

## The Position of Women During the Pre-Buddhist Period

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### Introduction

The position of women in Ancient India history has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early *Vedic* period. From the evidence of the *R̥g Veda*, the earliest literature of the *Indo-Aryans*, that woman held an honourable place in early Indian society. There were a few *R̥g Vedic* hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she was respected and there was no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage. At a later stage, when the priestly *Brāhmaṇas* dominated the Indian society, religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual. From this time onwards, we observe a downward trend in the position accorded to women. The most relentless of the *Brāhmaṇas* law-givers was *Manu* whose Code of Laws is the most anti-feminist literature one could find. At the outset *Manu* deprived woman of her religious rights and spiritual life. *Śūdras*, slaves and women were prohibited from reading the *Vedas*. A woman could not attain heaven through any merit of her own. She could not worship or perform a sacrifice by herself. She could reach heaven only through implicit obedience to her husband, be he debauched or devoid of all virtues. Having thus denied her any kind of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, *Manu* elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. She should therefore be kept under constant vigilance. The best way to do this was to keep her occupied in the tasks of motherhood and domestic duties so that she has no time for mischief. Despite this denigration there was always in Indian thought an idealization of motherhood and a glorification of the feminine concept. But in actual practice, it could be said by and large, *Manu's* reputed Code of Laws did influence social attitudes towards women, at least in the higher realms of the society.

The position of women is largely fashioned by the cultural background of a particular society at a particular age, evidence of which can be collected by cross-cultural studies and various other investigations (philosophical, religious, political, etc.) in an objective nature. For, in this vast and variegated society, the domestic, social, political, legal, and economic position of women manifests itself in so many ups and downs. There are many vanities and variations so that at first sight, it may seem difficult to assess the real position of women during the pre-Buddhist time in India. Their position in the family, society and state was studied to envisage the correct attitude of Indians towards their womenfolk. As a result, we have the following standpoints to examine.

There was a high standard of learning and living and all round progress in every sphere of life, and the position of women was high in *Hindu* society at the dawn of civilization during the *Vedic* age. This position is known from the mass of the four thousand years old *Vedic* literature. The *Vedic*

period<sup>1</sup> is divided into the following four divisions:

The period of *R̥gveda*, from 2500 to 1500 B.C;

The period of later *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads*, from 1500 to 500 B.C

The period of *Sūtras*, Epics and early *Smṛtis*, from 500 B.C to 500 A.D.

The period of later *Smṛtis*, Commentators and Digest writers, from 500 A.D to 1800 A.D

## The Period of the R̥gveda

During this period, women enjoyed absolute freedom to move about freely in society and to take part in public life. The spiritual equality of men and women prevalent among the higher classes in *Vedic* times was extended later to all men and women of the lower classes<sup>2</sup>. The absolute seclusion of women was unknown in ancient India. The freedom given to them enabled them to become prosperous and progressive. Their position in the *Vedic* age was on the whole much more satisfactory than in the later periods and it also throws some light on the nature of its administration at that time. The birth of a daughter was no doubt not as welcome as the birth of a son, but there is no evidence to show that girls were seen as unwanted babes<sup>3</sup>, sometimes it can even be found that special religious rituals were performed by parents for getting learned and capable daughters<sup>4</sup>.

The glorious position of women during the *Vedic* age is fully and clearly manifested from the *suktas* of the revered *Nārī R̥sis* or the women seers themselves, as well as from numerous other unassailable proofs with which the entire *Vedic* literature abounds. Thus, as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, women had equally honoured places in family, society and state alike<sup>5</sup>.

We have to admit with great shame and regret, that later on, most unfortunately, Indian Society came to such a pass that the very birth of a daughter in the family was not greeted as a blessed event, but treated as a great calamity; not welcomed with smiles, but condemned with tears. But during the *Vedic* Age, the well-known rite of *Puṃsavana*, performed for averting any evil to the progeny before the birth of a child, was meant for both a male and a female child. There were other equally important rites for those desiring daughters e.g., parents performed *Kanya-Sraddhas* on the second day of the moon, in the hope of having a daughter. That is why the *R̥gVeda* praises the

