



## Condition of Women in the Medieval India: A Study from the Historical Perspective

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### Abstract:

*The purpose of this research was to better understand the status of women in India throughout the Middle Ages. It sheds light on the ways in which the lives of Muslim and Hindu women are comparable as well. This research shows how tough it was for women in mediaeval India. Social customs in early mediaeval India were based on the caste system. It reveals how powerful women were throughout that time. Throughout their lives, the Indian women have endured immense suffering. According to historical accounts, women were enslaved and forced to do a wide variety of menial tasks, including dancing professionally for the royal court and serving as courtesans in temples (Deva-dasi) (Borah, 2021). Scientists have discovered that Muslim women really had it better than Hindu women. In contrast to Hindu women, Islamic women might inherit their parents' wealth and remarry after a divorce.*

**Keywords:** *Medieval India, Hindu Women, Muslim Society, Mughals, Spiritual Movements.*

### Introduction:

Muslims first came in India at the turn of the mediaeval period, mostly from the Middle East. "The Muslim brought with them different laws of inheritance and divorce and an entirely different from family life," Mr. Ashraf said on the status of Indian women. There is one area where Hindu and Muslim societies are in agreement: they both value men more than women. It is customary to favour boys above daughters, and the firstborn son in a family is especially prized. In both social systems, there is a mutual love and respect for parents, who are also known to be excessively possessive and overly loving with their children. Throughout history, women have played an increasingly submissive role, ultimately being seen as a source of support for men in many aspects of their lives. The role of a woman in the home was very unsavoury from the moment she was born till the day she passed away. She found solace in religion and other uplifting spiritual organisations, which helped her accept her destiny. However, they made sure to exclude her from any position of authority, even within their own hierarchy. But the same expert discusses women's roles in many faiths, writing, "The primary role of a woman, according to Hindu beliefs, was to bear a male, and if she was fortunate enough to give birth to a son, she was revered and cared for..." Regarding women, Muslim custom differed from one nation to another. Generally speaking, the Turks allowed their women a decent amount of independence. When contrasted with her Indian sibling, the Persian lady had more favourable circumstances. In Hindustan, Muslims adhered to the outdated practices of ancient Persians, which devalued women... People started to place a disproportionate amount of importance on women's virginity while simultaneously

promoting men's lack of it. Even when the Mughals first arrived in India, the social standing of women did not change.

However, A. I. Srivastava states about the status of women in the medieval society on the eve of Ghazanvi's invasion, "Another evil which can be traced in its exaggerated form to this period was the devdasi system. Every important temple had a number of unmarried girls dedicated to the service of the deity. This bred corruption and temple prostitution become common"

### **Background of the Study:**

Women of Islamic and Hindu faiths faced several challenges in the male-dominated culture of mediaeval India (1206–1707 A.D.). There have been several shifts in Indian women's roles and status over the years (Abdullah et al., 2020). Beyond this, women eventually gained the ability to speak out against oppression, for equal rights, and for greater authority. The male-dominated society is rife with instances of harassment and violence against women. It was common practice to portray women as objects for men's amusement. Submissive and giving up their natural selves, women of the time demonstrated obedience. From a young age on, the girls were obligated to follow their elders' marriage judgements. Most accounts indicate that, for reasons related to their own safety, females were married soon after reaching puberty. The mediaeval era was a time when love and inter-caste marriage were both outright forbidden.

### **Objectives:**

The purpose of this research was to better understand the status of women in India throughout the Middle Ages. It sheds light on the ways in which the lives of Muslim and Hindu women are comparable as well. This research shows how tough it was for women in mediaeval India.

