However, a distinction was made between



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voluntary *sati* and forced *sati*. Also, the passage of this Act did not put an end to the practice of *sati*.



British government and reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy try to put ban on the inhuman practice of Sati

Because of the ban on widow marriage and lack of opportunities for education, women who were rescued from the practice of *sati* had to undergo a great deal of suffering. Many widows preferred to die, because life held no meaning for them.

It was this plight of the young and tortured widows that moved West Bengal's great reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who led the movement for lifting the ban on widow marriage. Due to his efforts the *Widow Remarriage Act of 1856* was passed. Though there was no significant increase in the number of widow marriages, the passage of this Act paved the way for ending a longstanding oppressive custom. Social approval of widow marriage was also not forthcoming immediately. Vidyasagar had to often bear the wrath (*anger*) of hostile fundamentalists, who did not even hesitate to hurl physical assaults on him for his role in lifting the ban on widow marriage. But the great scholar and a truly progressive human being, that he was, Vidyasagar went ahead with his progressive reforms. The role of Vidyasagar in promoting the cause of women's education also deserves special mention.

The social reform movement, which started in West Bengal, spread to other parts of India too. Jyoti Ba Phule the great reformer from Maharashtra dedicated his life for the cause of women. He started a school for girls in 1848 and in 1852 established the first school for Dalit girls. He also supported widow marriage and started a home for protecting the children of widows. Women's education got a fillip (*boost*) in Maharashtra from Maharshi Karve who was a pioneer in establishing educational institutions for girls and women. This period saw immense philanthropic (*humanitarian*) activity by many Indians in different parts of the country.

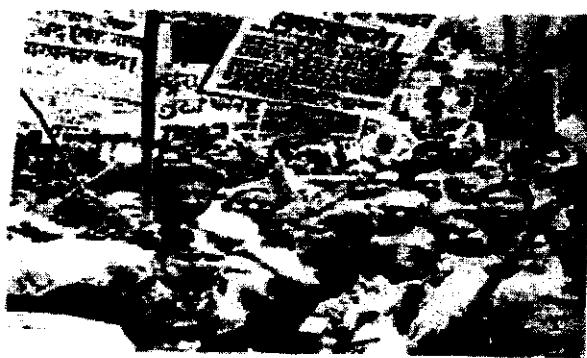
There were also a number of other progressive pieces of legislation during the



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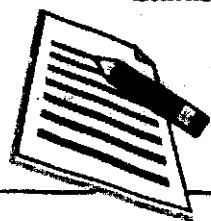
British period, prominent among these being the *Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929*. Many of the woes of women were rooted in child marriage. Leave alone child marriage, there were even infant marriages. The Act of 1929 fixed the minimum age at marriage for girls as 14 years and for boys as 18 years. Harbidas Sarda took the initiative in leading the campaign for increasing the age at marriage and in recognition of his role the Act also came to be known as the Sarda Act. Today the minimum age at marriage for a woman is 18 and for a man, 21 years. These changes were brought about by the *Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act*, which was passed in 1976.

The pre-independence era of the twentieth century was also remarkable for one more reason. The large-scale participation of women in the freedom movement both as visible and invisible freedom fighters was a standing testimony not only to their courage but also their capacities. Gandhiji, under whose leadership women participated in the nationalist movement opposed such practices as child marriage and dowry. 'Swaraj without social reform was not a meaningful proposition' was Gandhiji's view.



Women participating in the national freedom movement

The British period saw the rise of social reform movements which took up the issue of gender inequality, primarily by passing laws that removed barriers to women's emancipation. Though wide spread changes did not take place, the stage was definitely set for launching a struggle for creation of a gender just society (*a society in, which laws give equal treatment to men and women. In cases relating to women courts must give judgments in such a way that the interests of women are protected*). Independence brought new hopes and led to the creation of departments and launching of schemes, meant exclusively for improvement in the status of women.