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<sup>1</sup> Sankar Sengupta. *A Study of Women of Bengal*, Calcutta: Indian Publication 1970, p. 1640 – The last two epochs are chronologically definite; those of the first two, are, however, rather vague and no final comment has yet been made regarding them. Vedic period- According to P.V Kane 4000-1000 BC., Winternitz 2000-50 BC., Keith 1200-350 BC., MacDonnell 1300-800 BC., Sūtra and Epic period- Dharmasūtras Kane 600-300 BC., Hopkins 300-100 BC., Kautilya-Kane 300 BC- 100AD., Winternitz 300 AD-400 AD., Manusamhitā- Kane 700 BC- 100 AD.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Ghanananda & Jonh Stewart-Wallace. *Women Saints of East and West*. London: Ramakrisima Vedanta Centre, 1955, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Renuka Ray, Sipra Mookjee et al. Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Subhra Barua. *Monastic Life of the Early Buddhist Nuns*, Calcutta: Asia memorial Publishing Society, 1997, pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Renuka Ray, Sipra Mookjee et al. Op. cit. p. 17.

father of many daughters. Again, just as the *Matrika-Pūjā* is to take place in the beginning of all *Vedic* Rituals, so, the *Kumārī-Pūjā* is recommended to be performed at the end of all rituals.

Women had full right to the very important rites of Initiation. That is, like their brothers, they too triumphantly wore the sacred thread (*upavīta - dharana*), a sacred thread that has brought so much trouble to Indian women later on, when wearing it became a sure sign of sacrilege on her part.

Having gotten the passport of *Upavīta* (sacred thread), *Vedic* women proceeded to study the *Vedas*, uttered *Vedic Mantras*, performed *Vedic* rites and rituals, undertook *Vedic* vows and did whatever was necessary for a proper performance of *Yaga-Yajña*, just like sons. It is clear that *Vedic* women had absolutely equal rights with men, in every respect, and were their equal partners, friends, and helpers, all throughout<sup>6</sup>.

The *Vedic* widow enjoyed equal rights to remarry and start a new life. *Devara* (etymologically *Dvitiya-vara*: second husband) or the husband's younger brother was considered as the fittest person to remarry her, although this was by no means compulsory. The right of '*Niyoga*', too, shows as to how a widow was very liberally treated in those days. '*Niyoga*' was a social custom allowing a widow, or even women with living husbands, to have children by persons other than their husbands. This has been known in India from the *R̥gVedic* times. *Vedic* widows were also fully entitled to perform religious rites, as suitable and joined just like widowers, there being no distinction amongst them<sup>7</sup>.

As mothers, *Vedic* women held a most glorious position. There is no doubt that mothers were regarded as far more venerable than fathers, and the *Vedic* ideal, in this respect, has been most touchingly expressed in *Surya-Sukta* or the verse of the *Nārī Ṛsi Surya*. When the bride leaves her parent's house, after marriage with her husband, she is blessed thus- "*Svasure Samrājñī Bhava*"... "Be a queen to your father-in-law. Be a queen to your mother-in-law. Be a Queen to your sister-in-law. Be a queen to your brother-in-law". (*R̥gVeda*, 10. 85. 46)<sup>8</sup> This, as a matter of fact, is the keynote to women's position during the *Vedic* Age.

In short, *Vedic* women had the fullest freedom of thought and action, in every sphere, whatsoever. Child marriage was absolutely unknown and grown-up girls could freely choose their partners of life, as desired. Women could easily and honourably lead the life of celibacy, if so desired, and choose whatever career they wanted. That is why, we find *Vedic* women shining like beacon-lights in every sphere, even military. Here we find the names of two celebrated women soldiers, viz., *Vadhrimati* and *Vispala*. Both of them actually fought in battle fields. *Vadhrimati* was a married lady and had also a son, named *Hiranya-hasta*. It had been said of her that when during a war, *Vadhrimati* lost her hands, she prayed to the heavenly doctors, viz., *Asvinis*-so goes tradition. *Vispala* was a woman recruit in the military contingent of king *Khela*. There is another traditional tale regarding her, similar to the above. Thus, when *Vispala* lost her thighs during a fiery war, *Asvinikumaras* gave her golden thighs and thereby enabled her to walk again. In this respect, viz., skill in fighting etc. *Vedic* women surpassed even their very modern sisters.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

## The Period of Saṃhitās to Upaniṣads

During this period, it was expressed in words that “*The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance are, equal in every respect.*”<sup>9</sup> Therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular. The *R̥gveda* records that girls were educated like boys in all branches of knowledge and had to pass through a period of *Brahmacarya*. In the early *Vedic* period, the father usually taught the children. In the *Brāhmaṇa-Upaniṣadic* age, education for girls was usually attended to at home by their father, brothers and uncles. Some, however, received instruction from outside teachers and a few of them lived in boarding-houses. The highest education, including the study of the Vedas, was open to both men and women alike. The initial ceremony (*Upanayana*) of girls used to take place as regularly as that of boys at the normal times and this custom prevailed down to the *Sūtra* period, though it had then become a mere formality in the case of the majority. After their *Upanayana*, girls used to follow a discipline more or less similar to that of boys, though there were certain concessions for them.<sup>10</sup>

