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"Historical Evolution Of Indian Women's Status: From Ancient To Contemporary Times"

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Abstract:

"This paper delves into the historical narrative of women's status in India, offering a comprehensive analysis of their development and experiences from prehistoric to modern times. A closer examination of history reveals a striking parallel: the exploitation and subjugation of women have been pervasive across cultures, civilizations, and religions. Against this backdrop, the paper traces the trajectory of women's status in India, highlighting the distinct phases of progress and decline that have shaped their roles and positions throughout history. By exploring the historiography of women's history in India, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that have influenced the lives of Indian women over time."

Keywords: Gender equality, Indian history, Gender roles, Social change, Civilization, Historical analysis

Introduction:

In ancient India, women held a vital position in society, enjoying a high status and exceptional living standards during the Rig Vedic era. They were empowered to pursue intellectual and spiritual excellence, forming the cornerstone of Indian society. However, their circumstances deteriorated during the later Vedic period, facing discrimination in education and other rights. Traditional historical accounts often overlooked women's contributions, focusing on male-dominated domains like politics and warfare. Nevertheless, women like Mumtaz Mahal, Noor Jehan, and Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi left indelible marks on history, showcasing their courage, intelligence, and strength. Though exploited and subjugated across various cultures and civilizations, women's resilience and achievements continue to inspire us.

Objective of the Study:

This research paper seeks to explore the evolution of women's roles and status in Indian society from ancient times to the present day, with a focus on equality, education, marriage and

family life, race and gender, religion, and culture. The study aims to provide insight into the challenges faced by women throughout history and their contributions to various aspects of life. By examining the participation of girls and women in social, religious, economic, and domestic matters across different eras, this research hopes to shed light on the advancements and setbacks in gender equality and empower future generations to build a more inclusive society.

Methodology:

This paper employs a descriptive methodology, gathering information from various secondary sources and publications related to women across different eras. Ancient Indian society is vividly depicted in Hindu religious texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, providing valuable insights. Additional sources include manuscripts like the Rigveda Samhita, Susruta Samhita, Smritis, and Puranas, which shed light on women's social, domestic, economic, educational, religious, and political status in ancient India. The Vedas, the most revered Hindu scripture, highlight the esteemed position of women in ancient society, offering valuable perspectives on their roles and contributions.

Women in ancient India: Vedic and post-Vedic periods-

The status of women in ancient Indian society was complex and multifaceted, undergoing significant transformations over time. Initially, women held a revered position, participating in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies, with no discrimination in education or inheritance. The Mother Goddess was worshiped in the Indus Valley Civilization, indicating a deep-seated maternal respect. Women's contributions were valued in the Vedic era, with equal rights in religious and social spheres. However, as time passed, women's rights and privileges declined precipitously. They lost political participation, child marriages became common, and female education decreased. Women were denied property rights, expected to be chaste, and limited to monogamy while men could have multiple wives. Remarriages were prohibited, and women's social mobility was severely restricted. Smriti writers like Manu and Yajnavalkya reinforced gender discrimination, and patriarchal families restricted women's activities, perpetuating a regressive and oppressive social order. Buddhism offered some respite by accepting women as nuns, but failed to challenge the existing social hierarchy. Women's position varied across different periods, including the Mauryan Empire, Sangam period, and Gupta period, but overall, their condition deteriorated over time. This historical analysis highlights the need to recognize and address the persistent gender disparities in Indian society, promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms.

Women in medieval India: Mughal era and beyond:

Mughal era and beyond During the Medieval period, women in India held various roles, including wife, mother, sister, nun, artisan, and even queen. However, their position in society underwent significant changes, mirroring the tumultuous social, cultural, and political landscape of

the time. The Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods saw the dominance of women in certain spheres, with Razia Sultan being the only woman to ever hold the throne of Delhi. Despite her accomplishments, she faced severe restrictions and criticism due to her gender.

Religion played a significant role in shaping the position of women, with Hinduism emphasizing chastity and imposing strict moral standards. Women had no rights to education or property, and practices like Sati, child marriage, and forced widowhood further eroded their status. The purdah system, which originated in the Muslim community but was also adopted by some Hindu groups, segregated and veiled women, limiting their freedoms.

