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GENDER IN HISTORY (PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD)

With the help of sociological concepts like role and status, we can understand the conditions of Indian women through three main historical phases of Indian history, namely ancient, medieval, and modern. The ‘role’ can be defined as duties and obligations, while status can be defined as rights. Historians rely on archaeological sources like sculptures, coins and monuments complimented by the literary sources of religious, semi-religious, and secular texts to reconstruct the history of Indian women. Based on extensive research on this topic, we can find two approaches, such as classical or textual views and empirical views, for understanding the status and role of women through historical ages. The evolution of the status and role of women in India has been a continuous process through the centuries.

Various socio-economic and cultural factors, both internal and external, contribute to the present status of Indian women. This lesson mainly focuses more on the status and role of women during ancient and medieval periods than the modern period, which you are already familiar with.



OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, learner:

- describes the role and status of women in ancient India, consisting of pre-historic, Vedic and post-Vedic periods to the Post-Gupta period
- explains the status and roles of women during the medieval period, starting from the 11th Century to the 18th Century.

3.1 THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT PERIOD

3.1.1 Women in Ancient Indian Literature

The sacred literature of Hinduism advocates that women are to be honoured and respected.

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Many Hindu scriptures show the honour and esteem bestowed upon women. It is stated that a woman must be loved, well-fed and cared for. Such views are frequent in religious and semi-religious literature in ancient India. We have many stories about obedient, dedicated and faithful wives. For example, Sita is considered a great model of Indian womanhood, a faithful wife of Rama, following him into exile and facing many hardships. Likewise, Savitri followed her husband Satyavan when he was being taken away by the god of death, 'Yama', and the god had to release her husband as having been impressed with the loyalty of his wife 'Savitri'.

3.1.2 Pre-Historic Period

In the pre-historic or the earliest known civilization of India- the Indus Valley civilization- women enjoyed equal status and held a very honourable position in society. From various archaeological or historical sources, it is found that the deities of the Indus Valley people were predominantly "mother goddesses", and they exhibit a prevalence of a matrilineal system. It shows the strong and highly respectable position of women in the Indus valley.

3.1.3. Early Vedic or Rig Vedic Age

The Vedic civilization can broadly be classified into early Vedic or Rig Vedic (1500BC to 1000BC) and the later Vedic age (1000BC-600BC). Even though Indian society transformed from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system under the Vedic age, women were treated fairly in the early Rig Vedic age. Though the birth of sons was preferred and welcome, the birth of daughters was not condemned and frowned upon. The birth of a girl child was not considered a liability. No cases of infanticide were reported. The Vedas accorded respectable positions to women as they were permitted to receive religious education and conduct rituals and sacrifices. They could pursue the life of religion but were not permitted to become priests. Women were generally discouraged from taking up a life of religion or asceticism. Women had the freedom to choose their partners, and marriage was not compulsory for women. The rite of 'Upanayana' was performed by a Gurukul to learn the Vedas. Some women are also said to have been authors of Rig Vedic hymns. The early poetess Avviyar in the Tamil region of South India left behind a great work of literary merit. During this period, many learned women, namely Gosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Indrani, Maitreyi and Gargi, participated in the political, intellectual and philosophical discussions and debates.



DO YOU KNOW?

According to the Brihadaranyaka Upnishad (seventh century B.C.) Gargi was a learned woman philosopher. She was a great mathematician and was invited to participate in various debates and discussions.



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Early Vedic women enjoyed freedom in choosing their life partners. This system was known as “Swayamvar”. In some cases, they freely interacted with young men. Marriages were performed after puberty. No child marriage or the system of ‘Purdah’ is reported during that period. There were cases of unmarried women as well. To cite an example, a woman named Ghosha remained unmarried and lived at her parents’ home.

