

CHAPTER ONE

INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH AGES
(Historical Background)

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Position of Women in Ancient India:

It is a fact that women and untouchables suffered most in Hindu society from the time immemorial. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is remembered for his work towards the upliftment of women and untouchables in India. He was a scholar of comparative Religions and constitutional Governments. He was a scholar of Hindu and Buddhist religions. He felt that Indian woman was free to a great extent until Manu Smriti enslaved her.

In his view woman at one time was entitled to Upanayan and it is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahamacharya. From the Shraut sutras it is clear that women could repeat the Mantras of the vedas and that women were taught to read the Vedas. Panini's Ashtadhyaya bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul (College) and studied the various Shaakhas (sections) of the Veda and became expert in Mimansa. Patanjali's Maha Bhashya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. The stories

of women entering into public discussions on most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are by no means few. The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulabha, between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and between Shankaracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu's time could rise to the highest Pinnacle of learning and education.

That at one time women were highly respected cannot be disputed. Among the Ratnis who played so prominent a part in the coronation of the king in ancient India was queen and the King made her an offering as he did to the others. Not only the King elect did homage to the Queen, he worshipped his other wives of lower castes. In the same way the king offers salutation after the coronation ceremony to the ladies of the chiefs of the Shrenies (guilds).¹ Dr. A.S. Altekar also pointed out the fact of recommending a certain ritual to a household for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. It is true that this ritual did not become as popular as the Pumasavana one, prescribed for procuring the birth of a son, but it clearly shows that cultured parents were often as anxious for daughters as they were for sons. Some thinkers have even pointed out that a talented and well behaved daughter may be better than a son.

In cultured circles such a daughter was regarded as the pride of the family. In lower sections of society where the custom of bride-price prevailed, the birth of a daughter must have been a welcome event. We have, however, no literature preserved reflecting their views.

The reasons why daughters were relatively less unpopular in ancient India during the early centuries are not difficult to understand.

They could not be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods, the son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose. The marriage of the daughter was not a difficult problem: it was often solved by the daughter herself. The dread of a possible widowhood did not very much weigh upon the mind of parents, for as will be shown later, levirate and remarriage were allowed by society and were fairly common.

As time passed, he says further, the above circumstances gradually changed. The importance of ancestor-worship increased and sons alone were regarded as eligible for offering oblations to the mantras: daughters could not perform this very important religious duty. Child marriage came into vogue from about the beginning of the Christian era, and soon thereafter both levirate

(niyoga) and widow remarriage were prohibited. Inter-caste marriages began to be disapproved by society, and there came into existence hundreds of sub-castes all insisting upon mutual exogamy. The field of choice for the selection of suitable son-in-law thus became very narrow, intensifying thereby the anxiety of the daughter's father about the selection of a proper bridegroom. If a cruel fate inflicted widowhood upon the daughter, the calamity would break the parent's heart. Remarriage being no longer possible, parents had to bear the heart-rending pain of seeing their daughter wasting herself in an interminable widowhood. The growing prevalence of the Sati custom from about the fifth century A.D. added to the poignancy of the grief: parents had often to pass through the terrible ordeal of seeing their daughters burning themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands. To become a daughter's parent thus became a source of endless worry and misery.²

Textual Hindu Law permitted polygamy for a man. It is not a matter of long past that in India hypergamy brought forth wholesale polygamy and along with it misery, plight and ignominy to women, particularly Brahmin women. A caste when sub-divided into different sections of different social status the rule of hypergamy demanded that parents must marry their daughters to a man of

equal social status. The parents of higher sections found it extremely difficult to procure husbands for their daughters of same caste. During those days there was no injunction on polygamy. Taking advantage of this custom many Brahmins earned a livelihood by indulging in wholesale polygamy. These Brahmins married innumerable women. Hypergamy prevailed amongst Kulin Brahmins in Bengal. Anavil-Brahmins and Leva-patidars of Gujarat, Rajaputs of Gujarat and Rajasthan, Marathas of Maharashtra, and Nayars, Kshatriyas and Ambalavasis of Kerala. In rich and royal families polygamy was common, although ordinarily monogamy was the custom. The practice of polyandry was unknown in ancient India. It is only in the Mahabharata and Puranas that we come across a few cases of polyandry. The most well-known case of course, is that of Drawpadi marrying five Pandava brothers.