Despite these obstacles, women made notable contributions to literature, politics, and culture. Gulbadan Begum, for instance, was a skilled poet and author of *Humayun-Nama*. Jahanara and Nur Jahan actively participated in government affairs, while Mumtaz Mahal was a princess renowned for her beauty, intelligence, and exquisite taste. Court culture was embodied by women like Jahanara, a partisan of Dara Shikoh, Roshanara, a partisan of Aurangzeb, and Zebunnisa, Aurangzeb's daughter, whose poetry survives under the pen name Makhafi.

Shivaji's mother, Jija Bai, was a loyal woman who, despite being stubborn and dictatorial at home, would defer to her son's wishes. Women like her played crucial roles in shaping the political landscape. While women's dependence on their spouses or other male relatives was a defining feature of this era, they also made significant strides towards empowerment, leaving a lasting legacy in Indian history.

The medieval period saw a complex interplay of factors influencing women's lives, including religion, culture, and politics. Although they faced numerous challenges, women demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency, contributing to the rich cultural heritage of India.

Women during British rule: Colonialism and its impact:

In the mid-18th century, the British arrived in India as traders, and for the next 200 years, they ruled the country, first through the East India Company and later directly under the British monarch. At the onset of British rule, women's status in India was at an all-time low, with practices like Sati, child marriage, and purdah prevalent. However, the British government took steps to reform the Indian social order, abolishing Sati on humanitarian grounds and banning other social evils like child marriage. They also encouraged widow remarriage and legalized it.

The British government provided opportunities for those who sought change, leading to improvements in the position of girls and women. They introduced female education, but child marriage remained a significant obstacle. To address this, the Child-Marriage Restriction Act was passed in 1929, prohibiting child marriages and raising the minimum age for marriage to 14 for girls and 18 for boys.

Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and others

emphasized women's education, prevention of early marriage, abolition of polygamy, and remarriage of widows. During British rule, various social laws were enacted to improve the status of women, balancing the ambiguous position of Indian women. The national movement and women's movements paved the way for the removal of social and religious taboos, raising awareness about social disabilities and inequalities. Efforts were made to address these issues, leading to a gradual improvement in the status of women in India.

Women in independent India: Post-independence developments and challenges:

After India gained independence in 1947, women eagerly awaited greater liberty and freedom, hoping to break free from the shackles of religious, economic, and social taboos that had long oppressed them. And indeed, the status of women in Independent India has significantly improved. Structural and cultural changes have opened up numerous opportunities for women in education, employment, and politics. The Indian Government has implemented legal reforms and made concerted efforts to empower women, incorporating gender-focused norms and policies into the constitution. Women gained the right to vote, leading to increased political participation. Today, Indian women excel in various respected professions, including medicine, law, research, education, engineering, administration, and more.

These advancements have reduced women's exploitation, granting them equal status with men. The role of women in Indian society has expanded substantially in recent years, marking a significant shift towards gender equality. While challenges still persist, the progress made is undeniable, paving the way for a brighter future for Indian women.

Conclusion:

India's diverse culture, traditions, and norms, influenced by caste, religion, and historical periods, have shaped the status of women in society. Women's status in India can be traced through four distinct periods: Ancient, Medieval, British Rule, and post-independence. In the Ancient Vedic period, women were revered and respected, with no gender discrimination. They held a special place in society, considered goddesses by their families. However, gender discrimination emerged in the post-Vedic period, peaking during the Mughal era, where women were treated as objects and crimes against them became rampant. This trend continued during British rule, persisting for a long time.

After independence, India adopted a constitution that granted women equal status with men. Since then, women's status has undergone significant changes. With women comprising nearly half of India's population, their empowerment is crucial for the country's progress. While challenges remain, working women in India have made substantial strides, occupying positions of respect and prominence alongside men. The improvements are a testament to India's growth towards a more inclusive society, recognizing the importance of gender equality. As the country continues to evolve, it's essential to acknowledge the historical context and ongoing efforts towards women's

empowerment, paving the way for a brighter future for Indian women.

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