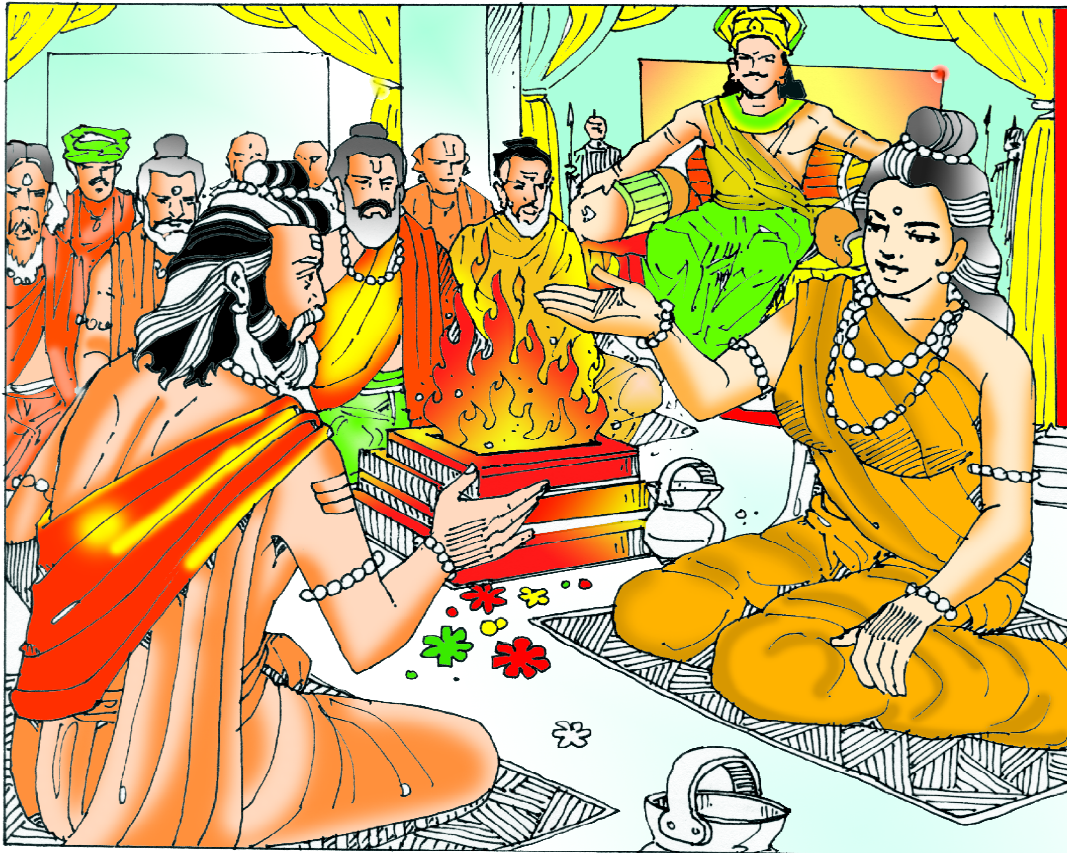


Fig. 3.1 Debate of women philosopher Gargi with a Hindu philosopher



DO YOU KNOW?

About Ancient Indian Civilization A well-known economic historian R.C.Dutt published a book in 1889 titled *A History of Civilisation in Ancient India*. He narrated the achievements of the ancient past, beginning with the ‘Vedic Age’. He mentioned that the unique feature of ancient Indian civilization was the better status of women. He wrote: ‘Still more [appealing] to us is the picture of cultured ladies who were rishis and composed hymns and performed sacrifices like men. There were no unhealthy restrictions against women in those days.’

Women enjoyed high respect for playing different roles in the early Vedic age. They did not confine themselves to household activities only; but stepped out into different fields such as

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teaching, medicine, business, politics, administration, and military. At the same time, however, women had no right to hold, acquire or dispose of the property. 'Stridhana' received from their parents at marriage was their exclusive property. In the absence of widow remarriage, women's safety was assured under the joint family system. However, a childless widow could cohabit with her brother-in-law until the birth of a son. This practice was known as the 'Niyoga system'. Thus, despite the family's patriarchal character, women's roles and positions were much better in the Rig Vedic period than in subsequent times.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.1

1. Explain the kind of status accorded to women during indus valley civilization.
2. Discuss how birth of girls were perceived in comparison to birth of girls during early vedic age?
3. Describe the practice of 'Niyoga system'.

3.1.4 Later Vedic Age

During the later Vedic phase lasting from 1000 BC to 600 BC, the system of patriarchy became stronger, resulting in the degradation in the role and status of Indian women. The birth of sons was preferred over the birth of daughters. As the family lineage was traced through the male line, the birth of sons over daughters assumed much more significance. Further, sons were the sole heir of family property. The belief that the birth of sons would grant parents liberation from rebirth also facilitated the importance of sons. The practice of Sati (Self-immolation by widows) can be traced back to this period. According to the text of Athreya Brahmana, a good woman does not talk back. Thus, the freedoms of women were curtailed. No marriages outside the gotra were allowed. Monogamous marriages were preferred. Women had to stay with their husbands at their place after marriage.