If a wife became a widow she was not required to ascend the funeral-pyre of her husband. The custom of Sati was unknown. The widow could, if she liked, remarry or follow the custom of Niyoga (liverate) which allowed the widow to have conjugal relations with her husband's younger brother or some other near relation till she got some children. A widow, who had children, was prohibited from having recourse to Niyoga. The main disability from which the widow³ suffered in the vedic age,

as well as in the next one was property rights.

Opinions differ regarding the prevalence of the dowry system. Tulsidas in the Ramayana, Jayasi and Surdas and some foreign travellers speak of the prevalence of this system among rich and royal families. It is only from the medieval times and particularly in Rajput families that the system assumed alarming proportions. The dowry system was responsible for female infanticide in Rajput families.

In Manu Samhita ideas about womanhood are laid down and morality is assigned in authoritarian code which bring down women to the level of subspecies. Manu was a law-giver of the most perverted Brahminical brand. According to him, the nature of women is to seduce men: they lead astray, not only fools but even learned men. Manu equated a woman with a slave and his laws epitomise complete submission of women to man.⁴

Women are not to be free under any circumstances. In the opinion of Manu: IX-2. Day and night women must be kept independent from the males (of) their (families), and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments they must be kept under one's control. Manu Smriti reads the following:

IX.3. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age, a woman is never for independence. IX.5. Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear), if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow to the families.

IX.6. Considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husbands (must) strive to guard their wives.

V. 147. By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

V.149. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons, by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible.

IX.45. The husband is declared to be one with the wife, which means that there could be no separation once a woman is married.

Manu regarded marriage as sacrament and, therefore, did not allow divorce. This in course is far from the truth. His law against divorce had a very different motive. It was not to tie up a man to a woman but it was to tie up the woman to a man and to leave the man free.



For Manu does not prevent a man from giving up his wife. Indeed, he not only allows him to abandon his wife but he also permits him to sell her. But what he does is to prevent the wife from becoming free. Manu says:

IX.46. Neither by sale nor by repudiation is a wife released from her husband.

The meaning is that a wife, sold or repudiated by her husband, can never become the legitimate wife of another who may have bought or received her after she was repudiated. If this is not monstrous nothing can be. But Manu was not worried by considerations of justice in framing his laws. He wanted to deprive women of the freedom they had under the Buddhistic regime. Manu was outraged by her licence and in putting a stop to it he deprived her of her liberty.

A wife was reduced by Manu to a level of a slave in the matter of property. IX. 416. A wife, a son, and a slave, these three declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is (acquired) for him to whom they belong.

When she becomes a widow Manu allows her maintenance, if her husband was in joint family, and a widow's estate

in the property of her husband, if he was separate from his family. But Manu never allows her to have any say over property.

A woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows the husband the right to beat his wife. VII. 299. A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil, and a younger brother of the full blood who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo .

Under Manu a woman had no right in knowledge. The study of the Veda was forbidden to her by Manu II.66. Even for a woman the performance of the sanskaras is necessary and they should be performed. But they should be performed without uttering the Veda mantras.

Offering sacrifices according to Brahmanism formed the very soul of religion. Manu forbids women from performing sacrifices. He says:

XI. 36.37 A woman shall not perform the daily sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. If she does it she will go to hell.⁵ The condition of women was deteriorating. Women were not entitled to receive education or study the vedas. Due to the practice of polygamy in the society the condition of women was deteriorating. There are

some references wherein on the death of their husbands wives burnt themselves along with their husbands. This shows that Sati Pratha was prevalent. However, there are also references of some exceptions. During the reign of Govind Chandra a women named Jambuki was Pattalika. Princesses were given education. There are also some references of poems composed by women.⁶ Women of royal families did play some role. Such instances are not wanting when women played an active part in the political, social and literary life of the country. Plurality of wives was a recognised practice especially among the wealthy classes. Child-marriage was very common and formed part of regular custom. The evil practice of exacting exorbitant dowries was greatly prevalent amongst those who were well placed. The state occasionally interfered in social affairs to settle disputes among various communities. The rite of Sati was very common in Vijayanagar. Being held in high esteem by the rulers, the Brahmanas exercised a predominant influence not merely in social and religious matters but also in the political affairs of the state.