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.3

Choose the correct Answer:

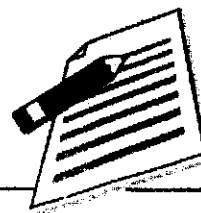
1. In which year did the British government pass the Sati Prohibition Act?
a) 1829 b) 1830 c) 1856 d) 1880
2. What is the name of the reformer whose name is associated with the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929?
a) Harbidas Sarda b) Dayananda Saraswathi
c) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar d) Raja Rammohan Roy
3. Who among the following said 'Swaraj without social reform was not a meaningful proposition'?
a) Gandhiji b) Lokmanya Tilak
c) G. K. Gokhale d) Sardar Patel
4. Who started the first school for Dalit girls in Maharashtra?
a) Maharshi Karve b) Jyoti Ba Phule
c) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar d) Pandita Rama Bai

32.3.2 The Period after Independence

After India got her independence the Constitution of India laid the foundation for creating a social order where men and women are treated as equals. While Article 14 of the Constitution conferred equal rights and opportunities on men and women, Article 15 (1) prohibited discrimination against any citizen on grounds of sex. The Constitution, through Article 15 (3) also laid down that the state can make special provision for women. According to Article 16 (2) no citizen shall be discriminated against in respect of any employment in office under the state.

The Directive Principles of State Policy prescribed that:

- i) Men and women equally have the right to adequate means of livelihood.
- ii) There is equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- iii) The health and strength of women workers cannot be abused.
- iv) Provision should be made for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity.



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A number of laws were also implemented for liberating women from oppressive social customs and protecting their rights. Prominent of these laws are as follows:

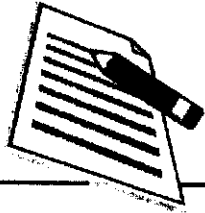
- i) **The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955** (This Act made monogamy compulsory and created a provision for divorce. It had prescribed the minimum age at marriage as 15 years for a girl and 18 years for a man).
- ii) **The Hindu Succession Act, 1956** (This Act confers property rights on women; but the provisions of the Act applied only to self-earned property and equal share is not guaranteed for women in ancestral property).
- iii) **The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961** and the subsequent amendments of **1984** and **1986** (As you will read in the lesson : Some Problems of Women).
- iv) **The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961** (This Act grants maternity leave with full pay for 135 days to women who have completed 80 working days in a given job and prohibits the dismissal or discharge of a woman during the leave period. This Act extends to factories, mines, plantations, shops and establishments where 10 or more persons are employed).
- v) **The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976** (This Act provides for payment of equal wages for men and women for equal work).
- vi) **The Indecent Representation of Women [Prohibition] Act, 1986** (This Act prohibits indecent presentation of women in advertisements and media campaigns and makes it a punishable offence).

Besides the Acts referred to above, there are also many legislations such as Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act of 1956 amended in 1986, The Family Courts Act of 1984 and The National Commission for Women Act of 1990 have been passed after the country became independent.

Constitutional provisions and a series of laws have actually paved the way for bringing about major changes in the lives of women. Though women have been enfranchised, their age-long social subordination continues to prevail in many forms. In the 55 years following India's independence, the position of women on different indicators of development such as education or life expectancy has improved considerably, but there are still gaps in such areas of access to health care or work participation. There are yet several causes for worry.

Let us start by taking a look at sex ratio. Sex ratio refers to the number of females per 1,000 males. Table 1 will give you information on how many women there were/are per 1,000 men during the different census periods.

India's sex ratio, which stood at 972 women per 1000 men in 1901, had declined



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to 927 per 1000 by 1991. However, in the 2001, census there has been only a slight improvement to 933 per 1000 men. There are also wide variations between different states. Kerala is the only state in India where there are more women than men. The sharp decline in the number of female infants (0-12 months) and girl children (1-6 years) in almost all the states of the country is a cause for concern. Life expectancy at birth for females increased from 23.3 in 1901 to 61.8 years by 1997 and this indeed is a heartening development. Improved access to health care and lower fertility ratios in some states are predominantly responsible for this phenomenon. But this happiness is taken away, when we realize that maternal mortality (*death of mothers in child birth*) rates have increased from 424 per 100,000 live births in 1992 to 540 in 1998. It is estimated that 80,000 women die every year in India during childbirth. The fact that even today only 34 per cent of births take place in medical institutions and lack of access to safe ante-natal care are primary causes for death of mothers during childbirth. Early marriage, frequent childbirths, poor nutrition and burden the of household work take a heavy toll on women's health.