3.1.5. The Period of the Epics

Great epics like Mahabharata and the Ramayana were compiled during the later Vedic period.

These two epics have strongly influenced Indian society and the attitude towards women in general. The courage, will-power, and valour of Kaikeye, Sita, Rukmani, Satyabhama, Savitri, Draupadi and others were appreciated. The Ramayana is a classic example of the ideal Hindu woman, which glorifies the value of 'Pativrata'. Sita is considered the ideal Hindu woman as she

surrendered all her desires and followed her husband to the forest. The Mahabharata also outlines the duties and attitude of the wife toward her husband. The self-imposed blindness by Gandhari is an example of the respect and honour she upheld for her blind husband. In the



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Mahabharata, Draupadi exhibits much courage and independence. Both Sita and Draupadi are universally respected despite their subjugated position to their husband. There are a few instances of Sati in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. In Ramayana, there is only a single reference to the immolation of the ‘Vedavalis’ mother. Otherwise, the wives of Dasharatha or Ravana did not commit Sati. Similarly, in the case of Mahabharata, only ‘Madri’ commits Sati. ‘Kunti’, the wives of Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha and Drona, did not perform Sati, but instead, we find a reference to the remarriage of a child widow in the Mahabharata. So, the practice of Sati was more of an exception than a rule during this time.

3.1.6 The Age of Dharma shastras (3rd century BC to 4th century AD)

The later Vedic texts like Smritis, Dharma shastras and Puranas laid down various codes of conduct, resulting in women’s status deterioration. This period witnessed the social exclusion of women from economic and religious spheres. They were denied the ability to offer sacrifices and prayers, practice penance or undertake pilgrimages. Vedic knowledge was closed to women, although the various religious sects still supported them in getting religious education. Women became dependent on men as they were denied education and other freedoms. The two important legal texts, Manu Smriti and Yagnavalkya Smriti, prescribed the legal code of conduct for womenfolk during the later Vedic period. Manu Smriti, composed around second century BC, provided a strong Indian patriarchal social structure.

The Hindu lawgiver Manu believed that women must be kept under the control of their father during childhood, under the tutelage of their husbands after marriage and then under the control of their son during old age. So, she should not be given freedom at any stage of life. In contrast, Manu later said, “*God lives where women are venerated*”. One can find contradictions in his views about the status of women. Yagnavalkya Smriti advocated for early marriage for girls before the attainment of puberty.

Moreover, the Dharma shastras preached that marriage is necessary for women’s salvation. As a result, it became an unavoidable ritual for women. Child marriage was encouraged, and widow marriage was looked down upon.

The birth of a girl child was considered bad luck, facilitating the practice of infanticide. Child marriage became customary. No widow remarriage was allowed, and the practice of Sati became common at this point. During this age, women became entirely dependent on men and lost all types of freedoms available to men.

In the post-Vedic period, the condition of women got worse because of the rigidity of the caste system, based on the ideas of purity and pollution. Women were considered to be impure in different stages of life. They were confined to the house’s four walls, and their primary responsibility was to care for their children and husbands. A woman played the role of sacrificing mother, chaste wife or obedient daughter. By and large, the decline in the status of women began during this period.

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INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.2

1. Identify the time period of the later Vedic age.
2. Name two of the later Vedic texts.
3. Discuss the kind of marriage system followed during later vedic age.
4. Name two epics of Indian literature.

3.1.7 The Period of Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism emerged around the 6th Century BC as protest movements against Vedic Hinduism. In the post-Vedic period, Indian society witnessed the strong influence of the caste system and ritual-based life. Vedic Hinduism led to the emergence of these two major religions. It was to promote an alternative philosophy against the prevalent caste system and the practice of mindless ritualism. So, it attracted the common man and spread far and wide. Both religions attacked the subjugation of women and advocated fair treatment for them.

Buddhism has unleashed a new horizon of freedom for women because it permitted them to get education to become missionaries and remain unmarried. It opened its doors to all human beings belonging to all strata of society, including women and even prostitutes. Buddha stayed as a guest in the house of Ambapali, a prostitute in the town of Vaishali. Women also could achieve 'Nirvana' like men in Buddhism. Women were permitted to become 'Sanyasis' and had their Sangha called 'the Bhikkhuni Sangha', which allowed them to be activated in public life. Many women monks composed verses which came to be known as Therigatha.