Pease tells us that the women attached to the temples "are of lose character, and live in the best streets that are in the city. It is the same in all their cities; their streets have the best rows of houses.

They are very much esteemed, and were classed among those honoured ones who were the mistresses of the captains, any respectable man went to their houses without any blame attaching thereto. These women were allowed even to enter the palace in the presence of the wives of the King and they stayed with them.⁷ The women of the higher castes did not take part in the industrial and business activity. It seems that the ladies in the royal families of this period used to take part in the political and state matters. This is proved by the fact that Prabhavati Gupta the daughter of Emperor Chandra Gupta II (Vikramaditya) (380 to 415 A.D.) of the Gupta dynasty who was married to king Rudrasena II (385-390 A.D.) of the Vakataka dynasty of Berar, acted as the Regent of her two minor sons (Divakarasena and Damodarsena) during 390-410 A.D. after the death of king Rudrasena II.⁸

There were various evil practices in Indian society, like slavery, untouchability, casteism, Vaghya-Murali, Deva-Dasi, child marriage, widowhood, Sati, Jauhar, blind faith, evil traditions, customs, polygamy etc.

The Devadasis: When the people of ancient India started constructing temples for the worship of the Hindu gods after 300 A.D. onwards and endowed magnificent gifts to those temples, the singing girls were appointed to

those temples to play music on the occasions of God's worship and festivals. As those girls used their art and skill for the worship of God (Deva), they came to be known as the Devadasis.

The Devadasis were required to devote all their life in the worship of the God to whose temples they were attached. They were not permitted to marry as it was thought that they belonged to the Gods. The Devadasis were generally at the mercy of the priests who used to perform the worship of the temple Gods. After the Gupta period when the decline of Jainism and Buddhism took place and Hinduism became a powerful and popular religion, the Hindu priests in general did not attend the religious duties properly. As a result persons with ordinary talent and average moral level became the priests of the Hindu temples, the life of the Devadasis seems to have started becoming wretched then as they were treated in a bad manner by those priests as well as by the other members of the Hindu society. That made the life of the Devadasis miserable in ancient India.⁹

Many ancient people buried or burnt a man's widow, horses, and other cherished possessions with his corpse, in order that he might have all that he loved and needed in the other world. We know that such practices were

followed by some early Indo-European peoples and the ancient Chinese. One of the funeral rites of Rig Veda (RV. X, 18, 9) shows that in the earliest form of the cremation rite the widow lay down beside the dead man, and his bow was placed in his hand, the bow was removed, and the wife called on to return to the land of the living. This practice must look back to a time long before the composition of the hymn, when the wife was actually burnt with her husband. The custom was prevalent among the Gauls, the Goths, the celts and the Thracians. Suicide of widows seems to have been known among ancient Egyptians. In China, if a widow killed herself to follow her husband to heaven, her corpse was taken in a great procession. In various African tribes, widows were buried alive with their dead husbands.¹¹

The position of women in a given society can be understood properly through the agency of the different customs which that society followed in respect to the course of the life of the women, and the rights which it gave to them, and the other considerations with which it treated them. To know this authentically in the history of ancient India, we do not have written sources up to the time of the Rigvedic or early Vedic period. The written sources from the Rigvedic period onwards offer

details on the basis of which it is possible to know about the different customs and practices followed by the ancient Indian women in the course of their life.

The life of a woman becomes miserable in the world after the death of her husband. As a widow, who is struck by immense grief because of her truly loved man, she does not find for herself any charm and meaning in her life in the world. In that case if she is not pregnant, and does not have any encumbrances like the responsibility to look after her young children, she may feel like putting an end to her life, immediately after the death of her husband. It seems that to accommodate such women it was that the practice of allowing the widow to put an end to her life came to be in vogue in the ancient civilizations of the world. Such women, who abhorring all the temptations of the worldly life put an end to their life after the death of their husbands, were naturally regarded as the most virtuous women who were to be worshipped by the other members of their society.

