

# The Status of Women in Punjab:A Socio- Early Historical Perspective (From Pre Vedic to Mauryan Period)

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**ABSTRACT:** The status of women is one of the important aspects the study in every era. The present study is related to the status of women in Punjab from Pre Vedic to Mauryan Period. With the help of available sources of information we 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 Punjab from a historical perspective is not an easy task because systematic documentation of the position of women in different social groups at different points of time began only recently. Using authentic sources of information an attempt is made in this paper to analyse the status of women from Pre Vedic to Mauryan period. The paper highlights the status of women, her changing roles in the society, changes in outlook that have taken place over the years towards women are also being discussed here. The paper also gives emphasis on the number of women in total workforce, torture of them by men in family life, social life and in other fields where they are participants. Ample examples can be cited with regard to the roles played by women in the history of man kind, heroines, rules, goddess, etc. From the Indus Valley, Valley period till Early Vedic Period, Women had an important role to play in the decision making progress. The famous bronze image of a dancing girl from Mohenjodaro and a number of terracotta images of women indicate towards the position they enjoyed. Women were worshipped in the society in the form of the mother goddess in addition to them considered as a source of entertainment and housekeepers. Women were held in high esteem in Punjab during Vedic Age. From the time of Rigveda we start getting examples of position of women in society of Punjab and the examples are not wanting for any period. They had the right of education had got the same kind of education of men and had been taking part in philosophical debates. We find women like Apala, Ghosa and Lopamudra other setting examples of ideal womanhood in this land, freedom enjoyed by women is reflected in their participation in various sacrifices, ceremonies, rituals and festivities besides their right to education and choice in the matter of marriage.

Since the later Vedic Age in Punjab, the role of women was limited to wifehood and motherhood. During this age, the position of women decreased compared to the Vedic period. Women did not get honored and respect from the society during this age. The important reason for the decrease was the prevalence of polygamy and polyandry. The study of the epics confirms this fact. The birth of a daughter was considered a source of misery and sorrow and the root cause of evil were assumed to be by women. This does not mean that they have no respect at all. Vasishtata's Dharma states that 'A wife shall not be abandoned, even though she quarrelsome or strained by incest or has left the house or has suffered criminal force or has fallen into the hand of thieves. Women were not honored in Punjab during Pre-Mauryan period (560 BC-321 BC) compared to Vedic Period. There were gradual changes in the position of women in this period. Women were not allowed to participate in the performance of sacrificial ceremonies. They got proper education and 'Purusha' system had not evolved as a fashion, but at the same time some reference to the social evils like 'Sati' was also followed during this period. The period of women was generally secure as the joint family system prevailed in Punjab in the Mauryan Period. The account of 'Arthashastra' of Kautilya provides so much information about the position of women during this period. They did not have a high and respectable position in the society during this time when compared to the Vedic period. A vivid picture of their status that emerges from our study indicates that despite some decline the women of Punjab enjoyed a high position in society and played a significant role.

Therefore, it may be concluded that the status of women is a complex question and has to be studied as an integral part of the socioeconomic structure in which women live. The changes that have taken place in their position are a part of the process of transformation of a traditional society. The various stages of this transformation may be briefly discussed in the paper.

**Key Words:** Status of women, Education, Rights, Participation.

## Introduction

One way to judge the state of the nation is to study the status of women. In the context of South Asian women and their status is being assessed here to highlight the similarity in the conditions faced by women

despite the diversities stemming from class culture and locality. This assessment is undertaken on the basis of a select set of quantitative indicators regarding their work, survival, health, education, and political participation. In this connection the paper is attempt to conduct an analysis the status of a women context of Punjab focusing the situation of women. It was almost seventy five years back when A.S Altekar remarked that one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitation is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.<sup>1</sup> The social status of the women of Punjab symbolizes the social spirit of the age. However to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. It is therefore necessary to trace this position in historical perspective.<sup>2</sup> In the course of Punjab history from Pre Vedic to Mauryan period, there were distinct stages of the rise and fall in the status and role of women.<sup>3</sup> Punjab is traditionally known as a land of brave women who withstood all impediments and emerged tall in all crises. In this study, we wish to judge the real picture through the analysis of social, political and religious institution's efforts are made to understand the position of women in different period of time in ancient Punjab from the birth of child there were several stages, that a person, in this case a female, passes through in ones life and at each stage several issues are attached to it.

### **Objectivity of the study**

State the position of women in Punjab society from Pre Vedic to Mauryan period.

