



- Since most of the early scholars, researchers and historians were men, many aspects of society did not find a place in history books. For example, child-birth, menstruation, women's work, transgenders, households etc. did not find much mention.
- Rather than building a holistic picture of the past, some select aspects such as polity and the different roles of men became the central focus of history writing.
- Women were confined to one corner of the chapter where a paragraph or two was devoted to the 'status and position of women'
- This made it look like as if history and thereby society, polity, economy and all culture belonged to men while women were only a small static unit to be mentioned separately
- There were some exceptions, but these were however rare. This practice is being corrected now

#### SOURCES

- From simple pre-historic tools to abstruse texts, everything can be utilized to understand life and roles of women in history.
- The presence & the absence of women from sources needs to be duly noticed, deliberated and argued upon and only then to be theorised upon
- Certain objects being directly related to the lives of women
- These include but are not limited to female figurines, art objects, texts attributed to or authored or compiled by women, monuments created by or for women, various objects relating to their lifestyle, objects associated with women on account of their cultural roles and so on.
- The sources must be understood with reference to political structures, social conditions, economic activities and various other ideas and institutions of the time
- One needs to be sensitive to the spatial context and semantic changes that a text has gone through time
- According to, Uma Chakravarti that much of the gender history written in early phase was a 'partial view from above'. This referred to the utilization of select textual sources and focussed only on relational identity of women.
- Interdisciplinary researches incorporating sources and methods from anthropology, art history, ethnography, literary studies and other disciplines can uncover overall history and gendered roles.

#### GENDER HISTORIOGRAPHY

- In the British narratives of history, Indian women became a point of central reference

- Various social evils that made the life of women miserable were pointed out and efforts were also made to introduce 'reforms.'
- Sati, child-marriages, imposed widowhood, polygamy, dowry, educational and economic inequality, purdah (ghoonghat) and many other practices prevailed during the colonial period that made the life of women difficult and pitiable
- Some practices affected women of higher social and economic households while others led to misery for poorer women.
- Women in India came to be treated as a homogeneous category and over generalisation became the norm.
- While many communities in India practised widow remarriage and did not practise (much less forced) sati and while some practised divorces or separation .
- Image of the Indian woman who had been subjugated as woman, wife and widow became a dominant theme in history writing.
- A western vision was placed over the non-western societies and hence interpretations were far removed from the context. For example, notion of stridhan was equated with dowry & little regard was paid to the provisions regarding its use and ownership by women.
- The huge social stigma that came along with the selling of jewellery of the household (one of the main components of stridhan) was paid no attention to.
- Similarly, penal provisions listed by ancient texts for misappropriation of women's property were not even looked into.
- The unilinear interpretations did not only create a monolithic (homogeneous) picture of 'Indian Women' but also stretched this image back to centuries and millenniums.
- Works on women were based on selective texts. This uniform and singular narrative claiming to be the history of Indian women is problematic.
- In a , research on the evolution of mankind shows that gender-neutral vocabulary was not used.
- For example, the use of the term 'mankind' in place of 'humankind', privileging hunting practices to gathering, indicates a mindset which puts man in the centre of existence.
- Studies, however, show that hunted prey formed only 35% of the diet while gathering fruits and other edible material supplied the major portion. Gathering of food resources was ordinarily done by women

- Since gathering was an important activity, more than hunting for game, it could point to significant role playing by women
- It has now been realised that not only Palaeolithic hunting but also the 'Neolithic Revolution' owes a lot to women.
- While the prehistoric period has very few gender studies, we have more material remains coming from the proto-historic phase (3000 BC to 600 BC)
- The gendered understanding of Harappan civilization is being built upon and various archaeological remains have been studied in this respect.
- The female figurines, idols of pregnant women, the statue of the 'dancing girl', various pieces of jewellery and personal belongings that have been discovered at various sites and offer useful insights on the public and private lives of women and men.
- The statue of a girl obtained from Mohanjodaro has been called a 'dancing girl' on grounds of familiarity with the institution of devadasis in the later times
- According to, Deeksha Bharadwaj the detailed history that could have been worked out of a large and diverse mass of female figurines obtained from the north-west
- She has associated felinity with fertility and reproductivity while paying close attention to detailed contexts and forms in which they were found
- There is a wide variety of terracotta female figurines that have been found at different sites right from the pre-Harappan times. Women figures are found suckling a baby, holding utensils, kneading dough, nursing infants, carrying objects like drums, seated figures for board games, with steatopygia (fat deposition on the hips and elsewhere), with floral head-dresses and in many other forms.
- Even figurines of pregnant women are quite common. However, most of these have been uncritically associated with fertility, religiosity and reproductive ideas, and have been passed off as representations of the Mother Goddesses.
- While some of them were votive objects, others are held to be toys or other utilities.
- The focus on female form has been so stereotypical that women have been seen as associated only with home, hearth, fertility, sexuality and divinity.