Like the widows of the other ancient civilizations the widows in the ancient Indian society also put an end to their life. The widow who put an end to her life after the death of her husband was called as the Sati

(a virtuous woman), in the ancient Indian society.

As a result, the practice which the widow followed to put an end to her life after the death of her husband also came to be called as Sati. In that practice of Sati followed in the ancient Indian society the widow immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. As the ancient Indians believed in the theory of re-birth based on the doctrine of Karma (action or deeds), it was believed by them as well as by the widow, who practised the custom of Sati, that she will marry again in the next birth her deceased husband.

A more concrete proof of the practice of Sati followed by the ancient Indian people is found in the Greek accounts of India written by the Greek scholars who had accompanied Alexander the Great, when he invaded India in the fourth century B.C.. The data found in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata (for the composition of whose different parts the scholars have ascribed the period from 600 B.C. to 600 A.D.) also shows that the custom of Sati was practised by the women of that period in ancient India. The early Smritis (Hindu works on law) allowed the practice of Sati to the widow but did not give strong emphasis on it. Those works did not permit a pregnant wife to practise Sati. During

the period 200 B.C.-200 A.D., the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthians, and the Kushanas, who were central Asian tribes, conquered territories in India. After that they became permanently settled communities in ancient India by becoming followers of the different Indian religions and thereby got absorbed in the ancient Indian society. As the custom of Sati was common in the life of the tribes belonging to central Asia, it is felt by the scholars that the people belonging to those tribes also practised that custom after their absorption in the Indian society. Seeing them following the custom of Sati it is felt by the historians that the other members of the Indian society also practised that custom by larger degrees. This is proved by the fact that it is during the Gupta period (300-600 A.D.) that ample evidence is available to prove that the custom of Sati was followed in a common manner. The inscription of Goparaja (510 A.D.) (near Sagar in the Madhya Pradesh) of the time of king Bhanu Gupta of the Gupta dynasty proves that the practice of Sati was very common during the period. The large number of Sati stones which have been found in north India after the period of that inscription indicate that the custom of Sati was practised on a large scale then.¹²

Opposition to the Custom of Sati:

This cruel practice did not go unopposed even in ancient and medieval period. The Tantric cult of Hinduism did not approve it. Thinkers of that cult felt that the widow who practised Sati went to Hell and not to Heaven. The Tantric cult felt on those lines because those cults worshipped different goddesses and held women in great reverence. They felt that since the source of life in the world was the woman, she should not follow the custom of Sati, which destroyed her previous life. Their ideas seem to have exerted some influence restricting the incidence of the practice of Sati in Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Bihar, and different parts of South India, where the Tantric cults had spread. Some ancient Indian thinkers like poet Bana, the Court poet of Emperor Harsha Vardhana (606-647 A.D.) condemned the custom of Sati. That also might have been instrumental in putting restriction by some degrees on the practice of the customs of Sati in the ancient Indian society.¹³

The Practice of Niyoga (Levirate):

This practice also must have worked against the custom of Sati as it resolved the problem to satisfy the natural desire of a childless widow or a married woman, whose husband was sterile, to have a son by

introducing the practice of Niyoga (levirate). According to Niyoga a childless widow or a wife of a sterile husband was permitted to beget a son from other person than her own husband in the ancient Indian society. From the data of the Rigveda it appears that practice of Niyoga existed in the life of the members of the Rigvedic society. The ancient Indian society, through the agency of the practice of Niyoga allowed a childless widow to conceive a son by her brother-in-law. That practice was also allowed to be followed by a married woman whose husband was sterile or who had become impotent due to disease in order to beget children. Such a person, who was struck by that misfortune, was permitted by the ancient Indian law-givers to have progeny by appointing his close relative, mostly his brother, to produce offspring on his behalf. The practice of Niyoga was also sanctioned by the early Hindu law books. According to those law books such an unfortunate person was given the facility to have only one son by following that practice.¹⁴

Widow Remarriage:

