

A Review Study on Women's Status During the Mauryan Age to The Gupta Age in Ancient India

Sulagna Seth

Research Scholar, Department of History, RKDF University, Ranchi, India

ABSTRACT

Women's status in Ancient India evolved between the Mauryan (322–185 BCE) and Gupta (320–550 CE) periods. This review examines historiographical and literary sources on women's social, economic, educational, religious, and legal status during these two key periods. The research critically explores the changing role of women in ancient Indian society, utilising Vedic and post-Vedic literature, Dharmashastra texts, Buddhist and Jain literature, the Arthashastra, inscriptions, foreign travellers' narratives, and modern historical scholarship. Despite patriarchal social constraints, Mauryan women participated more in economic, religious, and administrative activities. The Arthashastra and Greek writers suggest that women engaged in industry, trade, and royal administration, while Buddhist and Jain traditions emphasised spirituality and intellectual pursuits. However, during the Gupta Age, patriarchal views, family roles, and Brahmanical legal codes intensified. Child marriage became more common, women's formal education declined, and property rights and public participation were curtailed. Yet literature, inscriptions, and archaeology demonstrate that royal and elite women influenced religious patronage, culture, and politics. The study also examines colonial, nationalist, Marxist, and feminist historians' views on women's status. The political, economic, and cultural conditions of regions, social classes, castes, and religions affected women's position. According to the analysis, social fluidity gave way to patriarchal order from Mauryan to Gupta times. This study synthesises historical scholarship to better understand gender relations in Ancient India and recommends further research on regional variations, socio-economic inequities, and women's agency throughout the Mauryan and Gupta periods.

Keywords: *Ancient India, Mauryan Age, Gender Relations, Historiography, Social History.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian women's history is relevant to historical and gender studies because it sheds light on Indian civilization's social, cultural, economic, religious, and political evolution. The status of women has changed with socio-economic systems, religious ideologies, legal traditions, and political institutions. The Mauryan Age (c. 322–185 BCE) and the Gupta Age (c. 320–550 CE) contributed greatly to state building, administration, economic expansion, literature, religion, and cultural development in Ancient India. Women's role in these two periods helps explain early Indian gender relations. The Mauryan Empire, created by Chandragupta Maurya and strengthened by Emperor Ashoka, had a well-organised administrative system and thriving economy. The Arthashastra, Buddhist and Jain writings, inscriptions, and Greek writers show that women participated in social and economic life. Domestic management, agriculture, textile production, trade, religion, and administrative services were performed by women. Although patriarchal standards prevailed, historical evidence implies women had a greater social role than in many later periods.

The "Golden Age" of Ancient India was the Gupta Age, known for its achievements in literature, science, art, mathematics, philosophy, and architecture. While cultural prosperity increased, many historians believe women's social status decreased. Brahmanical social norms and legal literature legitimised patriarchal structures by emphasising household duties, male guardianship, and restrictions on women's education and inheritance rights. However, inscriptions, literary works, and archaeological evidence show that royal and elite women continued to influence through religious patronage, charitable service, and political administration. The status of women in these two periods has been studied extensively. The data has been evaluated differently by historians. Nationalist historians emphasised early Indian women's dignity and respect, while colonial historians presented them as victims of societal tyranny. Feminist historians focused on gender inequity, patriarchy, women's agency, and the diversity of women's lived experiences, whereas Marxist historians explored women's situation in connection to changing economic structures and class. This diversity of viewpoints shows that understanding women's history demands a diverse and critical approach.