Table 1: India's Sex Ratio

Census Year	Male	Female
1901	1,000	972
1911	1,000	964
1921	1,000	955
1931	1,000	950
1941	1,000	945
1951	1,000	946
1961	1,000	941
1971	1,000	930
1981	1,000	934
1991	1,000	927
2001	1,000	933

*** Source: Census of India Reports of Different Decades Table 1.1**

Female literacy increased from 39.42 per cent in 1991 to 54.16 percent in 2001 (*an increase of nearly 15 per cent in a span of 10 years*). In fact, it is only

during this period that a visible rise took place in the number of literate women. The data in Table 2 will show you that in the 50 years after the country became independent female literacy increased only at a marginal pace .

Table 2: Literacy Rates in India

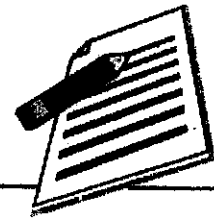
CensusYear	Persons	Males	Females
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961	28.31	40.40	15.34
1971	34.45	45.95	21.97
1981	43.56 (41.42)	56.37 (53.45)	29.75 (28.46)
1991	52.11	63.86	39.42
2001	65.38	75.85	54.16

Note: Literacy figures for Census of 1951, 1961 and 1971 applied to persons of five years of age and above. From the Census of 1981 literacy percentages are being calculated for persons of 7 years of age and above. Figures in brackets for 1981 indicate literacy rates in the five years and above age group.

Sources: NIPCED, Statistics on Children in India, 1992.

Annual Report 2001-2002, Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India.

Improved access to education has helped many women overcome the obstacles to their illiteracy. An increasing number of women are now getting opportunities for not only acquiring skills but also enhancing their income earning capacities. In spite of the increase in the percentage of literacy, there are differences among states in making use of educational opportunities. While states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Goa, Mizoram, Tamilnadu and many of the northeastern states and the Union territories have recorded a significant rise in literacy, states like Rajasthan, Jharkhand, are still on the lower side. It is also true that school drop out rates rise sharply in higher primary and high school levels. This is primarily due to the emphasis being given for preparing girls for shouldering family responsibilities. In spite of the programme of free compulsory primary education being in existence for nearly fifty years, a large number of girls are not able to make use of these opportunities on account of domestic burdens and economic constraints.



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Work participation rates for women are still very low. It is only 23.3 for females as against 57.6 for males. Only 17 per cent of women workers are in organized sector (*those jobs protected by labor laws*) employment, while most women work in low paid and over worked jobs.

While the law tightens its hold on offenders responsible for incidence of violence against women, in actual practice cases of violence against women are also on the increase. This is indeed a disturbing trend, which cannot be taken lightly. However, it is also true that there is growing awareness among women of their rights and there is a strong women's movement, which has been addressing questions of gender inequality and gender injustice. But, the movement for women's emancipation has to touch the lives of larger sections of India's population if there has to be a real change in the position of women.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.4

Choose the Correct Answer:

1. The Hindu Marriage Act of _____ created a provision for divorce.
a) 1956 b) 1955 c) 1976 d) 1961
2. What is the sex ratio in India as per 2001 census?
a) 927 b) 933 c) 960 d) 929
4. The female literacy rate according to the Census of 2001 is _____.
a) 54.16 b) 56.37 c) 53.45 d) 52.11
5. The only state in India, where there are more women than men is _____.
a) Goa b) Kerala c) Sikkim d) Tamilnadu

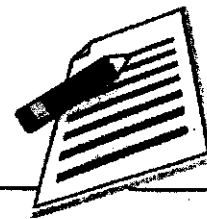


WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

The status of women in India has been presented as existing in different periods of Indian history. These are 1. Ancient 2. Medieval and 3. Modern.

Ancient Period

- During the early Vedic period women enjoyed a relatively higher status. They could receive education and choose their marital partners. Evil practices such,



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as sati, child marriage or ban on widow marriage did not exist.