#### POSITION OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA

- The first literary tradition in the Indian subcontinent (and the oldest in the world) is that of the Vedic corpus. From the four Samhitas to the Upanishads, we find many interesting references to women.
- Some of these women have left their mark on the cultural heritage to this day and are remembered in various ritual and social contexts.
- Their names, stories, some highly revered hymns
- They are referred to not only in the context of social roles but also as originators of many important hymns.
- Not only feminine and masculine but also various neuter characters and categories can be identified in the Vedic corpus.
- The Vedic literature has been classified as Early Vedic and Later Vedic. The Rigvedic society & polity seems to be teeming with life and agro-pastoral economy was enmeshed in close kinship ties.
- Women & men participated in society, economy and polity.
- Various natural phenomena are depicted as Goddesses and they are offered prayers.
- While quantitative analysis highlights the predominance of Indra, Agni, Varuna and other male gods, the power and stature of the goddesses is equally well established.
- Not only in the context of the divine but also in the descriptions of the temporal world we have women making their own life choices and participating in the decision-making bodies. Women participated in all three Vedic socio-political assemblies viz. Sabha, Samiti and Vidhata.
- They had access to education and were even engaged in knowledge creation. They could choose to be brahmavadinis with or without matrimony. Hence, there is no reason to believe that they were only confined to home and hearth.
- According to historian Uma Chakravarti it was the system of "brahmanical patriarchy", which created hurdle for women.
- Looking at ancient texts such as the Dharmasatras (including the Manusmriti), as well as subsequent Buddhist sources, Chakravarti reconstructs early Indian society from approximately 1000 B.C. onwards.
- Social organization is reconstructed through these texts to show how control over women by men was mediated through the creation of caste and class hierarchies and differences.
- Women were subordinated to men. Their behaviour, reproduction and sexuality were controlled and guarded by men.
- Further, women were seen as a private property of men not having any existence of their own.
- There was a desire for sons and the birth of a son was celebrated.
- The Brahmanical texts depict that women had no access to economic resources. A woman was valued for her role in reproduction alone.
- From the above passage it is clear that texts like Manusmriti portray a picture of women who enjoyed no rights and were insubordinated.
- According to , T. S. Rukmani, though the patriarchal set up put women at a loss, there were instances where women found space to exercise their agency.

- She points out that though the texts like the Kalpasutras (Srautasutras, Dharmasutras and Grhasutras) revolved around the ideology of Dharma and there was not much space to express alternative ideas, still these works also find some leeway to express ideas reflecting changed conditions
- For example, there is a statement in the Apastamba Dharmasutra that one should follow what women say in the funeral samskaras.
- Stephanie Jamison believes that in hospitality and exchange relations, women played an important role.
- She says that the approval of the wife was important in the successful completion of the soma sacrifice.
- Women enjoyed agency in deciding what was given in a sacrifice, bhiksha to a brahmacarin or to a sanyasin. The men had no authority in telling her what to do in these circumstances.
- Vedic society was the one which valued marriage immensely. If a woman chose not to marry, then it would point to her exercising choice in her decision to go against the grain and remain unmarried.
- Mention may be made of Gargi. She was a composer of hymns and has been called a brahmavadini (Rukmani, 2009).
- This term applies to a woman who was a composer of hymns and chose to remain unmarried, devoting herself to the pursuit of learning.
- Similarly, in the case of Maitreyi, she consciously opts to be educated in the Upanishadic lore and Yajnavalkya does not dissuade her from exercising her choice.
- The statement in the Rigveda III, 55.16 that learned daughters should marry learned bridegrooms indicates that women had a say in marriage.
- Though male offspring is desired, there is a mantra in the Rigveda, recitation of which ensures the birth of a learned daughter.
- Anant Altekar refers to the yajnas like seethayagna, rudrayajna etc. that were to be performed exclusively by women.
- Some of the women were known for their exceptional calibre, for example, from the Rigveda Samhita we find mention of women like Apala, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Shachi, Vishwavara Atri, Sulabha and others
- Women have not only been praised as independent individuals but also with reference to their contributions towards their natal or marital families.
- The Later Vedic literature shows the progression towards a State society with a change in the organization of the society and polity
- The chief comes to be referred to as bhupati instead of gopati.
- However, within the twelve important positions (ratnis) mentioned, the chief queen retains a special position under the title mahisi.
- The importance of the chief queen continued as gleaned from several references to them in the Epics, Arthashastra and even in coins and epigraphs from early historical times
- The other Samhitas also refer to women sages such as Rishikas. The wife is referred to as sahadharmini. Brahmanas or the texts dealing with the performance of the yajna (Vedic ritual), requires a man to be accompanied by his wife to be able to carry out rituals
- For example, Aitareya Brahmana looks upon the wife as essential to spiritual wholesomeness of the husband.
- Uma Chakravarti has pointed towards the condition of Vedic Dasis (female servant/slave) who are referred to in numerous instances
- They were the objects of dana (donation/gift) and dakshina (fee).
- It is generally believed that from the post Vedic period the condition of the women steadily deteriorated.
- However, Panini's Ashtadhyayi and subsequent grammatical literature speak highly of women acharyas and Upadhyayas.
- Thus, the memory and practice of a brahmavadini continued even after the Vedic period.
- Since a woman taking sanyasa was an act of transgression, one can explore women's agency through such instances.
- Kautilya's prohibition against initiating women into Sanyasa can make sense only if women were being initiated into sanyasa.
- He advises the king to employ female parivrajakas as spies. Megasthenes mentions women who accompanied their husbands to the forest, probably referring to the Vanaprastha stage.
- Shastras are comprised of sutras (aphorisms) & the smriti texts ('that which is remembered') becomes important in the post Vedic period.
- These textual traditions cover many subjects relating to the four kinds of pursuits of life referred to as purusharthas (namely dharma, karma, kama and moksha). In all these texts we find very liberal values and freedom for both women and men.
- The setting up of a household is seen as an ideal for men as well as women (though asceticism for learning is equally praised for both). For example, Apastamba Sutra opines that rituals carried out by an unmarried man do not please the devatas (divinities).
- The post-Vedic phase from 6th century BCE onwards is also rich in literary traditions with ample depictions of women.