Historical, literary, inscriptional, religious, and modern scholarly interpretations on women's status in the Mauryan and Gupta periods will be examined in this review study. The main topics include family, marriage, education, property rights, economic engagement, legal status, religious involvement, and political impact. The

study contrasts the two periods and examines the variables that kept women's position the same and changed. This review synthesises preceding research to explain women's status from the Mauryan to the Gupta eras. It also exposes research gaps on regional variations, class inequalities, caste dynamics, and the actual realities of women outside the royal and privileged classes. Examining Ancient India's historiography relates to gender, social transformation, and women's rights discussions in the Indian subcontinent.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sharma Kalpna, Singh Uday Veer (2025) A mystery of emancipation and decline plays out along the path of women in ancient Indian society. The Vedic era was a time when women performed religious ceremonies, taught, and held esteemed roles in society. The power to decide, inherit wealth, and further their education was all within their grasp. Social mores, economic changes, and foreign invasions all worked to limit the freedoms of the strictly patriarchal. The purdah, dowry, and child marriage were further customs that curbed women's independence. This research analyses the changing position of women in the church, literature, and history from a feminist theoretical perspective, taking into account contemporary circumstances like SDG 5 of the United Nations. The study's central argument is that revived empowering practices from India's past can guide modern changes towards female equality.

Deshwal Ritika, Rani Neelam (2025) A great number of individuals believe that the Gupta period, which lasted from approximately 320 to 550 CE, is the most prosperous time in the history of India. During this period, there were significant advancements in the domains of art, science, and culture. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the situation that women found themselves in during this period by evaluating the roles that they played, the rights that they were granted, and the expectations that society had for them. By employing historical documents, literary sources, and archaeological findings, the objective of this project is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role that women played in the Gupta civilisation. This will be accomplished through the application of a methodology that draws on a variety of academic fields.

Madan Vibha (2023) People have treated women both as goddesses and as pests since the beginning of time. The place of women in society has evolved throughout history. There was a sharp decline in women's standing until the Middle Ages. Under man's dominion, women were considered inferior. The status of women declined in India during the Muslim rule; practices such as purdah, sati, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage, and the joint family system contributed to women being mistreated. Despite our independence over the past 75 years, women are still confined by the societal constraints of a male-dominated society. Another side of India's courageous women is their involvement in the fight for independence. Keep in mind Indira Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, and Rani Jhansi, who brought about a progressive era and a promising future for women in India. In modern Indian society, women's roles are more central than in the past. The purdah system, sati, child marriage, female infanticide, dowry, and the lifelong prohibition of widow marriage are practices that she has begun to change. For the first time, they are openly engaging in the nation's social, cultural, political, and economic life. Women make up a sizable portion of India's scientific community, political elite, engineering community, pilot community, police force, and judiciary in a free India. Napoleon Bonaparte once stated, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," while the ancient Manusmriti text states, "God resides where women are respected." In shaping society's trajectory, women play a pivotal role in nurturing and guiding the next generation. A strong and formidable woman has emerged. As much respect as men deserve, she demands it. The purpose of this article is to draw a line between the social standing of women in India's past and present.

Patil, A. (2023) The Gupta Empire was a prehistoric Indian empire that ruled from the early fourth to the late sixth century CE. Given the large land grants the Brahmanas received, their stature likely grew throughout the Gupta dynasty. Though initially clearly vaishyas, the Guptas came to be known among the Brahmanas as Kshatriyas. The Brahmanas described the Gupta kings as possessing celestial attributes.

Chahal, S., Kumar Kuldeep (2023) This study will focus solely on India under the Mauryan dynasty and how males acted socially toward women according to their norms. Attempting to assert something novel or do honour to the issue is not an easy feat. This issue has been occasionally brought up by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, but it is only becoming worse. According to literary tradition assessments, early Indian legal and general tradition authorities disagreed on the proper role of women.

Lepcha Jona (2022) Looking back, we can see that no civilisation can remain static. Every aspect of a civilised society, from norms of conduct to patterns of thought and law, is subject to change. In order for the world to improve, women's rights must be respected and empowered. A bird can't soar on its own wing, according to Swami Vivekananda. His main argument was that men's dominance in society leads to prejudice, discrimination, and persecution against approximately half of the world's population. For a long time, societies have divided work based on the perceived physical differences between the sexes, with men expected to provide monetarily and women to nurture children.

