

Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-4a Daily Life and the Position of Women

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 4-4a Daily Life and the Position of Women

The abject misery from which India's rural population often has suffered is a relatively recent phenomenon—usually the product of mismanagement or a shortage of agricultural land. Until the last two or three centuries, shortages were almost unknown or limited to small areas. Although the material conditions of village life could not have been high by today's standards, the natives and the Aryan invaders had extensive areas of both irrigable and undeveloped land suitable to agriculture in various forms, and they steadily brought these lands into production for a millennium. When a shortage did threaten the food supply of large populations, emigration to another, less crowded area was the usual and most effective solution.

As in the Near East, Indian tradition regarding the relative status of women shows an initial period of near equality or possibly matriarchy. But with the arrival of the Aryan nomads, female prestige seems to have begun a descent that continued in the Vedic Hindu era. Manu, the legendary lawgiver, established the proper relationships between the sexes once and for all. The ritual of widows' suicide ([sati \(\(suh-TEE\) In India, the practice in which a widow committed ritual suicide upon the death of her husband.\)](#) [SUH-tee]) and isolation from all nonfamily males ([purdah \(\(PER-dah\) The segregation of females in Hindu and Muslim society.\)](#) [PURR-dah]) gradually became established. The Laws of Manu established that a female's fundamental dharma in all castes was to obey and serve her husband and her sons (see [Framing History: Society & Economy](#)).

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