

Status of Women in Tamil Nadu through the Ages

C.Tamilarasi,

Ph.D, Research Scholar, TNOU, Chennai

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the yardsticks for measuring the growth of a society is development of its women. A well-known historian of India would say “ one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellence and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and the status of women in it”.

The role, status and position of women have been far from static and it varied from period to period. Paleolithic and Neolithic archaeology do not throw any light on the position of women. Icons deciphered in the Indus Valley have brought to light the worship of female deities in Harappa and Mohenjodaro and elsewhere, and reveal that women were treated with honour and respect.

Position of women in the Ancient Period

During the Vedic period, equal treatment was given to men and women, and the latter even enjoyed the freedom of choosing their life-partners. They participated in cultural events, festivals and public functions. The fact that the age of girls to be given in marriage in the Vedic period was sixteen to eighteen indicates that child-marriage was not favoured during that period. The Vedic society allowed widows to remarry and treated them well. But, in the later Vedic period, the position of women deteriorated gradually and their status suffered with the coming of Manu’s Code. It sanctioned child marriage, denied them education and treated them like Sudras.

The Sangam women were also the expected to give birth to valorous sons to maintain the martial pursuits of their community. But this position has now changed, and both boys and girls are endowed with equal status in getting trained for different professions; such as viable nature of equality crept into the Tamil society after the colonial rule and due to the introduction of Western system of education, economy, culture, etc.

The Thiruvamathur Abhirameshwarar temple inscription dated A.D 1030 reveals that there was disparity in the payment of wages for

men and women who collected flowers. While women were paid only four nails of paddy for the collection of flowers, the men were granted eight nails of paddy for the same quantum of work. The adoption of equal pay for equal work is a modern concept alien to the ancient Tamils. On the whole it may be safely assumed that women of the lower level of the Tamil society of the Sangam age were engaged in multifarious economic activities.

Women were known for their generous and kind-hearted nature, and were served as *sevili thayar* to bring the children for meager wages. This was another measure to estimate the venerable though economically not enviable status of women. But, the condition of widows was deplorable because they were lead a life of isolation and were deprived of even the basic necessities of life. Their life was empty and had no meaning. To escape the miseries of widowhood, they preferred to die on the husband’s funeral pyre since they did not enjoy the right of remarriage.

Now and there women enjoyed a place and status equal to that of men in the Social, Cultural and Political life of Tamil Nadu from the earliest days. There was no evidence of Polygamy and Polyandry. Though the possession of wealth was considered indispensable for earthly life, a good wife was considered as more valuable asset. If fame, fortune and strength were the hallmarks of Masculine qualities, love, honour, chastity, restraint, hospitality and charity were considered essential virtues of ideal womanhood. But, during the Pallava and the Pandiya periods, women appear to have fallen to an inferior place in society.

Position of women during the Medieval Period

Though it was an extension of the Sangam Age it became an unequal society due to the influence of Islam. During, this period, the role of women conformed to the dictum laid down by Manu, which imposes to a number of restrictions on upon the freedom of women. In patriarchal societies, the mother ‘had a less active role in the upbringing of children in the family’. Their only vocation in life was to minister to men’s physical

pleasures and wants. They had no equal status with men and the importance of the wife's role during ceremonies merely allowed the presence of the wife near the husband.

Since the recognition of womanhood was getting lost in society, they concentrated more on religion-oriented activities. Women had no property rights due to their subordinated social status. The newly married girls brought stridhana (dowry). But such things do not prove that the custom of inheriting property existed. Girls were guarded by the parents at all levels especially after puberty. The girl who received the stridhana could give or donate them to the temple, as they were the property holders. They two were interested as men to create endowments by offering land and jewels for religious and charitable purpose.

Women were sold as Slaves during the Medieval period to the temples due to famines and also due to economic distresses. Women were sold to temples to dedicate themselves for temple services. Even the absconding women slaves were searched and recovered and were compelled to continue their services. The practice of employing women for the temple works started from the Pallava period but they considered themselves not as slaves of human beings but of God.

Women in temple administration came into prominence from 11th century A.D. They were also called devaradiyar as they were dedicated for a spiritual life of divine services. Later on, they took to dancing and music because of their talents in the field of fine arts. But it started deteriorated from about the 16th century A.D. and degeneracy in moral standards had set in among devaradiyar and many of them married and led family life. From the 8th century onwards with foreign invasions, society yielded place to old customs and traditions and lived according to Hindu Sastras. In the Hindu social set up she was kept under strict control and she was only compliment to her husband. The system of early marriage, stridhana, polygamy, sati, and temple service (Devaradiyars), dowry demand, female infanticide etc appeared in society. It was the darkest period for women. Sexual exploitation by the aliens restricted women's physical movement and reduced their participation in socio-economic activities. There were child-marriages too. The king, feudal lords and wealthy persons used to marry more than one wife and kept them in their harem. Gradually polygamy became the norm in society.

Thus, the women of Tamil Nadu during the medieval age suffered a subordinate position and this was an extension of the previous period. Political, social and economic factors shackled them

into everlasting subordination. Only after the advent of the British, their position gradually stated changing for the better.

Position of women in the Modern Period

The women in Tamil Nadu were economically, socially, politically or even in matter of ritual completely dependent on men. It was thought that they did not deserve to be educated and had to be kept subjugated. They were tightened in the grip of men from birth to death.

With the establishment of British rule in India, leaders of Indian society came in contact with the west and learnt the virtues of liberal traditions. Establishment of schools and universities opened the doors of western knowledge to Indians and influenced their ideas about the dignity of man. The spread of English education which was characteristic of British rule and the intermixture of western and eastern cultures enabled women to realize their subordinate position and persuaded them to regain their legitimate status.

The cumulative effect of all these influences marked the beginning of the movement for social reform on an organized basis. This movement had its most natural growth in areas where the first British impact was felt, that is, in Bengal, Madras and Bombay.

II. CONCLUSION

As a result of their services, awareness was created in society about the low status of women and the need for lifting them up from degradation. The women leaders found warm sympathizers and active supporters among men also.

Though the position and status of Indian women was not an appreciable one through the ages either in law, or in public or social life, it is obvious that during the post-Independent period they made good progress politically and in other walks of human activity, laws were also passed in the Indian parliament to achieve a status legally.

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