DO YOU KNOW?

Bhikkhuni Sangha (Order of Nuns)

At the request of Buddha's stepmother, Maha Pajapati Gotami, Buddha instituted Bhikkhuni Sangha or Order of Nuns with certain conditions. As time passed, it expanded and produced many noble and saintly women. It was a great blessing for women otherwise living in unfavourable circumstances. The Sangha admitted women drawn from all strata of society, comprising queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women, ex-courtesans, and slaves, irrespective of their caste, class and creed. Lower caste women could also attain salvation through their spiritual quest through Sangha. Undoubtedly, it elevated women's dignity and status, as they could seek emancipation through the Sangha.

The royal princess and Buddhist monk, Sanghamitra, was the eldest daughter of 'Asoka the Great'. She was dispatched to spread the canons of Buddhism in various parts of India and the world.



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Jainism, founded by Vardhamana Mahavira, advocated the doctrine of ‘Non harming’ and ‘non-violence’. Women were allowed to give up their families to become ascetics. Many women joined the sect during the time of Mahavira. Women were respected and given the freedom to decide for themselves.

Poems by Buddhist Nuns.

Jainism preached equality between both sexes. Like Buddha, Mahavira also admitted women to his order. The first female disciple of Mahavira is said to have been a captured slave woman. Women took different important roles in Jainism and served in its expansion. Women excelled in the political field and proved themselves as great warriors. According to Jaina tradition, a potter woman from the town of Sravasti owned one hundred potter wheels, which shows women’s economic freedom during that time. In the era of Buddhism and Jainism, there was a great degree of freedom, rights, autonomy, and equality of opportunities for women. During this period, there was also the absence of crime and violence against women.

3.1.8 Ancient Women in Politics

In ancient India, Royal women played a significant role in politics. For example, Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration in the Tamil region. In the Satavahana kingdom of the present Andhra region, a queen named Nayanika ruled on behalf of her minor son. Likewise, Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta-II, ruled on behalf of her minor Vakataka prince. There were various instances during the post-Gupta period wherein queens ruled, such as in the Kashmir, Odisha and Andhra regions. Princess Vijaybhattarika was a provincial ruler under the Chalukya King Vikramaditya-I (655–680 CE).

The above description indicates that certain sections of women enjoyed freedom during the ancient period. Although there were contradictions and ambivalences about the status of women in ancient India, the historian A.S. Altekar sums up the overall conditions. He wrote that ancient Indian women by saying that ‘on the whole’ society showed concern, care and respect for women, giving them the freedom to take up various socio-economic and political roles.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.4

Fill in the blanks as given below.

1. Buddhism and Jainism emerged as _____ movements against Hinduism.
2. Jainism was founded by _____.
3. Explain the term ‘the Bhikkhuni Sangha’.
4. What examples would you choose to explain the economic freedom given to women during the period of Jainism.

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3.2 THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The medieval history of India starts roughly from the 11th Century up to the 18th Century. This period witnessed significant socio-economic and cultural changes in Indian society due to external invasions by the Turkish, Arab, and Mughal rulers of Central Asia. The credit for establishing the first Islamic empire in India goes to the Turkish ruler Shahab-Ud-Din alias Muiz-Ud-Din Muhammad of Ghur. Since his reign, Muslim kings' rule lasted for almost five hundred years until their downfall under British colonialism.

With the coming of the Turks, the practice of Purdah also spread to the lower castes. Earlier, it was the customary practice of the upper castes. Gradually the lower caste adopted these upper caste customs. Another evil practice, Jauhar, was introduced by the Rajput community, which curtailed the liberty and freedom of women. Jauhar means the self-immolation by Rajput women to protect themselves from being captured by the enemy. For example, when Rana Ratan Singh, the Rajput ruler of Chittor, was defeated by Ala-Ud-Din Khilji, his wife Padmini performed Jauhar along with other Rajput women. Based on this incident, Padmavat was written by Malik Muhammad Jaisi in 1540 AD.