- Classical Sanskrit, Pali, ArdhaMagadhi, and other Prakrit languages have a rich textual tradition from this phase onwards.
- The diversity of languages is also accompanied by a diversity of rich intellectual traditions.
- Not only do the oral traditions continue but various archaeological remains have been recovered too
- There is an entire body of literature that is ascribed totally to women who became Buddhist nuns. These are referred to as Therigathas i.e. the Songs of the Elder Bhikkhunis (Buddhist Women who joined the Samgha)
- The Arthashastra gives us information on women who were engaged in economic activities of various kinds.
- They formed a part of both the skilled and the unskilled workforce. They were into professional as well as non-professional employment.
- There were female state employees as well as independent working women.
- Similarly, some of them were engaged in activities which though not dependent on their biological constitution are nonetheless categorized as women's domain, e.g. domestic services etc.
- Some of them were actual state employees, while some others were in contractual relations with the State. For example, we have female bodyguards and spies in the State employment
- K.P. Jaiswal suggests that these women perhaps came from Bhila or Kirata tribe. Female spies were not only to gather information and relay it to proper source, but also to carry out assassinations.
- However, a closer look at the text shows that there were different classes of female spies engaged for different purposes.
- Amongst others 'women skilled in arts were to be employed as spies living inside their houses' [KA I.12.21].
- Others were required to work as assassins [KA V.1.19, XII.5.48].
- Some were to play the roles of young and beautiful widows to tempt the lust of greedy enemy [KA XIII.2.42].
- Female slaves formed an important part of the workforce both in the royal establishment and in the common households.
- In the royal establishment, 'female slaves of proven integrity' were to do the work of bathattendants, shampooers, bed-preparers, laundresses and garland-makers; otherwise they were required to supervise the artists doing these jobs [KA I.21.13].
- Further they were to offer garments, flowers and other cosmetics after first putting them on their own eyes, bosoms and arms [KA XXI.14-15]. Thus, they were functioning not only as personal attendants but also as security check.
- Buddhist & Jaina traditions giving us some glimpses of the ideas and institutions of the times.
- The Therigatha by the Buddhist nuns are an interesting literary source that provides us with a glimpse of various women who attained arhantship or similar other stages of Realisation.
- The deliberation on the age and deterioration of the body by Ambapali, the non-importance of sensual or bodily pleasures by Nanda, Vimla and Shubha etc points towards the intellectual and spiritual engagements and attainments of women
- On the contrary picture, is presented by the Jatakas wherein more often than not, women are depicted as evil.
- In the same story we have different natures ascribed to women. Thus, it is clear that the Jatakas are particularly biased against the passionate or affectionate relationships between man and woman. For example, Suvannahamsa Jataka gives us an account of a gold-feathered bird that comes to visit his wife of previous birth so as to help their destitute situation.
- Blatant aggression from a woman was not culturally accepted in a patriarchal society and thus we find that patriarchal norms dictated what was accepted and what was not in terms of woman's behaviour.
- The earliest Vedic literature, Rigveda, which is claimed to have evolved roughly from 1500 BC to 1000 BC, shows clear influence of the pre Aryan culture in its references to the image of 'Mother Goddess' or Shakti, giving reverence to the beneficial aspect of nature and women.
- In the later Vedic literature, there are indications that the principle, of patriarchy got strengthened.
- The birth of a son was decidedly a matter of great joy, but the birth of a daughter was not seen as a matter of misfortune.
- Various important ceremonies like 'annaprasana', 'namkaran', 'jatkaram', 'upnayan, as well as 'yajnyopoavit' were held both for girls and boys, making it clear that there was no difference between children of different sexes
- However, being a patriarchal society, mothers of sons had a special status in society. While marriage was considered a noble institution, divorce was permitted in specific conditions and remarriage of divorced women called punarbhu has been referred to in various texts (Datta, 2000:8).
- Indications also exist of the practice of niyoga through which a childless mother, married or widowed, could have a child by a man other than her husband.
- The accounts of women's situation during the Vedic period offer a view only of women of the Brahmin caste. There is hardly any mention of women of other social groups.
- Later Vedic Period witnessed increasing rigidity in Hindu Society. The society gradually established itself as patriarchal, controlling every aspect of women's existence.