- The two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have a strong influence on Indian society. Even today girls are being brought up to follow in the footsteps of Sita, the wife of Rama. Sita is considered the ideal Hindu woman because she surrendered all her personal desires and followed Rama to the forest. On the other hand, Draupadi the central female character of Mahabharata is a woman who exhibits a greater sense of independence and courage.
- During the period of Jainism and Buddhism women were treated with far greater respect than they were during the later Vedic period. Both these religions gave opportunities for women to participate in religious activities. Women could come out of their homes to seek religious knowledge.
- In the late Vedic period a gradual decline took place in the status of women. This was primarily due to the increasing importance given to sons as the carriers of family lineage and inheritors of the family property. Women began to be confined to the domestic sphere.
- Manu Smriti and Yagnavalkya Smriti, the two most well known Dharmashastras laid down codes of conduct, which placed heavy restrictions on woman's mobility and freedom. Evil practices such as early marriage, denial of education, ban on widow marriage and Sati relegated women to a position of total subordination.

Medieval Period

- The medieval age saw the rise of Islam in India. Owing to the practice of *purdah* women remained in a state of physical and social isolation. Since Muslim Personal Law governed rights of divorce, inheritance or maintenance, Muslim women too suffered heavily. Many Hindu women adopted *purdah* too. *Jauhar* or mass *sati* was also widely practiced by Rajput women.

Modern Period

- Though the British came to India in the beginning of the 17th century, they started taking initiative for introducing social reforms only in the 19th century.
- Due to the efforts of Indian social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Harbidas Sarda, the British passed Widow Remarriage Act, the Sati Prohibition Act and Child Marriage Restraint Act. Women's education also received great support from Indian reformers in the 19th century.



Notes

- After India became independent, the Constitution of India conferred equal rights on women and men with a view to abolish gender discrimination.
- The Government of India implemented a number of laws for liberating women from oppressive social customs. These include laws relating to divorce, inheritance, equal wages, maternity benefits etc.
- Though significant improvements have taken place in the position of women in the 50 years following independence, women continue to suffer from problems such as illiteracy, violence and ill health.
- It is true that a number of laws have been passed to change the conditions of women. But the culturally prescribed roles for men and women, project women as weak and submissive individuals. People generally tend to follow the gender role models. Changing attitudes towards women is also very important, if their overall position has to improve.



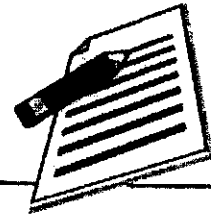
TERMINAL EXERCISE

Answer the following questions in 200-300 words.

1. Explain the status of women during the early Vedic period.
2. What were the factors responsible for the decline in the status of women during the period of the Dharmashastras?
3. Explain the main features of the social reform movements during the British period.
4. Discuss the impact of legislation on women's status in independent India.

GLOSSARY

1. **Child Marriage Restraint Act:** The Act, which was passed in 1929 fixed 14 years as the minimum age at marriage for a girl and 18 years for a boy. The Hindu Marriage act passed in 1955 raised the minimum age at marriage for a girl to 15 years. In 1976, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was amended and the minimum age at marriage was raised to 18 and 21 years, respectively for girls and boys.
2. **Dharma Shastras:** The religious texts, which prescribed Codes of Conduct.
3. **Epics:** The two epics are Ramayana and Mahabharata.



Notes

4. **Medieval Age:** The period between 1100 and 1700 A.D. This age also saw the emergence of Islam.
5. **Patriarchy:** The system, which upholds the superiority of a male. In a patriarchal society, the oldest male member is the head of the family, the lineage is traced through the male line and males enjoy the right to property inheritance. Women's identities are traced through men in a patriarchal social set up. Feminists see patriarchy as a major cause of women's oppression.
6. **Rig Vedic Age:** The period of the Rig Veda is also known as the early Vedic age.
7. **Sati:** The customary act of self-immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. The decision was either voluntary or forced.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

34.1

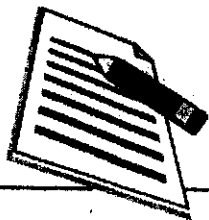
- 1 Rig Vedic Period.
- 2 Ramayana and Mahabharata.
- 3 Her loyalty to Dhruvashtra.

34.2

- 1 True
- 2 False
- 3 False
- 4 True

34.3

- 1 1829
- 2 Harbidas Sarda



Notes

- 3 Gandhiji
- 4 Jyoti Ba Phule

34.4

- 1 1955
- 2 933
- 3 54.16
- 4 Kerala