### **Major Problem Experienced by Women in Medieval India:**

It is well-known that women's position started to erode in mediaeval India. The most significant issue that women have faced is discrimination (Nitisha, n.d.). People often used the purdah system in their homes. This arrangement prevented the public from keeping tabs on them. Regardless of one's community, category, or background, everyone wants to live in a well-organized way and improve their quality of life. Socialising and interacting with people will be necessary for them to accomplish these aims. As a result of being restricted to the purdah, screens, curtains, and enclosures, the women would undoubtedly face several obstacles while trying to make ends meet. One of the biggest obstacles women face when trying to advance is the widespread recognition that they should not be subjected to public scrutiny. Consequently, the biggest issue that women in mediaeval India faced was the lack of opportunity to be seen by the public. People need to have access to food, clothes, and a safe place to live if they want to maximise their potential and maintain their health and happiness. It was discouraged that the women pursue education and take part in different kinds of jobs. This meant that women had to rely on the men in their homes. When they are young, women in natal households rely on their male relatives for support. In contrast, it is the duty of the husband and son in a married household to provide for the wants and needs of the wife and mother. Traditionally, ladies would go to their dads in their ancestral houses or their husbands in their marital homes for permission to do anything. But the ladies came to believe that their husbands and dads would not push them to do something that might hurt them. As a result, women did what the males in their homes said and obeyed the rules. For the simple reason that they supplied them with all they needed to maintain their living circumstances. In this view, education is a tool that, when used properly, may improve one's living situations via increasing one's knowledge, skills, and capacities. Women will no longer be reliant on the male members of society after they have received an education. On top of that, they'll know the difference between what's acceptable and what isn't. It was thought that the girls' marital houses would not be able to put their daughters' educational credentials, talents, and abilities to any use, therefore they were discouraged from going to school. As a result, women faced several challenges and obstacles when they lacked education, both in carrying out daily

jobs and activities and in taking part in decision-making processes. There will be a lot of issues and obstacles for women when they can't raise awareness about the techniques, tactics, and methods that are necessary for effective life. It is crucial to prioritise women's education in order to address these critical issues.

### **Improvements made in the Status of Women in Medieval India:**

Everyone agrees that treating women with disrespect and rudeness will impede the development and success of families, communities, and the country as a whole. Opportunities to better and enrich their lives should be made available to them. When women are given the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions, they may play a significant role in helping families, communities, and the country progress. Women should not be restricted to their homes or forced into purdah; rather, they should be encouraged to be visible in public spaces. This is something that people in both families and communities need to grasp. The following are some of the reasons why women's status is improving:

***Acquisition of Education*** – By furthering their education, people may increase their grasp of the processes and methods that are vital to leading organised lives and reaching their professional and personal objectives. Consequently, women will make significant contributions to the improvement of their families' and communities' well-being when they get an education. Because of this, pushing for women's education was a must. So, it's clear that getting a degree improves one's knowledge and abilities, but it's also seen as a key indicator of women's political empowerment.

***Participation in Employment Opportunities*** – People in more remote areas often spent their days tending to crops and other forms of agriculture. The women were not only expected to labour in the fields and tend to the cattle, but also to create artwork, handicrafts, ceramics, silk, food, and more. In order for the girls to help improve their families' and communities' quality of life, they were motivated to take part in these activities from a young age. Consequently, it's not hard to see why women's increased work prospects are seen as a key indicator of their improved status.

***Participation in Decision Making Processes*** – Education, job prospects, home management, child growth, and a host of other life-altering aspects all need decision-making. When men will listen to women when they speak, when they can better their standing, and when women can voice their opinions and perspectives. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that women's increased representation in decision-making roles in both their personal and professional life is indicative of broader progress towards gender equality.

***Participation in Various Activities*** – It is widely recognised that women's active engagement in many social, cultural, economic, and religious spheres has been a crucial element in elevating their status. Both the marital and the natal households should promote this. The most important reason is that they may effectively contribute to raising their standing while also improving their knowledge, abilities, and aptitude via these activities. It follows that women's active engagement in all spheres of society—political, cultural, economic, and religious—is a key indicator of the widespread progress they've achieved towards parity with men.

***Encouraging Empowerment Opportunities*** – Many things must be considered in order to promote empowerment opportunities, such as the following: access to education, employment, decision-making roles, participation in a variety of activities, skill and ability upgrades, socialisation, public observation, expression of ideas and opinions, and so on. Enhancements to women's quality of life and chances for empowerment may be achieved by their active participation in a variety of activities. Encouraging empowering possibilities will greatly help to improving women's status, as is evident from the reasoning.

***Curbing the Societal Problems*** – Child marriage, the purdah system, sati, jauhar, and restrictions on girls' education are only a few of the many issues that women faced and which contributed to their deteriorating position. In order to elevate women's standing, it is crucial to address these issues. Changes and new policies were required to help alleviate the difficulties plaguing society. When they are reined in, women will be able

to flourish and advance. In light of this, it is reasonable to conclude that reducing social issues is an important step towards demonstrating progress for women's rights.

**Promoting Public Observation** – Using their attire and the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains inside their homes, women were meant to be isolated from public gaze under the purdah regime. Eliminating the purdah regime is a huge step towards encouraging public scrutiny. Improving women's quality of life and creating possibilities for empowerment are both facilitated when they are encouraged to engage in public. It follows that encouraging public observation is crucial to bringing attention to the fact that women's position improves across all groups, classifications, and backgrounds.