- As society became stratified, women's roles were defined as subservient to men in the name of social and moral stability
- Confined within an elaborate structuring of power relations and ethical principles, women's lives from about 500 BC became more patrifocal, constricted and homebound (Bose. 2000:viii).

#### BUDDHIST ERA

- In the 6th century BC, the teachings and practices of the Vedas were thrown into the background. There was much priest craft everywhere.
- Buddha's teachings had a revolutionary impact on women's status, as in many other aspects of Hindu social and religious life.
- He preached to all without exception, men and women, the high and the low, the ignorant and the learned - all alike. All his first disciples were laymen and two of the very first were women.
- This had a liberating influence on women. Buddha established an order of female ascetics (nuns) as also of male sanyasins (monks). Many women, oppressed in their families, found solace in the Nunneries.
- Women's contributions to Buddhist literature give evidence of their access to education.
- Although the status of husband was superior to his wife, the relationship was of mutual respect.
- Age at marriage was higher and the birth of the daughter was not considered a calamity
- During the lifetime of the Buddha and later, the patriarchy had got strongly entrenched in the society.
- Allowed women equal participation in the practice of the Path and Nirvana
- Women were acknowledged to be temptresses; and nuns came to be subjugated to the monks
- Despite the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha, the later Buddhist teachers perceived women as physically weak and dependent.
- In fact, Buddhism leaves most areas of worldly life to be managed by the people according to their customs and traditions (GOI, CSWI, 1974:48)
- The post Vedic period is characterised by a strong ambivalence towards women. Women were

visualised both as goddesses or shakti—to be worshiped and temptress to be shunned at the same time

- The epics put mothers of sons and faithful wives on a very high pedestal. The chaste and faithful wives were shown to have developed miraculous powers
- Manusmriti, a book composed by Manu somewhere from 200 BC to 200 AD and committed to writing in 12th century AD (Seth 2001:23).
- Manu established the principle of purity as a basis of a code of social conduct. Women were seen as the most potential danger to purity of the family lineage.
- They were, therefore, restricted to the four walls of their home. Religious prescriptions and social practices reinforced each other to relegate women to secondary status.
- The outcome of this perception of women was denial of education to women—denial to read Vedas or chant mantras. The role of a married woman was confined to her home and to serve her husband faithfully.
- She could attain her salvation through selfless service to her husband, taking care of his daily needs, so that he could meditate and perform Vedic rites.
- Manu, who is held responsible for the fate women suffered for more than two millennia, considered women in constant need of protection and supervision.
- As a result, gradually, early or child marriages came to become a norm. On account of the preference for a son to carry on the lineage and the problems of protecting girls, female infanticide became prevalent in India.
- Pativrata wife could not imagine getting linked to any other man and hence, if the husband died, she was expected to opt for self immolation. Sati got a status equal to that of deities.
- Woman's sins were responsible for her husband's death and so, widows were considered inauspicious.
- Marriage being sacrosanct, divorce was not only unthinkable, but also despicable