Shirpurkar, S.C. (2021) It claims that women and men have participated equally in India's rich history of freedom movements. Like people in other third-world countries, ours was a protracted struggle for freedom.

The names of many brave and heroic sons are written in the golden books of history in this lovely account of the struggle against British oppression. As a result, philosophers, farmers, lawyers, and social reformers have been vital to the liberation movement at every turn and phase. But, given the historical background, examining how women are positioned in this setting is also highly interesting and important. Depending on the time period and circumstances, women's status has varied throughout history, from the Vedic to the modern ages. Lopamundra, Ghosha, and Apala were powerful political figures during the Vedic period. Gargi and Maitre existed in the post-Vedic period, as did Sheela and Attarika during the Gupta period and Razia during the Mogul period. Similarly, it is impossible to overlook the contributions that women made during the period of the independence struggle, especially during the 1857 Revolution, such as Mrs. Annie Besant, Bhagini Nivedita, Madam Cama, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Nehru, Sucheta Kruplani, Prabhadevi, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Mniben Patel, and others. In a similar vein, the British education system, better transportation, and the social reform movement have all contributed to the expansion of women's political consciousness and their subsequent involvement in the National Movement. Women overcame numerous obstacles during the struggle for independence, such as poor educational attainment and other limitations on their ability to participate in public life, by working hard and creating their own distinct identity. Over time, women began to become interested in social issues, and their thinking evolved along with their understanding of this field. Thus, women achieved slow but steady progress in the Legislative Councils, the reform movement, and the struggle for independence. It is also undeniable that most of the women who spearheaded the national movement were well educated and from the upper middle class.

Trautmann, T.R. (2021) Megasthenes lived during Chandragupta Maurya's reign, which began in 321 BCE and marked the establishment of the first empire to encompass all of India. With an army that was mostly reliant on the availability of people, horses, elephants, and oxen—what would be considered military livestock—he established his kingdom. Significant evidence about the elements that supported Chandragupta's success can be found in Megasthenes' description of this important area of public spending and the laws that governed it. These elements include the maintenance of a royal monopoly on horses, elephants, and weapons; payment of the soldiers in both peace and war; demilitarization of the farmers; and the separation of the soldiers from the land. The political order in India throughout its long history, from the Mauryan Empire to the present, has its environmental roots in the complementary distribution of horse and elephant country to the dry west and humid east of a line that runs down the middle of the Subcontinent, or, respectively, the valleys of the Indus and the Ganga. Since the Ganges valley is home to elephants, with towns ranging from Pataliputra (Patna) to Kanauj to Delhi, India's dominant force has traditionally located its capital there to control the movement of horses and elephants to neighboring states to the east and west.

Gupta, G.S. (2021) The Mauryan Empire—which had a long line of emperors and made significant historical contributions—was one of India's finest empires. Chandragupta Maurya established the Mauryan dynasty with the assistance of Chanakya's wise advice. This era is widely recognized for its contributions to stupas, edicts, and education. It was even believed that the former Takshashila University was founded during the Mauryan period. During this period, the prehistoric Indian treatise known as the Arthashastra or Arttacstiram first appeared. It discussed politics, kingship, and other relevant topics. The architectural design, coins, inscriptions, and other artifacts unearthed during excavations serve as the main sources of historical knowledge. These resources are indispensable because they help reconstruct the social mores, economic circumstances, and manner of life that were prevalent throughout time. This study will be centred on the Mauryan inscriptions and the knowledge they left behind.

Sharma, U. & Gupta, G.S. (2021). The Mauryan Empire, an early South Asian state, was formerly believed to rule the majority of the Indian subcontinent. A new view of the Mauryan kingdom that places greater emphasis on relational networks than on geographic dominance can be gained by reexamining ancient texts and historical evidence. With this frame of view, it is possible to examine longer-term patterns of interaction that persisted throughout the Early Historic (about 600 BCE–600 CE) of the Mauryan state and go beyond its political aspects. This concept can also be expanded to include parallel networks of interaction that existed outside of official control and persisted long after different dynastic powers had faded. The establishment of a stable central government and the unification of a substantial part of the Indian subcontinent under the Mauryan Empire led to the development of a fundamental social structure and its caste systems.