In the time of the *Upaniṣads*, there is evidence that some women shared in the intellectual interests of the day. They strove vigorously for spiritual perfection. Many women became *Vedic* scholars, great philosophers, and brilliant teachers, and they continued the tradition of the earlier age by taking part in discussions in learned assemblies. The religious privileges of women, continued to be more or less unaffected during the *Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣadic* period. Women were not debarred from having access to *Brahmavidya*. They inherited and possessed property, they took a part in sacrifices and religious duties, they attended great assemblies, they openly frequented public places, they often distinguished themselves in science and in the learning of their times. There were women scholars who specialized in the *Mīmāṃsā*. The teaching profession was prevalent down to the *Sūtra* period. Women’s participation in public meetings and debates became less and less common in the later *Vedic* period.<sup>11</sup>

The list of great *Vedic* teachers whose memory was honoured at the time of *Brahmayajña* includes the names of three great women *Gārgī Vācakanvī*, *Vadavā Prātithyī* and *Sulabhā Maitreyī*. *Maitreyī*, wife of the great sage *Yājñavalkya* and *Gārgī*, daughter of the sage *Vacakhu*, had an outstanding personality and could engage even the great *Yājñavalkya* in high philosophical discussion. Unfortunately nothing is known about these female scholars except their names and what is given incidentally in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. But it is clear from whatever is found about them that they were keen seekers after truth.<sup>12</sup>

Although the ‘ascetic’ is a familiar figure in ancient Indian history, in the *Vedic* age, the ideal of renunciation was not popular in society. Unmarried women could not perform *Vedic* sacrifices and it is believed that they could not win heaven.

So, marriage was regarded as help in religious progress. The couple was spiritual partners, and

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<sup>9</sup> Subhra Barua. Op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

both proceeded towards a spiritual goal. It is for this reason that men and women became fit for the final state of spiritual evolution, the life of renunciation, and became saints. It was during the period of the *Upaniṣads* that the path of renunciation became popular and gave rise first to three and later to four *aśramas* - that of the student, the householder, the recluse and the monk. Some women gave up the pleasures and prospects of married life and took to the life of asceticism. Slowly the spirit of asceticism became more and more appreciated and normal married life, and the spiritual life came to be considered as incompatible.<sup>13</sup>

## The Period of Epics

Coming from the *Vedic* and *Upanisadic* time when the *Dharmasāstras*, *Purāṇas* and *Epics* were written, there were traces of great saints, ascetics and *Yogis* among women. In the *Dharmasāstra*, women ascetics were called *Brahmacārinī*.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata*, we find many liberal rules regarding women. Thus, here, too, sons and daughters were treated more or less alike, and all the religious ceremonies were performed gladly for them all together. Daughters were given full opportunities for education and training, and brought up with equal care and affection. Marriage was not compulsory for women and child-marriage was absolutely unknown. Women could, like men, embrace the life of *Naisthika Brahmacari*, or a religious mendicant. Women had the right to choose their own husbands. Further, it has been enjoined in the *Mahabharata* that a girl should wait for three years, after attaining puberty and then she could choose her own bridegroom, even without the permission of her parents. *Pana-Pratha* or *Vara-Sulka*, i.e., the customs of the bride's father paying money in cash or in kind to the bridegroom's father, as found even today, was practically unknown. On the contrary, what was known was *Kanya-Sulka* or just the opposite kind of custom, viz., bridegroom's father paying money in cash or kind, to the bride's father. But generally speaking *Pana-Pratha* or '*Sulka-grahana-pratha* was condemned either from this side or that.

Widow-marriage has been enjoined in the *Mahābhārata*, and *Debara* or the husband's brother was considered as very suitable for this purpose. Not only that, a married lady also could re-marry even with her husband living. This definitely proves that in the *Epic Age*, under certain circumstances, a married woman could remarry, have children and live honourably like an ordinary wife. Not only that, though not in vogue at all, in the *Mahabharata*, the custom of a woman marrying more than one husband at a time (*Bahu-Patikata*) was allowed, though not at all encouraged and praised. In the *Mahābhārata*, two ancient cases of women marrying many persons at a time have been quoted, viz., *Jatila* marrying seven sages at a time and *Varksi* marrying ten brothers at a time.

In the period of *Rāmāyaṇa*, saintly women cast off all worldly ambitions and retired to the forest to lead a life of *Tāpas* or mental discipline. The names of some saintly women from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were *Śabari Sramaṇī*, *Svayamprabhā*, and *Anasūyā*.