The data of the Rigveda points out that the remarriage of widows was fairly common in the Rigvedic or the early Vedic society. The story of King Nala and his queen Damayanti stated in the epic Mahabharata also

points out the remarriage of widows was existent in the ancient Indian ways of life. In that story it is stated that King Nala, who had parted from his wife Damayanti, again won her, in the Savyamvara, which she held presuming that he was dead. Additionally, the Arthashastra of Kautilya or Arya Chanakya or Vishnugupta, show that under different circumstances the women of the ancient Indian society could remarry the person of their choice. The ancient work like the Narada Smriti, the Parashara Smriti, the Agni Purana etc. allowed the remarriage of a woman in the ancient Indian society, if her husband had disappeared, or if he was impotent, or if he had lost his caste due to his improper and evil undertakings. But the Manu Smriti, whose composition period is thought to be 200 B.C.-200 A.D. and whose main purpose was to settle the castes well regulated. Since the matters stated in the Manu Smriti were adhered to by the later authorities of the Hindu law, gradually the practice of widow remarriage and many other healthy old customs disappeared. Due to that the lot of the women of the higher castes became very hard generally in the closing period of ancient Indian history.¹⁴

Proprietary (Ownership) Rights of Women:

Most of the legal authorities in ancient India did not recognize the right of a woman to own property

land, houses etc. which come under the category of immovable property. But those authorities admitted the right of a woman to Stridhana (ornaments, jewellery, etc., which were given to her at the time of her marriage by her husband, parents, relatives etc.). On those things the woman had exclusive right. Those things which formed part of the Stridhana could not be taken away from her even by her husband. The Arthashastra of Kautilya not only stated that the Stridhana was the property of the married woman but also laid down that a woman could own money up to 2,000 silver panas (approximately 1 pana = $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 Rupees), or any sum that being held by her husband in trust on her behalf her property used to pass on to her daughters and not to her sons or husband after her death. In her life time she was permitted to part with the Stridhana if she wanted to give it as a present to her daughters.

During the Gupta period and after the things changed according to the Yajnavalkya Smriti, the wife had the right to own the property of her husband immediately after the son. Her daughters also were given the right to property after her as well as her son's death. But while her husband and her sons living she had to remain at their mercy.

Position of Women in Medieval India:

There was no Purda system among the Hindu before the arrival of the Muslims in India. The Muslim observed Purdah system very rigorously and so its influence on the Hindu subjects was somewhat natural. But the Hindus adopted it more because of the changed circumstances rather than in imitation of the Muslims. In order to save their women from the voracious eyes of the Muslims the Hindus adopted the Purdah system. Although the women enjoyed respect and influence at home they were completely dependent on their husbands or male relatives and had to live in seclusion behind the Purdah. Some of the aristocratic Muslim families adopted the Hindu custom of Sati and Jauhar. Most of the Muslim rulers and nobles married Hindu women by force but they spared married women as a convention not as a rule. The Hindus began to marry their daughters at a very early age. So, child marriage became popular. The Muslims do not like to give liberty to their women-folk. Firoz Tughlaq, a great protagonist of Islam, had formulated certain rules prohibiting women even from visiting the tombs of pirs and holy saints outside the city. The prophet had also said, "Those people that make women their ruler will not find salvation". Consequently, the Hindus also began to put certain restrictions on the liberty of their woman after

the fashion of the rulers.¹⁶

The position of women was determined largely by Smriti rules relating to marriage and succession to property. Intermarriages among the three upper castes were forbidden. The Sikh Gurus - themselves Khatries - did not marry non-Khatri girls. Early marriage of girls was recommended. The general age limits were seven and twelve. The remarriage of widows was forbidden. Ibn Batuta, who gives an eye-witness's account of Sati in Malwa, says that the custom was highly esteemed but not obligatory. He adds that, under a law made by the Sultans of Delhi, permission had to be obtained before burning a widow. Women had legal right to property within certain limits and they were treated leniently in respect of punishment for crimes. They were subjected to religious disabilities such as disqualification for Vedic studies and sacrament in accordance with Vedic Mantras. Their position in their own families was regulated by the old Smriti rule which prescribed their perpetual subjection and lifelong tutelage under their male relations - father, husband, sons at successive stage of their lives.¹⁷

A man like Ibn Batuta married more than four times in a most irresponsible manner and abandoned his wives one after another. The education of women was

not altogether neglected, and the traveller writes that when he reached he found there 13 schools for girls and 23 for boys, a thing which agreeably surprised him. Though women were treated with great respect, the birth of a girl was looked upon as an inauspicious event, as it is illustrated by Amir Khusrau's lament over the birth of his daughter. Seclusion was recommended for women, and Amir Khusrau in his advance to his daughter asks her not to leave the thread of the spinning wheel and always to keep her face towards the wall of house and her back towards the door so that nobody might be able to look towards the doors so that no body might be able to look at her.¹⁸

Purdah and child marriage had become common on account of influence of Islam and the conduct of Muslim rulers and nobles. Except those of the lower classes, Hindu women did not move out of their house. The Muslims observed Purdah much more strictly than the Hindus.