Analyze and explain the what changes took place in the position of women during this period.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on both primary and secondary data collected from the various sources, according to our study period. The data are used in it purely both, according to the need for the study.

### **Birth and childhood:**

It is but natural that in the patriarchal form of society that prevailed in Punjab during the early Vedic age sons were more desired than a daughter. The *Arthārvā Veda* contains a rite for the birth of a son in preference to daughter.<sup>4</sup> A verse of the Atharva Veda rightly echoes the general desire of the birth of the son and not of the daughter.<sup>5</sup> "The birth of a girl grant it elsewhere, here grant a boy."<sup>6</sup> In this line we assume that the birth of a girl was regarded as a misfortune.<sup>7</sup> Expression of sorrow indicated on the birth of a girl.<sup>8</sup> The *Aitāreya Brahmanā* says that whereas a son is the hope of the family, a daughter is a source of trouble for it.<sup>9</sup> We do not come across instances of infanticide in the Punjab of Vedic times. The same prayer has been repeated in another form in which a husband asks for the birth of a male child to his wife.<sup>10</sup> And male children, it is again prayed, be followed by male offspring only and never by female progeny.<sup>11</sup>

***"In him a father pays a debt and reaches immortality.***

***When he beholds countenance of a son born to him alive."***<sup>12</sup>

In this line the birth of a girl in the family did not cause much rejoicing while the boy was lifted up by partents with an expression of joy. The *Brhādāranyākā* Upanished prescribes a ritual for the birth of a scholarly daughter.<sup>13</sup> Even Smayutta Nikaya Says that a talented daughter was better than a son.<sup>14</sup> As late as the time of Ramayana it was maintained that family prosper with daughter.<sup>15</sup> It is seen sometimes reference are stretched out of context to derive meanings. For instance, Altekar has cited an example from the Ramayana where the position of king Janaka is said to be have become intense due to great anxiety like that of poor man who lost all his little money.<sup>16</sup> It is further said her that the father of a girl, even if he is an exalted king, has to put up with insult not only from his equals but even from his inferiors.<sup>17</sup> It seems Valmiki has made these remarks out of a natural concern that a father has for the wellbeing of her daughter when looking for a suitable match for her marriage and not with a view to comment on social status of daughters as such. For all we know, Sita was highly accomplished princess and all the princes and kings were vying for her hand.<sup>18</sup> There are plenty of references in ancient text on either side. In cultured families no distinction was done between daughters and sons and for the rest, for whom we do not have any literary data, it is presumed that daughters cannot be a source of misery because economically profitable.<sup>19</sup> They helped the family in economic pursuits and brought the bride price at the time of marriage.<sup>20</sup>

*Apāstāmbā*<sup>21</sup> says that when a father returned from a journey he recited a mantra for the welfare of his daughter in the same way as he did for the happiness of his sons. An interesting reference is contained in the *Apāstāmbā* where Sachi says that her sons are destroyers of her enemy and her daughter is an empress.<sup>22</sup> It reflects the social thinking of the time when both daughters and sons are given equal importance.

### **Education :**

Education was the best parameter for the competence of a lady. As already pointed out the general features of education in ancient Punjab, we do not get a clear picture of the education system in the early Vedic Age. However, the Rigveda contains numerous reference too highly educated female seers who composed hymns

for the Veda and were figuring prominently throughout. Women enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. In a verse of Veda contains “*Ayōgyo vādhā yeshyeōpatnik*” means without a wife, a husband could not take part in Yagna ceremonies. If the woman was not educated how could she recite the mantras; *Purakriāpaal Kumarinām mohyebandhanmisheyte prārashārmadhav-2/P-485*<sup>23</sup>