Akter, I. (2020). A state's economic status has an impact on almost every element of that state, including its social structure. The subject matter remains just as pertinent as it did in antiquity. Recessions and economic crises are nevertheless frequent occurrences in the modern world. In the past, natural disasters, diseases, and the ineptitude of the monarchs all had a negative effect on the economy. The topic of financial prosperity was brought up again. Based on the division of eras, there aren't many sources of knowledge about ancient India in Bengali in ancient, medieval, and modern times. Again, a number of old Indian texts that remain untranslated have been uncovered. This makes it very difficult to find knowledge about ancient India. Despite various limitations, an effort is undertaken to gain knowledge about ancient India. Several books and articles were consulted in order to finish the current inquiry. I have to study books and articles and then carefully compile information from them.

After deleting and adding other data, I use this information for my research. Furthermore, information about the condition of the economy at the time has been extracted from a variety of coins, land records, copper plates, etc.

Azad, U.S. (2020). Seals and sealings hold a significant place among the many archaeological relics discovered in the Patna area. From the Maurya era to the later Guptas, they span Even though many of these artefacts are quite valuable in the historical gallery, only a few were prominently displayed and used in Indian history. Aside from these, there are many additional seals and sealings that are still of great historical significance. However, little effort has been taken to thoroughly analyse these seals and sealings, and the significance of these artefacts has been overlooked. The purpose of this essay is to thoroughly examine the seals and sealings that have been uncovered at various Patna locations in order to extract as much historical information as possible. The paper's primary goal is to examine the inscriptions and devices that can be found on them; the approach to creating seals and sealings has been left out.

Richa Kapoor (2019) A key contributor to the downfall was the common practice of polygamy and polyandry. Look no further than the epics for proof of this. To some, having a daughter meant disaster was on the horizon because women were evil in and of themselves. That they are rude is completely unfounded. "A wife shall not be abandoned," as stated in Vasishtata's Dharma, irrespective of her aggressive or incestuous nature, whether she has escaped from the house, is a victim of criminal assault, or has been abducted by robbers. In contrast to the venerated Vedic era, the Mauryan period (560 BC-321 BC) saw a marked decline in the status of women in Punjab. A subtle change in women's status began around this period. Women were not allowed to take part in ceremonies that involved the sacrifice of humans. Although the 'Purdha' system was not yet in vogue, they were educated adequately, and we also find mentions of social issues like 'Sati' that were common at the time. Women enjoyed a comparatively secure era in Punjab during the Mauryan Period due to the widespread practice of the joint family structure. Much about women's position in this period may be gleaned from Kautilya's "Arthashastra" account. At this period, they were not as highly esteemed as they had been in the Vedic period. Although there has been some decline, our data clearly shows that Punjabi women played a significant part in society and had a high status. Studying women's status, then, necessitates examining it through the prism of the complex socioeconomic system in which they find themselves. Changes in social standing are an integral part of any traditional society's story of development. A brief synopsis of the various stages of this transition may be available in the article.

III. CONCLUSION

From the Mauryan to the Gupta eras, women's status in Ancient India changed with political, economic, social, and religious conditions. Women's rights, duties, and opportunities changed with Indian society. The data reviewed implies that Mauryan women participated more in economic, religious, and administrative activities. The Arthashastra, Buddhist and Jain writings, inscriptions, and foreign accounts show that women worked in agriculture, crafts, trade, and home management and participated in religious and philanthropic activities. Women often had social and economic agency despite patriarchal attitudes.