Muslim women also did not enjoy a good status in society during this period. Polygamy was widely spread among Muslims. Marriage was a contract among Muslims. It was a man's prerogative to divorce his wife without paying any alimony. The purdah system was strictly observed among Muslim women. Though divorce was permitted between Muslim men and women, it had hardly any advantage for women. The Muslim women did not perform 'Sati' like Hindu women.

In contrast, the Medieval period had several capable and intelligent women who influenced the politics of their times. Women played a significant role in the affairs of politics. These include Sultana Razziyya of the Delhi Sultanate and many women in the Mughal period, such as Rani Karnavati, Rani Jodha Bai, Rani Durgavat, Rani Rupmati, Chand Bibi, Nur Jahan, Nur Jahan's mother Asmat Begum, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Roshanara, Jebunisa, Jija Bai (mother of Shivaji) and Tara Bai (wife of Raja Ram). During the Mughal period, Noor Jahan played a vital role in the administration. She is said to have formed a 'Janta' along with other nobles and wielded strong influence in administration during the rule of Jahangir.



DO YOU KNOW?

Sultana Razziyya (1236-1240 A.D.)

She was the first woman to open a new chapter in the history of the Delhi Sultanate by becoming its first Sultana or female ruler. Razia was the daughter of the third Delhi Sultan, Iltutmish. Her mother was Terken Khatun, the favourite wife of Iltutmish. She was trained in



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warfare, horsemanship, administration, and diplomacy from childhood. She ascended the throne after deposing her brother. She was a tough soldier and an able commander who led the campaigns personally. She reduced the political influence of slave nobles on the throne and saved her kingdom from the attacks of Mongols. She dressed in male attire, sat on the throne without Purdah or veil, went hunting and horse riding and met the public without Purdah. In addition, she was a successful diplomat. Prof. K.A, Nizami writes, “The fact that she was the ablest of the successors of Iltutmish can hardly be denied.

3.2.1 Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement of Hinduism emerged in the medieval age and emphasized Bhakti as a means to attain salvation. It was a pan-Indian movement which began in the sixth and seventh centuries and gradually spread across the country up to the seventeenth Century. The Bhakti, or devotional movement, witnessed the emergence of lower caste and women saints. Spirituality provided a platform for self-expression to women in the dominant patriarchal society. Some of the women saints looked upon themselves as brides of the Lord. The classic example is Meerabai of Rajasthan. During this time, saints like Guru Nanak advocated for women’s equality in various socio-economic, religious, political, educational, and cultural fields.



DO YOU KNOW?

Meerabai

She was born to king Rana Ratan Singh and Veer Kumari in Kurkhi in Rajasthan during the 16th Century. A passing mendicant gifted a statute of Krishna to the child Meera. Her attachment towards Krishna grew over the years. Though she was married to the King Rana Kumbha (also known as Bhojraj) of Mewar, she considered herself to be the wife of Krishna. Although her husband died after a few years of marriage, refusing to perform Sati, as was expected of every Rajput widow, she continued her visits to the Krishna temple at Chittorgarh. She sang the songs in praise of her Lord Krishna Day and night. Her relatives scorned her as mad. She referred to herself as Diwani, or someone not in her senses. Her in-law’s family did not like her behaviour. Eventually, it is believed that her brother-in-law decided to kill her by giving her a glass of poison. She accepted it and drank it with a smile and was believed to be saved by Krishna. However, when the torture became unbearable, she left Mewar, went to Brindavan, and later left for Dwaraka. Meera Bai broke many social norms of her time. She accepted Raidas (Ravidas), a Dalit by birth, as her guru, and she wrote her songs in Brajbhasha, interspersed with Rajasthani. Her poems may not be scholarly, but they were full of raw emotions. Many of Meera’s verses abound with references to her ill-treatment by her husband, the Rana of Mewar, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law. She seems to have left behind a minor sect called Meera Bais in the medieval period.

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3.2.2 Devadasi System

The Devadasi system was prevalent among the Hindus during the medieval period. It meant that beautiful unmarried girls were dedicated to gods in temples where they passed their lives as maidservants of said gods. Thus, they were nothing but the slave girls of gods. It was a common and well-established practice in medieval South India, where it survived until recent times. It was a social injustice to women and led to corruption in temples. Many inscriptions and charters showed donations to temples specifically for Devadasis. To cite an example, A general named Mahadeva, under the reign of Vikramaditya VI Chalukya, founded a temple in memory of his late mother, with quarters for the Devdasis. Devdasis were exploited by the more affluent class. During the reign of late Chola and Vijayanagar, periods of medieval south India occupied an important position: they owned property, moved about freely, and even enjoyed the privilege of a direct audience with the king.