We find *Gargi* and *Maitrey* distinguishing themselves in *Brāhmāvidyā*, the highest knowledge. *Apālā* and *Atreya* were also knowledgeable and authority on women, they suggested that matrimony was not for woman.<sup>24</sup> The status of a woman on the training. She had received in her childhood. Solely because of this reason that we see the position of women in Punjab society gradually declined from the Post-Vedic time onwards.<sup>25</sup> When the child marriage became the practice girls never got a time to receive education and hence their economic utility also decreased considerably. Rather, they become a burden on their in-laws due to their incompetence and hence lost respect. But it was not so in the beginning. All these ladies of early Vedic age naturally belonged to the Sapatsindhu Region. The picture of women's education during the Vedic period appears to be very bright and it seems that women continued to shine in this field throughout the period of our study.<sup>26</sup> However, the *Rigveda* contains numerous references to highly educated female seers who composed hymns for the Veda and were figure prominently throughout.<sup>27</sup> In the *Sārvānukeāmānikā* there are as many as twenty names of female seers to whom respect were to be paid during daily prayers at the time of *Brahmayājnā*. The *Athārvāvedā* clearly says that a woman can succeed in his married life only if she has been properly trained during her student life or *brāhunchāryā*. The prominent names of female seers that occur in the Rigveda include those of Lopamudra, Ghosha<sup>28</sup>, Visvavara<sup>29</sup>, Sikta<sup>30</sup>, Nivari<sup>31</sup> etc. Of these Ghosa who was suffering from a disease and grew up unmarried in the house of her father is found to be composed two hymns dedicated to Asvins in the Rigveda<sup>32</sup>. Lopamudra two other female scholars composing hymns in the Rigveda<sup>33</sup>. To Sachi is attributed hymn X .145<sup>34</sup> and to Indrani hymn X.159<sup>35</sup>. The *Brahādaranyākā Upanishad*<sup>36</sup> contains an interesting episode of the learned assembly in the court of the philosopher king Janaka where several great sages had assembled for discussion. *Yājā Valkyā* was one of them who got into a discussion with *Gargi Vachakanvi*. Likewise Atreyi was a student of Vedanta under Valmiki and Agastya. The list of scholars of the Vedic age is too long and there is no reason for us to believe that all these names are without any basis. It simply shows that the education for women was as popular for men. We get reference to two types of female students. The first were known as *Sadyovadhus*, who studied up to their marriage and then took over the responsibility of the household<sup>37</sup>. Other like those mentioned above were called brahmavadins who remained life long students of philosophy and theology. Besides these subjects there must have been a number of woman who were given education in more practical subjects, though the data available about them is very meagre. We get to know a number of women warriors right from the time of the Rigveda, which mentions a lady named *Vispala*<sup>38</sup> who given a metallic limb by Asvins. She must have been given complete military training. The tradition of female education in Punjab continued till the time of Panini period is evident from numerous reference to the same by the great grammarian. He says that the same rule applied to the formation of terms connected with male and female student<sup>39</sup>. Thus a female learning *Apisali* grammar was called *Apisala*<sup>40</sup>. Likewise a female studying Panini's grammar was called *Paniniya*. It only indicates the complete autonomy given to this sector by the state despite the fact that liberal royal grants were made to all educational institutions and even individual teachers who commanded immense respect in the society. It may be pointed out that some of the queens of Asoka were highly educated ladies and his daughter Samghamitra even went abroad to preach Buddhism.<sup>41</sup> From the fact that we get reference to educated ladies right up to the end of the period of our study, it is obvious that female education continued from the PreVedic to the Mauryan period in Punjab.<sup>42</sup>

### **Marriage and Position of Widows :**

Marriage is an essential institution of civilized life. We get a beautiful picture of the same in the marriage hymn of Rgveda.<sup>43</sup> It not only provides details of how a marriage was performed, but also tells how blessings were bestowed upon the bride to rule over the heart of each member of his in law's family through her idea conduct. The later texts portray details of the types of marriage forms of marriage, socially acceptable and unacceptable form of marriage and so on. Both endogamous and exogamous types of marriages were prevalent in Punjab. The eight forms of marriage were known as we get some idea of the same from the epic in the cases of the marriage of Madri, Gandhari and Kaikayi all of whom belonged to Punjab. Some archaic customs like that of Arsha type of marriage in which bride price is involved were also prevalent over here. The institution of marriage was quite liberal in Punjab within the laid down scriptural norms is reflected from various sources. *The fourteenth Kanda of the Athārvā Veda* is entirely devoted to the hymns connected with marriage. <sup>44</sup> The Taitiriya Brahman<sup>45</sup> clearly lays down that a man without a wife is unholy and