In the *Mahābhārata*, there is an account of *Sulabā*, a wandering nun and great *Yoginī* She belonged to the clan of *Rājarṣi Pradhāna*. She became an ascetic and roamed alone from place to place in search of knowledge. Once, she arrived at the court of King *Janaka* and exhibited great powers

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Renuka Ray, *Sipra Mookjee et al, Op. cit., p. 8.*

and wisdom, which she had acquired by the practice of *Yoga*. Another woman ascetic, known as *Śivā*, was learned in the *Vedas* and attained spiritual perfection. In the *Śalyaparva* of *Mahābhārata*, it is found that the daughter of *Śāṅḍilya* also embraced a life of celibacy, practised *Yoga* and attained perfection in austerity. Sometimes, married women also became ascetics. The wife of *Prabhāsa* became a *Brahmvādinī* and embraced the life of the wandering nun and practised *Yoga*. In the *Anuśāsan parva*, there is an instance of an old women ascetic who met the sage *Aṣṭabakra* in *Uttaradeśa*.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the *Epic Age* as well was a glorious age for women. A large number of women excelled in all spheres - as queens, Housewives, and ascetics and their contributions to the various fields of education and culture were of a high order. They enriched their homes, societies, states, and countries to a great extent.

In summation, we may consider that, the glorious position of women during the *Vedic Age* is fully and clearly manifest from the *Sūtras* of the revered *Nārī Risis* or women seers themselves, as well as from numerous other unassailable proofs with which the entire *Vedic literature* abounds. Thus, as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, women had equally honoured places in family, society, and state alike.

### The Period of later Smṛtis

At the later part of the *Vedic era*, during the Age of later *Smṛtis*, the position of women deteriorated considerably. Women were looked upon with dread and disgust on account of their periodic menstruation. They were regarded as impure even during childbirth from the *Vedic times*.

During the early *Vedic period* (from about 1500 to 1000 B.C.), there was also the view that any error in the recitation of a *Vedic mantra* would produce disastrous consequences. It was therefore necessary for a person to devote a fairly long period of twelve to sixteen years for *Vedic study*, which women could hardly do. As a result, women *Vedic scholars* become rare. Since *Vedic sacrifices* became more complicated and women become less expert, and who were also wives in the home with no training at all in *Vedic rituals*, women were gradually eliminated from *Vedic sacrifices*.<sup>16</sup>

Women in India enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing their mates and participating in public functions until about 500 B.C. Down to about 800 A.D, the *Smṛtis* were emphatic in declaring that women, who were forcibly taken into captivity or dishonoured, should be admitted back to their families. Pseudo-puritanical notions distorted social vision in this matter soon after 1000 A.D. Hindu society began to show a surprising callousness to women, who had the misfortune of being carried away into captivity, even for a very short time.<sup>17</sup>

Some idea about the position of women could be gleaned from the classic Hindu *Dharmasāstras*,

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<sup>15</sup> Subhra Barua. Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Bangalore Kuppaswamy. *Dharma and Society: A Study in Social Values*. Delhi: Macmillan, 1977, p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> A.S. Altekar. "The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: Retrospect and Prospect" in Kumkum Roy. (Ed). *Women in Early Indian Societies*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1999, p. 66.

of which the *Manu-smṛithi*, popularly known as the “*Laws of Manu*”, is the best known. The book describes the duties of women as a dark tragic plight:

Women are impure in their desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct. The taste of intoxicating liquor, the company of the evil, long separation from the husband, much gadding about, excess of sleeping or lying in bed, day-dreaming and constant visits to others’ houses and staying there for long periods - these lead to the ruin of women.<sup>18</sup>

The basic rules for women’s behaviour excerpted from different religious texts stress the need to control women because of the evils of female character. Woman by nature is considered to be a deceitful and wily creature.

With women there can be no lasting friendship; hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women.<sup>19</sup>

Truly there is no friendship with women, and theirs are the hearts of hyenas.<sup>20</sup> A woman is the embodiment of rashness and a mine of vices. She is hypocritical, recalcitrant and treacherous... she is an obstacle to the path of devotion, a hindrance to emancipation.... she is practically a sorceress (a magician) and represents vile desire.<sup>21</sup>

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.<sup>22</sup>

Women were treated as an appendage and looked upon as inferior to men, particularly in intelligence, and also seen as the root of all evil in society. It was because of such inherent weakness in the nature of womankind itself, that the religious literature prescribed control and subordination of women. Woman’s sexuality is seen as dangerous and, therefore, the religious texts very strongly lay down that a woman should always be protected by a man and never given independence. Woman should be protected through all the stages of her life, and the ideal woman is the one who does not strive to break these bands of control.

