

The Position of Women in the Ancient India and Present India: A Special Focus on Jharkhand

Dr. Milan Barman¹ Dr. Susmita Purkayastha²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, IASE (Deemed to be University)Sardarshahr, Churu

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, IASE (Deemed to be University)Sardarshahr, Churu

Abstract

Women have played a crucial role in Indian society since ancient times. In the Vedic period, women enjoyed considerable freedom, education, and a dignified position in society. They actively participated in intellectual discourses and religious rituals, with eminent scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra contributing significantly to philosophical debates. Women had access to education, property rights, and the ability to engage in economic activities. However, over time, patriarchal norms led to the gradual erosion of these rights, restricting women's autonomy and opportunities.

In contrast, the present status of women in Jharkhand reflects a complex socio-economic reality. Tribal communities traditionally offered women greater autonomy, particularly in economic activities like agriculture and handicrafts. However, modernization and socio-political changes have introduced new challenges, including disparities in education, employment, and political participation. Despite government initiatives such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' and 'Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana,' gender inequalities persist, particularly in literacy rates and wage disparities.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the status of women in ancient India and present-day Jharkhand, highlighting the progress made and the obstacles that remain. It emphasizes the need for targeted policy interventions, increased access to education, and economic empowerment strategies to ensure gender equality and social justice. A holistic approach integrating education, economic support, legal reforms, and cultural awareness is essential for bridging the gender gap and fostering women's empowerment in Jharkhand and beyond.

Subtheme: Representing women: Arts, literature, culture and cinema

Introduction

Women have been an integral part of the social fabric in India since ancient times. The Vedic period presents an intriguing scenario where women enjoyed considerable freedom, education, and a dignified status. However, with time, various socio-political and economic changes affected their status. In contrast, the present-day status of women in Jharkhand reflects a complex socio-economic landscape. While tribal communities traditionally allowed women greater autonomy, modern influences and economic struggles have led to disparities in education, employment, and political participation. Reports from the Jharkhand government indicate a lower female literacy rate and wage gap challenges. This paper explores the evolution of women's status from the Vedic period to contemporary Jharkhand, highlighting the transformations and existing challenges.

The Position of Women in the Ancient Period

Socio-Cultural Position: In the Vedic era, women held a respectable position in society, enjoying access to education, participating in religious rituals, and being regarded as equal partners in household and societal affairs. Eminent women scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra were highly esteemed in philosophical discourses. The Manusmriti emphasizes the reverence for women with the verse "यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः। यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः" (Manusmriti 3.56), highlighting that where women are honored, divinity prevails. Similarly, the Atharvaveda acknowledges the spiritual stature of women, stating "स्त्री हि ब्रह्म बभूविथ" (Atharvaveda 14.1.6), affirming that a woman embodies the essence of Brahman.

Educational Rights : Women in the Vedic era were granted the right to study the Vedas and actively participate in intellectual discourses. The term 'Brahmavadini' was used for women who dedicated themselves to Vedic knowledge and philosophical pursuits. Education for girls took place in **Gurukuls**, and they were not bound by the immediate obligation of marriage, allowing them to focus on learning and spiritual growth. The **Shatapatha Brahmana** acknowledges the significance of education with the verse "गायत्री छन्दसां माता, ब्राह्मणस्य माता, यज्ञस्य माता" (Shatapatha Brahmana 3.1.1.20), recognizing the Gayatri meter as the mother of the Vedas, Brahmanas, and sacrifices, symbolizing the integral role of women in knowledge transmission.

Economic and Political Rights: Women had property rights and actively participated in economic activities. Some Vedic texts, including the **Rigveda**, mention women engaging in business and trade, reflecting their economic independence and contribution to society. Although their political participation was somewhat restricted, historical evidence suggests that women held advisory roles in governance, influencing decision-making processes. However, the

Manusmriti highlights the patriarchal structure with the verse "स्त्रीणां भर्ता गुरुर्नित्यं भर्तैव गुरु उच्यते" (Manusmriti 9.2), indicating that a husband was traditionally regarded as the guide and protector of women.