unworthy of a performance of sacrifices. Even Panchavinsa Brahmana Says "Heaven and earth were once together, when they were separated; they said, let us bring about a marriage. Let there be cooperation between us".<sup>46</sup> *The Brhādārārānyākā Upanishad*\_says that the man was alone in the beginning .He was divided into two parts to create man and wife for the continuation of the Punjab.<sup>47</sup> The Māhābhārātā unequivocally says that since the wife is root of three Purushārthā, Dharma,Artha and Kāma,she is the best friend of man, therefore, a home is not a home without wife.<sup>48</sup> Ram Gopal very aptly pointed out that marriage was a highly developed institution in the remote past amongst the Aryans as well as other peoples.<sup>49</sup> Though there is no specific mention of these forms in the early Vedic literature, Some of them are reflected even in the Rigveda.<sup>50</sup> Thus the marriage of Surya describes in the marriage hymn can be termed as a Brahma form of marriage.<sup>51</sup> There is an allusion to Asura form in the marriage of Brahma's wife. The reference to the Gandharva form, thus may be noticed in hymn twenty seven of the tenth s mandala.The giving of a daughter to officiating priest also find mention in Rigveda.The epic contains references to various forms of marriage.In the Ramayana Kaikeyi, the wife of Dasartha and mother of Bharata,was married according to the Asura form of marriage. She belongs to Kekaya or the central Punjab.<sup>52</sup>In the Māhābhārātā<sup>53</sup> also we find specific mention of Mādri being married through the same practice.When Bhishmā went to ask her hand for Pandu Madari's brother Salya ,who was a king of central Punjab, hesitantly laid down the condition of the bride price. It shows the prevalence of the Asura type of marriage in Punjab for a long period though people were aware of the stigma attached to it. It is interesting to note that Kautilya refers to Sulka or bride price even in the case Dharmavivaha<sup>54</sup>or first three forms of marriage also. Since Kautilyapuls marriage in the section on revocation of sale and purchase and states that it can be revoked till the rituals of Panigrahana<sup>55</sup> for the upper castes and consummation for the sutras. Therefore, the possibility of the prevalence of the custom of bride price in all types of marriages in Punjab cannot be completely ruled out.<sup>56</sup>On the other hand Gandhari,the daughter of king Subala of Gandhara and sister of Sakuni, was married to Dhrtarashtra apparently through a Brahma form of marriage because we are told that Sakuni went to Hastinapur to perform the ceremony of her sister's nuptials and gave her decked with ornaments.<sup>57</sup>The famous marriage hymn of the Rigveda provides some good glimpse of the custom as it prevailed in the early Vedic age. It shows that the bride was fully grown up at the time of marriage. The example of Ghosa<sup>58</sup> as one such case is well known. The Arthāsāstrā of Kautilya has reformed to single women who adopted various professional occupation for a living but he also recommends the age of twelve for marriage of a girl.As long as husband was alive, the wife enjoyed all the privileges and ruled over her household.This is made clear in the marriage hymn of the Rigveda itself and repeated by later writer like Panini an Kautilya in their work.One of the most important aspects of women and society is the status of widow the latter grants the farmer .The Rigveda contains Several references to widow but does not throw much light on their condition. In one of the hymns it described the women whose husbands are alive as "***let these women who are not widows, who have good husbands, enter with urgent and butter.***

**Lets women without tears, without sorrow, and decorated with jewels, first proceed to house.**<sup>60</sup>Here we can easily from the idea of the condition of widows as contrast to these ladies.The Sutras do provide some glimpse on the point. According to Baudhāyā widows should abstain from meat, liquors, honey and salt and should sleep on the ground for a year after the death of her husband. Similar views are held by Vasistha.<sup>61</sup> &Vishnu Dharam Sutra<sup>62</sup>the latter is of the view that by leading the life of celibate a widow shall attain heaven. This is a marked change from the time of the Rigveda .This condition continued in theory till the end of the Mauryan period, but we do not have any specific examples from Punjab.The most talked about custom is that of widow burning known as Sati. Accordingly a widow was burnt alive along with her dead husband on the funeral pyre.The Rigveda contains a single reference that has been pressed into service by those who support the existence of this custom during the early Vedic period yet they neither belong to Punjab nor have any conclusive evidence on the point. The remains from the Harappan sites have yielded so such evidence. In the literature of the later Vedic period, including the Brahmanas,Upanishads and even the Sutras evidence not remotest evidence on the point. Panini as well as Kautilya is absolutely silent on the issue and so are the inscription of the Maurya-Sunga period .Even the reformers like Asoka are unaware of the existence of any such practice.The vast ocean of the Buddhist literature, including the Jatakas that depict the social life of the period in detail are silent on the point.