**Encouraging Up-gradation of Communication Skills** Every single one of us has an innate need to share our thoughts and feelings with the world. Women may improve their communication skills when they are consulted and given chances to voice their opinions. When both men and other women pay attention to what women have to say, they will be empowered to raise their standing. It follows that promoting the development of better communication skills would aid women in both raising their social standing and making friends.

**Generating information in terms of Managerial Functions** – If we want to see women's status rise, we need more data on the management tasks of planning, organising, directing, leading, coordinating, and regulating. When women are given the chance to excel in their jobs and improve their lives in general, they will be well-prepared to take on management roles both within and outside the house. These are put into action while carrying out domestic duties and other purposes, such as looking for a job, furthering one's education, carrying out home duties, and so on. Thus, women may benefit from and make progress towards advancements in their position via the generation of knowledge about management duties.

**Practicing Creative Skills** – The development of creative abilities, such as those required to create artwork, make crafts, weave silk, cook, play an instrument, sing, dance, act, and so on, should be fostered among women. When women dedicate themselves to improving their talents in one or more of these areas, they may utilise their strengths to create greater prospects for livelihood. A person's ability to bring about changes in their status depends on how well they are able to enhance the competences and skills required to maintain their living circumstances. So, it's safe to say that developing one's creative abilities is a key indicator of women's progress in society.

### **Socio-Economic status of Women in Medieval India:**

The 'dark period' of mediaeval India was supposedly not a time when women wanted to be alive. Invaders from other cultures, such as Muslims, introduced their own traditions to India. In their view, a woman has no autonomy and is instead considered to be the property of her male relatives. The desire of the indigenous Indians to protect their women from the savage Muslim invaders was another factor contributing to the deterioration of women's position and independence. They would take whatever woman they chose and keep her in their "harems" since polygamy was common among these invaders. The 'Purdah,' or veil, became common for Indian women as a form of self-defense. Because of this, their independence was also curtailed. The restriction on their movement only served to lower their already poor social standing. A girl is now seen as a misery and a burden, something that has to be protected from others and treated with special care. As a result, women became the object of a vicious cycle. New ills including child marriage, sati, jauhar, and restrictions on girls' education emerged as a result of all this.



Figure 1.6: Rani Abbakka Chowta

(Source: asianage.com, 2023)

Because Hindu communities at that time were subject to horrific atrocities, many Muslim women felt they had no choice but to convert to Islam in order to protect themselves and their families. Women, however, were never able to adapt to changing circumstances. But even in the worst of circumstances, women stood up. It was found that women of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds were politically active. Notable Hindu woman monarchs during the Middle Ages had an influence both militarily and diplomatically. The only female combatant who persistently repelled the Portuguese army was Tuluva native Rani AbbakkaChowta (asianage.com, 2023). Along with her, her two girls fought bravely. Throughout the sixteen years that she ruled over Gondwana, Rani Durgawati proved to be an exceptional diplomat and warrior, defending her realm on several occasions. Notable Islamic women also ascended to the throne and assumed leadership roles throughout the time. The Delhi Sultanate has never had a female monarch until Razia sultana. Despite her brief reign, Razia Sultana accomplished much in the realm of diplomacy and administration. Under her pen name, she was also a famous poet. All of these things point to the fact that the women of the upper class, particularly those from noble families and governing houses, had plenty of money, access to education, and a more progressive upbringing than the average citizen.

But for the regular people, things were different. Many social mores fell on the lower-class households because of their financial and caste-based status in society. The purdah system was more than just one thing that women in both groups had to deal with. The Hindu practice of covering one's face with a veil originated as a defence mechanism against Muslim males who would enter homes with malevolent intent (Rani, 2020). Furthermore, women in both groups were primarily seen as a means to an end—a means to produce male offspring who could continue the family name. It draws attention to the site's patriarchal framework. Looking at the lives of resourceful women and those of working-class women reveals some similarities.

### **Conclusion:**

Women in Indian culture are also impacted by the caste system via certain norms. This predicament evolves as a result of women's growing feminism. In the wake of the Mughal era's impact on Indian culture, many Hindu women began to question the importance of asserting their rights and responsibilities, as well as the

role and status they played in mediaeval India. Women in mediaeval India left an indelible impression on Indian history by their accomplishments, proving that they were equal to men. Even though the 'swayamvar' gave women more freedom to pick their spouses, girls still had to marry off according to their fathers' wishes throughout that era. A new facet of Hindu society was on display in this episode.

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