During the Gupta period, however, the consolidation of Brahmanical social norms and the growing authority of Dharmashastra literature led to tighter restrictions on women's autonomy. There was greater emphasis on domestic responsibilities, dependence on male family members, and idealized roles as wives and mothers. Educational opportunities and independent property rights became more limited for many women, and practices such as child marriage gained wider acceptance. Nevertheless, the available evidence also shows that women from royal, aristocratic, and affluent families continued to play important roles in religious patronage, cultural life, and, on occasion, political administration. Thus, women's experiences were not uniform but varied by class, caste, region, occupation, and religious affiliation.

The historiographical examination indicates that perceptions of women's status range greatly among colonial, nationalist, Marxist, and feminist authors. Nationalist historians emphasised ancient Indian women's dignity and respect, whereas colonial historians emphasised their servitude. Marxist historians evaluated gender in connection to economic systems and social classes, whereas feminist historians critically analysed patriarchy, gender relations, and women's agency. These different perspectives show why studying women's history should be interdisciplinary.

Historiography shows that colonial, nationalist, Marxist, and feminist authors view women's status differently. Colonial historians stressed ancient Indian women's servitude, while nationalist historians emphasised their dignity and respect. Marxist historians examined gender in relation to economic systems and social classes, while feminist historians examined patriarchy, gender relations, and women's agency. These perspectives demonstrate the need for multidisciplinary women's history research.

REFERENCE

- [1]. Deshwal Ritika, Rani Neelam (2025) Status of Women in Society During Gupta Period: Historical Context, International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences Vol-10, Issue-4; Jul-Aug, 2025, pp-499-503
- [2]. Sharma Kalpna, Singh Uday Veer (2025) Status Of Women In Ancient Indian Society: A Critical Analysis, International Journal of Environmental Sciences, Vol. 11 No. 8s, 2025, pp-1002-1012
- [3]. Deshwal Ritika, Rani Neelam (2025) Status of Women in Society During Gupta Period: Historical Context, International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences Vol-10, Issue-4; Jul-Aug, 2025, pp-499-503
- [4]. Madan Vibha (2023) Status of Women in India: From Ancient Period to Modern Age, A GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, GAP BODHI TARU, A GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, Special Issue on Indian Knowledge System, August 2023, Vol-VI, pp-141-143
- [5]. Patil, A. (2023). Social development during Gupta period. *Ancient India History*, 1, 1-12.
- [6]. Chahal, S., Kumar Kuldeep (2023), Women in Mauryan Period as Reflected in Arthaśāstra. Social Research Foundation Innovation The Research Concept Vol. II Issue XII. pp-1-8
- [7]. Lepcha Jona (2022) A historical outlook of the status of women through the lenses of the Patriarchal Indian Society Before 1997, International Journal of Current Science (IJCS PUB), 2022, Volume 12, Issue 1 March, pp-707-721
- [8]. Shirpurkar, S.C. (2021). Analytical Study of the Political Status and Role of Women during the Indian Independence Movement. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(3), 168-172.
- [9]. Trautmann, T.R. (2021). Megasthenes on the Military Livestock of Chandragupta and the Making of the First Indian Empire. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 63(2), 339-365.
- [10]. Sharma, U., Gupta, G.S. (2021). Mauryan Dynasty Ancient Times of Indian History. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 9 (8), b478-b484.
- [11]. Sharma, U., Gupta, G.S. (2021). Mauryan Empire: Golden Period of Indian History. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 8(8), b764-b769.
- [12]. Akter, I. (2020). Economic System of Ancient India: Maurya and Gupta Empire. *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, 4(9), 218-228.
- [13]. Azad, U.S. (2020). Seals and Sealings of Pataliputra (From the Maurya Period up to the Gupta Period). *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 8(2), 632-647.
- [14]. Kapoor Richa (2019) The Status of Women in Punjab: A Socio- Early Historical Perspective (From Pre Vedic to Mauryan Period), IJRAR- International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews, Volume 6, Issue 2, April-June 2019, pp- 909x-915x