#### **Inheritance and Right to Property :**

Coming to women's right to property, it must be admitted that it appears to be absent in earlier times as there are no references to support such a view. There is a single reference in the Rigveda where a lady who did not have any brother goes to the court to claim inheritance to her father's property. But at another place in the same text a brother less daughter is given share in the patrimony.<sup>63</sup>In the third chapter of Rigveda,<sup>64</sup> considered oldest part (3.31.1)it appears that even those unmarried girls who had brothers but grew old in

the house of parents had some right in their paternal property.<sup>65</sup> Normally the father of a brotherless daughter would try to adopt her as *putrika*. In this arrangement, it was stipulated at the time of marriage that the son born to the daughter shall be considered as son of maternal grandfather and shall also inherit his property. Such as off spring was called *Putrika-putra*. In the Punjab of the Vedic age.<sup>66</sup> It seems, the greed of property was not able to lure men to marry difficult for a arrange marriage of such daughters.<sup>67</sup> We find reference to this effect in the Rigveda<sup>68</sup>. Even if the father of a brotherless daughter gave assurance to future son-in-law against her son reverting back to maternal grandfather, a doubt remained in their minds and they were hesitant in taking the hand of such girls<sup>69</sup>. A girl who had brothers also seems to have staked claim to patrimony sometimes.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand ***Satapatha Brahmana*** recognizes wife as inheritor of husband's property<sup>71</sup>. The Taitiriyā Samhita on the other hand recognizes a wife as owner of the household goods only.<sup>72</sup> Numerous examples have been quoted by scholars to show that women were like chatter in early Punjab society and husband had complete right over them through the ages. The case of Draupadi being staked during the game of dice by her husband in the Māhābhārtā is too well known to be enumerated. We have a similar reference in the Rigveda also when a gambler stakes his wife in a game of dice.<sup>73</sup> But at the both places the husbands are severely condemned for their action. The first ultimately led to the great war fought in the Kuru fields of Punjab.<sup>74</sup>

#### **Woman in professional and public life :**

The picture of women in Punjab during the period of our study was entirely different. There is no evidence at all to indicate that either women were confined to the four walls of the house or there were customs like Purdah prevailing in the society to curtail their free movement and participation in the day to day life in any sphere of life. Actually we find that women not only enjoyed complete freedom from the early Vedic age down to the end of the Mauryan period but also freely participated in public life and adopted profession of their choice as frequently as in the modern times. Of the various professions adopted by women, studying and teaching formed a well known occupation right from the early Vedic times. We have already given above the name of several female rshis like Lopamudra, Sachi, Ghosha, Visvavara etc.<sup>75</sup> We have also referred to female teachers called Upadhyayas and Acharyas as mentioned by Panini.<sup>76</sup> Even the female teachers having co-educational institution are known from the Vedic age and speak for the active participation of women without any inhibition.<sup>77</sup> The women were active in Political participation. In the Ratnāhvimsi ceremony at the time of the coronation of the new king, both mahishi, the chief queen and the Parurkti, the neglected queen play an important role and occupy a significant position.<sup>78</sup> We have the example of women like Vispala and Mudgalani who fought against the enemies shoulder to shoulder with their husbands. Even Kautilya provides a salary equal to that of the highest office to the chief queen.<sup>79</sup> In the epic times in the Ramayana, we find Kaikeyi accompanying her husband Dasaratha to the battlefield and helping him in the difficult time when a wheel of his chariot was broken even at the risk of an injury to her own self.<sup>80</sup>

#### **Concluding remarks :**

It appears that the ancient Punjab society had a flexible social structure. Freedom enjoyed by women is reflected in their participation in various sacrifices ceremonies, rituals and festivities besides their right to education and choice in the matter of marriage. There was no restriction on their movement in public nor they compelled to end their life. The complete silence of the indigenous sources at the point more than justifies his conclusion about the absence of this custom in Punjab to fourth century BCE. Women were treated on equal footing with men at least in the early Vedic age. The archaeological evidence of the Harappan period also points in the same direction the famous bronze image of dancing girl from Mohenjo-Daro and a number of terracotta images of females indicates towards the position they enjoyed. Kautilya lays down detailed rules for the protection the rights of women, especially widows and those who had no one to look after them. He recommends special provisions for their employment by the state and also for their social and legal protection. A vivid of their status that emerges from our study indicates that despite some decline the women of Punjab enjoyed a high position in society.<sup>80</sup>

#### **Endnotes:**

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5. Wilson Horace Hayman, Rigveda IV 4.27. Oxford, 1888.

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35. Indrani hymn X.159.
36. Bohthingk,O., Op.Cit,III.6 & 8.
37. Rigveda, XI 112-10.
38. Rigveda, XI.116.15
39. Agrawala .V.S.,pp.281-282
40. Ibid.,4.1.14
41. Ibid
42. Ibid
43. Rigveda.X.10.85.44. "O desired of the Gods, beautiful one with tender heart,with the charming llok good towards your husband animals destined bring forth heroes."
44. Athārvāveda VI-1.13
45. Taitiriyā Brāhmān.II.2.2-6 & III.3.31.1
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61. Vāsisthā Dharmā Sutra 17.55-56
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