Therefore, at that time, many Hindus in India killed their daughters immediately after birth. They preferred a son to a daughter because a son was needed to perform his parent’s last rites. A daughter was, on the contrary, considered a burden on the resources of her parents and was, therefore, a liability, her upbringing till marriage was an unwanted responsibility. In such a partial environment, killing of female children was not a cause of surprise. An infant girl was killed either

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<sup>18</sup> Manu Smṛiti, V, 148. (See, Jyotsna Chatterji. *Religions and Status of Women*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1990, p. 16.)

<sup>19</sup> Rig Veda, 10. 95. 15. (See, Jyotsna Chatterji. *Religions and Status of Women*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1990, p. 6.)

<sup>20</sup> Atapatha Brahmana, 11. 5. 1. 9. (See, Jyotsna Chatterji. *Religions and Status of Women*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1990, p. 16.)

<sup>21</sup> Brahma Vaivarta, Prakṛiti Khanda. 16. 52-60, Sen, I. 132-133. (See, Jyotsna Chatterji. *Religions and Status of Women*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1990, p. 16.)

<sup>22</sup> Goerge Buhler. (Tr). *The Law of Manu*, V. 147, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, p. 195.

by drugging or by mixing poison in her milk. Sometimes a layer of poison was also applied on the mother's breast so the baby died when suckled.<sup>23</sup>

Manu also expressed in a similar fashion, the double standards for women. When a girl had grown up, the marriage was the only consideration for the parents and required the offering of a dowry in order to secure husbands for their daughters. Women whose parents failed to meet the required dowry demands were harassed, beaten or burnt alive, and those who could not afford to pay the dowry at all were forced to remain unmarried. Either way, family members therefore looked down upon girls, as they caused a heavy responsibility and expense, to such an extent that the birth of a female child was not welcomed in the family. Thus, unmarried women were severely condemned and had no place in society.<sup>24</sup>

Manu also limits the movement of women in the form of certain duties. These duties may be mentioned as follow:

A woman in her house must always be cheerful, a good manager and thrifty in house management. She must be loyal to her husband throughout her life. The husband should constantly be worshipped though he may be devoid of good qualities because *“by violating her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment for) her sin.”*<sup>25</sup> Medhatithi observes, *“For these reasons, a woman shall not fail in her duty to her husband either with a view to worldly or heavenly joys.”*

Wife should not perform *yajña* without the permission or presence of her husband. Whether the husband is dead or alive, she should not do anything, which may displease her husband.

Even after the death of her husband she should not think of another man, she should be patient with hardship, and chaste. If the husband died without having a son or daughter, she should not go to another man to have offspring.<sup>26</sup>

All these indicate that Manu wanted to create absolute lordship of man over woman. Under such conditions the position of women in the ancient world was one of extreme oppression. These statements clearly show that Manu did not permit the widow to remarry on any account. He says: *“A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead.”*<sup>27</sup> She was considered inauspicious and prevented from participating in social and religious rituals, and whereas a widower was encouraged to remarry after the death of his wife, many disabilities were imposed on women who were widowed.

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<sup>23</sup> K. Devendra. *Status and Position of Women in India*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> N. S. Krishnakumari. *Status of Single Women in India*, Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1990, pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Goerge Buhler. (Tr). *The Law of Manu*, V. 164, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Goerge Buhler. (Tr). *The Law of Manu*, V. 160-162, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, p. 196-197.

<sup>27</sup> Goerge Buhler. (Tr). *The Law of Manu*, V. 156, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, p. 195.



## Conclusion

What happened in India during these dark and depressing days of total injustice, intolerance, and inequality can never be justified on any account; and will, forever, remain the darkest spot in the otherwise bright history of India. Just imagine the women of India, who rose to the heights of knowledge and realization, who vied with men in all spheres of life, and even surpassed them in many ways, who enjoyed absolutely equal rights and privileges with men in every respect... eager and enthusiastic women of India were suddenly confined within the four walls of the dark and dreary, desolate and depressing *Zenana*, with almost all their fundamental birth-rights totally cut off-rights to justice, freedom, education, equality - domestically... As a matter of fact, in the regrettable ninth chapter of the *Manu- Smṛti*, as many as twenty verses (9.1- 9.20), has been openly and unashamedly devoted to this kind of absolutely wrong condemnation of women.<sup>28</sup> Woman was reduced to a status almost equivalent to that of a slave. This period came to be known as the dark ages for women.

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<sup>28</sup> Renuka Ray, Sipra Mookjee et al., Op. cit., pp. 31-32.