On account of early marriage there were many widows in our society and they were not allowed to remarry, polygamy was common among Musalmans who could according Sunni tradition, marry four wives at a time. A Shia could marry more than four. Divorce was permitted both for Muslim men and women. Although Hinduism did not prohibit polygamy, monogamy was the rule with the Hindus

on account of habits and economic necessity. Rarely did a man of average means and status marry more than one wife. Only Hindu ruling classes indulged in this pastime. In spite of these handicaps, women exercised great influence at home and some of them helped their husbands in their avocation. There were many Hindu women of outstanding ability during this period, notably Rani Durgawati of Gondwana (who was a brave soldier and a capable administrator), Rani Karmavati, Mira Bai, Tarabai, etc.. Among the Muslims, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Chand Bibi, Jahanara, Raushanara, Zebunnisa and Sahibji (wife of Amin Khan, Governor of Kabul) played an important part in the affairs of that time.¹⁹

Muslim women received better treatment than their Hindu sisters in matters of inheritance; they had the privilege of divorce and they were not subjected to the cruel practice of Sati. But polygamy was more widely prevalent in the Muslim society than in the Hindu society.

As a result of their permanent residence in this country the social life of the foreign Muslims was to some extent Indianized in some of its essential features something like the caste system developed among the Muslim aristocrats in respect of marriage.²⁰

The Purdah system was universal in the Muslim

society although it was less rigid among the lower classes in rural areas. Akbar issued an order that if a young woman was found unveiled in the streets she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession. Polygamy was a common practice though the poor section of the Muslim could not afford to marry more than one wife. Akbar ordered that a man of ordinary means should not have more than one wife unless the first proved to be barren. The Emperors maintained large harems and their example was followed by the nobles. The Shariat law permits a Muslim to have four wives at a time but in Akbar's reign the theologians (ulma) decided that a Muslim might marry any number of wives by *mutah* but only for by *nikah*. The strict enforcement of the *Purdah* system and the general prevalence of polygamy seriously affected the social position of women but they had the privilege of divorce and widow remarriage was permitted. In the tantric cults the object of worship was the Mother Goddess (Shakti) and the rights of women were recognized in the spiritual sphere. In Vaishnavism Radha was the inseparable associate of Krishna. Hindu widows could not be remarried. Akbar's attempt to abolish Sati and child marriage had little success. The *Purdah* system had found a recognized place in the Hindu society. The birth of a daughter was considered inauspicious.

The dowry was oppressive and in Rajasthan it led to horrible practice of female infanticide.²¹

Position of Women in Modern India:

By the end of the eighteenth century, women were reduced to the most lamentable plight, child marriages were common, with the result that education of girls was totally neglected. Widow remarriage was out of question, polygamy was widely prevalent and the plight of widows was very sad. Even female infanticide was practised in some communities. Among some communities Sati was practised. During the days of the company reformers like Ram Mohan Roy were able to persuade the Company's Government to pass legislation towards social reform. Practice of Sati, infanticide, forced labour etc. were made illegal.

The British rulers looked for precedents. The Sultan had tolerated the horrible custom. Akbar had tried to attack it by prohibiting Sati if the widow was unwilling. But this loophole caused his legislation to be virtually void. The Portuguese, the French, the Dutch had banned it, but then they ruled over tiny areas. However, their position changed considerably due to the social reform movement launched by the Indians them-

selves starting from Raja Ram Mohan Ray. Special schools for women were started and propaganda to educate women was seriously launched. The marriage age and the age of consent were also raised. Their legal equality was also accepted by law in the courts. Education brought some awakening to them also. By the close of the first quarter of the twentieth century they were enfranchised in a limited way.²²

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