Marriage and Family Life: The Vedic society primarily followed a monogamous system, emphasizing mutual respect and companionship between husband and wife. Women had the right to choose their husbands through the **Svayamvara** system, where they selected a life partner based on their own preference and wisdom. Additionally, widow remarriage was not explicitly forbidden, suggesting a more progressive approach to women's rights in family life. The **Taittiriya Samhita** reinforces this concept with the verse "उद्वाहसमये कन्या स्वयमेव वरं विन्दते" (Taittiriya Samhita 6.5.8.2), affirming the agency of women in marriage decisions.

The Present-Day Position of Women in Jharkhand

Jharkhand, with its unique tribal and non-tribal demography, presents a mixed picture of women's status. While tribal societies historically provided greater autonomy to women, modernization, economic struggles, and lack of education have created challenges.

Socio-Cultural Position: Jharkhand has a significant tribal population where women have traditionally enjoyed economic independence due to their active participation in agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and handicrafts. Tribal societies, particularly among groups like the **Santhals, Mundas, and Oraons**, historically recognized women's contribution to the economy and community decision-making. However, with the growing influence of patriarchal norms, many tribal communities have experienced a shift, leading to increased restrictions on women's mobility, decision-making power, and rights. The **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908)** and **Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (1949)** historically restricted women's land inheritance rights, reflecting a transition from a more egalitarian tribal structure to a male-dominated system. Furthermore, the **Mahabharata and Puranic texts**, which influenced the socio-religious framework of India, reinforced patriarchal ideals that gradually impacted tribal societies as well. Despite these challenges, many tribal women in Jharkhand continue to uphold their traditional roles in community governance through institutions like the **Parha Panchayat and Munda Manki system**, showcasing resilience in preserving their rights and identity.

Educational Scenario: Despite various government initiatives, the **female literacy rate in Jharkhand stands at 67.6%**, which remains lower than the national average (Census, 2011). Several socio-economic factors, including **early marriage, economic hardships, and inadequate educational infrastructure**, significantly hinder women's educational progress. The 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' (BBBP) scheme, launched in 2015, aims to improve girls' education, but its implementation in tribal-dominated regions faces challenges due to cultural norms and lack of awareness. Additionally, **safety concerns, long distances to schools, and financial constraints** contribute to high dropout rates among adolescent girls, particularly in rural areas. The **Jharkhand State Education Project Council (JSEPC)** has taken steps to improve access to education, yet gender disparities persist.

Employment Scenario: Tribal women in Jharkhand have traditionally played a significant role in **agriculture, forest-based occupations, and handicrafts**, contributing to their communities' economic sustenance. However, limited access to **formal education and vocational training** restricts their opportunities in the organized sector. The **Skill India Mission** and **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)** have been introduced to enhance women's employability, but outreach and effectiveness in remote areas remain inadequate. **MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)** has provided employment security to rural women, yet many continue to work under **precarious conditions in the unorganized sector**, facing **low wages and lack of social security** (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020).

Economic Contributions and Challenges: Women in Jharkhand actively engage in **agriculture, handicrafts, and daily wage labor**, contributing significantly to the state's economy. However, **wage disparity and lack of financial independence** remain persistent challenges. The '**Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission**' (DAY-NRLM) has been instrumental in promoting self-help groups (SHGs) among women, fostering financial empowerment. Despite such efforts, women's access to credit facilities, land ownership, and entrepreneurship opportunities remains **limited due to social and economic barriers** (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Political Representation and Legal Rights: The **Panchayati Raj system** has played a crucial role in enhancing women's political participation through **reservation policies**, ensuring 50% representation for women in local governance. However, **their presence in higher political roles remains limited** due to socio-cultural restrictions and financial dependencies. Many elected women representatives serve as proxies for male family members, reducing their actual decision-making power. The **Jharkhand Women's Policy (2014)** and the **National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001)** aim to promote women's leadership in governance, but deeper social transformation

is needed for **greater political agency and legal empowerment** (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022).

Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Ancient India	Present-Day Jharkhand
Education	Women had access to Vedic studies	Low literacy rates, gender gap
Economic Role	Property rights, trade participation	Informal labor, wage disparity
Marriage System	Freedom in choosing partners	Early marriages, restrictions
Political Role	Limited but advisory participation	Increased due to reservations

Government Initiatives and Policy Recommendations

To improve the status of women in Jharkhand, various government policies and programs have been implemented, including **'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' (BBBP)**, women's **'self-help groups' (SHGs)**, and **state-run educational initiatives** (Government of India, 2020). The **Jharkhand Women's Empowerment Policy** and **'Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana'** aim to enhance girls' education and financial independence. However, reports from the **Jharkhand State Commission for Women (2021)** and **Jharkhand Economic Survey (2022)** highlight **gaps in policy implementation**, particularly in rural and tribal-dominated areas. Limited access to resources, inadequate monitoring, and socio-cultural constraints continue to hinder progress. More **targeted interventions in vocational training, digital literacy, and community awareness** are needed to bridge these gaps and ensure effective policy outcomes. Strengthening **legal protections, expanding financial inclusion, and enhancing rural infrastructure** can further support women's empowerment in Jharkhand.

Conclusion

The **Vedic period** provided women with dignity, education, and social freedom, allowing them to participate in intellectual and religious discourses. However, over time, socio-political changes led to **restrictions on women's rights** and their diminished role in public life. In contemporary **Jharkhand**, tribal traditions historically offered women **greater autonomy**, especially in economic roles. However, **modern economic struggles, literacy gaps, and persistent gender biases** have created significant challenges for women's advancement. Addressing these issues requires a **multi-dimensional approach** that integrates **education, economic support, legal reforms, and social awareness**. A **sustainable and inclusive development model** must be adopted to ensure that women in Jharkhand achieve **true empowerment and equal opportunities** in all spheres of life.

References

1. Altekhar, A. S. (1959). *The position of women in Hindu civilization: From prehistoric times to the present day*. Motilal Banarsidass.
2. Banerjee, S. (2006). *Women in early Indian societies*. Manohar Publishers.
3. Basu, A. (2019). *Women in governance: Challenges and opportunities*. Oxford University Press.
4. Census of India. (2011). *Provisional population totals: Jharkhand*. Government of India.
5. Chitnis, S. (2004). *Feminism in India: Issues and challenges*. Rawat Publications.
6. Ekka, A. (2011). Traditional tribal institutions and governance in Jharkhand. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 14(2), 45-63.
7. Government of India. (2020). *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme guidelines*. Ministry of Women and Child Development.
8. Jharkhand Economic Survey. (2022). *Jharkhand economic survey report 2022-23*. Government of Jharkhand.
9. Jharkhand State Commission for Women. (2021). *Annual report 2021-22*. Jharkhand Government.
10. Kumar, R. (2020). Challenges of women's education in rural Jharkhand. *Indian Journal of Social Development*, 15(1), 77-92.
11. Ministry of Rural Development. (2020). *MGNREGA annual report 2019-20*. Government of India.
12. Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2022). *National policy for the empowerment of women (Revised 2022)*. Government of India.
13. Mukherjee, P. (2018). Socio-economic barriers in women's education in Jharkhand. *Journal of Education and Society*, 12(3), 34-56.
14. NITI Aayog. (2021). *Women's economic participation in India: Policy recommendations*. Government of India.
15. Sahay, B. K. (2010). *Tribal women and land rights in Jharkhand: A socio-legal perspective*. Rawat Publications.
16. Sharma, N. (2021). *Gender disparities in education and employment in Eastern India*. Sage Publications.
17. Singh, R. (2021). Wage disparity and economic independence among tribal women in Jharkhand. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(7), 14-23.
18. Sinha, N. K. (2019). *Women in tribal India: A historical and contemporary perspective*. Concept Publishing.
19. Thapar, R. (2002). *Women in early Indian societies*. Oxford University Press.