In general, we can say that women suffered in all extents during the medieval period. They did not command respect in society and had no independent existence. In relation to the ancient period, gender inequality became more comprehensive and severe during the medieval period.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.4

1. Who was the first female monarch of the Delhi Sultanate?
2. Discuss the concept of 'Bhakti'.
3. Which God is Meera Bai associated with?
4. Describe the contribution of Guru Nanak for women's equality.
5. Is the Devadasi system still in practice?



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

Ancient Period

- Ancient religious and semi-religious literature and the ancient Indian attitude to women were ambivalent. She was treated as a goddess, a saint, and a slave.
- In the pre-historic period, women had a strong and respectable position.
- During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a relatively higher position. They could receive education and choose their life partners. Evil practices such as Sati, child marriage or the prohibition on widow marriage did not exist. They enjoyed high respect for playing the roles of daughter, wife, and mother in the early Vedic age.



Notes

- During the later Vedic phase, a gradual decline in women's status took place. The birth of sons was preferred over the birth of a daughter. The family lineage was traced through the male line. Women began to be confined to household activities.
- The great epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were compiled during the later Vedic period. These two epics have strongly influenced Indian society and played a more significant role in the evolution of Hindu culture and the attitude towards women in general.
- The later Vedic texts like the Smritis, Dharma shastras and Puranas laid down the various codes of conduct, resulting in the deterioration of women's status. This period witnessed the social exclusion of women from economic and religious spheres.
- In the post-Vedic period, the condition of women became worse due to the rigidity of the caste system, based on the ideas of purity and pollution.
- Jainism and Buddhism advocated fair treatment of women.

Medieval Period

- The period of the medieval history of India starts roughly from the 11th Century up to the 18th Century. Women did not command respect in society and had no independent existence.
- There are also several capable and intelligent women such as Sultana Razziyya of the Delhi Sultanate and many women in the Mughal period, such as Nur Jahan, Nur Jahan's mother Asmat Begum, Jija Bai (mother of Shivaji) and Tara Bai (wife of Raja Ram) who influenced the politics of their times.
- The Bhakti movement in Hinduism emerged in the medieval age, which emphasized Bhakti as a means to attain salvation and advocated for the liberation of women.
- The Devadasi system was another social evil practices prevalent among the Hindus during the medieval period.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Explain how women are given choice in terms of marriage and choosing life partner during early vedic age
2. Identify the leading female intellectuals during early vedic age and their contribution.
3. Evaluate how women are positioned in terms of economic status during early vedic age?
4. Discuss the system of 'Sati' during the period of 'Epics'.
5. Comment on the overall status of women during the era of Buddhism and Jainism.

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6. Describe the concept of Purdah during the medieval period.
7. Elaborate role of the Bhakti, or devotional movement in women's life.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

3.1

1. women enjoyed equal status and held a very honourable position in society. The deities of the Indus Valley people were predominantly "mother goddesses", and they exhibit a prevalence of a matrilineal system. It shows the strong and highly respectable position of women in the Indus valley.
2. Though the birth of sons was preferred and welcome, the birth of daughters was not condemned and frowned upon. The birth of a girl child was not considered a liability. No cases of infanticide were reported.
3. a childless widow could cohabit with her brother-in-law until the birth of a son. This practice was known as the 'Niyoga system'

3.2.

1. 1000 BC to 600 BC.
2. Smiritis, Dharmashatras and Puranas.
3. No marriages outside the gotra were allowed. Monogamous marriages were preferred. Women had to stay with their husbands at their place after marriage.
4. Mahabharata and Ramayana.

3.3

1. Protest.
2. Mahavira.
3. Women were permitted to become 'Sanyasis' and had their Sangha called 'the Bhikkhuni Sangha', which allowed them to be activated in public life
4. a potter woman from the town of Sravasti owned one hundred potter wheels, which shows women's economic freedom during that time

3.4

1. Sultana Razziyya.
2. It means devotion to attain salvation.
3. Lord Krishna.
4. Guru Nanak advocated for women's equality in various socio-economic, religious, political, educational, and cultural fields
5. No.