

From Shadows of History to Empowerment: Women's Struggles in Medieval Societies and My Journey to Advocate for Safety and Strength

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Abstract

The paper discusses the status of women in various medieval societies of Asia, the Middle East, and the Western world in terms of their roles in a social, political, and economic sense. This paper discusses the status of women during the Lichchhavi period in Nepal in the light of wider perspectives emanating from India, China, Japan, and the Middle East to examine how their lives were interwoven with patriarchy, religious dogma, and cultural practices.

The discussion includes the practice of Sati in India, which is foot-binding in China, and veiling in the Middle East, where women were mostly enclosed in domestic roles and devoid of their free will. Amidst these broad suppressions, tales of resistance and survival are unearthed epitomized by the likes of Hua Mulan, Fatima al-Fihri, and Eleanor of Aquitaine, who resisted the expectations placed on them by a male-dominated society.

These historical narratives serve to connect past struggles with modern challenges, emphasizing the need for women's empowerment in contemporary times. It concludes on a personal note, where historic oppression of women inspires one in establishing an NGO aimed at enhancing safety and physical strength in women. By tracing the historical roots of gender inequality, the article serves as a call to action for continued advocacy for women's rights and autonomy.

Introduction

The stories of women have often been relegated to the fringes of recorded history, overshadowed by grand narratives about the exploits of kings, emperors, and wars. For much of that history, a woman's role was often confined to the private sphere, frequently defined by a uniform patriarchal tradition that invaded all geographical and cultural boundaries as men ruled the kingdom, waged wars, and shaped the future. The silencing of voice was heavy for women in medieval societies of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and even pre-colonial America, with identities molded by the expectations of men surrounding them, and social, legal, and religious structures stripping autonomy.

These stories touched a chord deep within me during my personal journey of historical study. The more I learned about the systemic oppression women suffered throughout history, the more the invisible chains of patriarchy came into stark view. Their struggles were not confined to the distant past but echoed across time, leaving a legacy still affecting women today. It is these stories of tragedy and resilience that gave me the encouragement to found an NGO for women's safety and empowerment, particularly through physical strength. These women fighting in silence or against insurmountable odds became a beacon of hope, a reminder of how far we have come and how long the road ahead was.

The Asian Struggle: Confucianism, Caste, and Confinement

The condition of women was related directly to religious, philosophical, and cultural doctrines which played their part in governing practical life. In the societies such as China, Japan, and India, for example,

woman was considered as innately inferior to man, her major roles confined to the domestic domain, where she had to bear and raise children, manage a household, and uphold family honor. Although these were regions that were distinct in a number of cultural and religious influences, the common thread was that women were inferior to men and were severely curtailed in their rights and autonomy.

Lichchhavi Period in Nepal: Honor and the Private Realm

The Lichchhavi period, or from about 400 to 750 CE, is a highly significant historical era in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. It was an age of affluence and cultural advancement, but the contribution of Lichchhavi rulers to art, architecture, and public administration notwithstanding, their women folk were little different from those in any other part of South Asia at the time: patricians all. A good many women of the Lichchhavi period, as indeed in other societies of the period, were confined to the four walls of their homes. Their primary roles were related to family and marriage, as dictated by society and Hinduism.

The Manusmriti or Laws of Manu was one of the primary codes of law in Hinduism. This had significant impact on the status of women within the sub-continent. They were considered inferior to men and were seen as carriers of family honor. Chastity and obedience were for them the commanding features; perforce, their lives were divided into three stages of dependence—firstly upon their fathers, secondly upon their husbands, and thirdly upon their sons. The day-to-day life of women in the Lichchhavi period reflected this ideal. Howsoever busy the political and cultural life may have been, the freedom of women remained circumscribed, their voices muffled by social convention that spoke loudly of duty and modesty.

However, they did contribute to religious and cultural life significantly. Since the Lichchhavis were great patrons of both Hinduism and Buddhism, there were women who participated in religious functions and temple administration, though these were also subordinate to the males. Records through inscriptions and religious texts of the period indicate that some women enjoyed positions of respect in the religious communities, but again, their contribution was restricted by the all-encompassing patriarchal structure.

The few examples of women's prominence during the Lichchhavi period come from the story of the Lichchhavi queens who occasionally acted as regents or advised. In any case, most political influence women had lay hidden behind the male rulers. The value of women was determined through their relationships with influential men, an added emphasis on their subjugation in the patriarchal system.

India: The Shadow of the Caste System and Religious Tradition

If medieval India was governed by the patriarchal dictation over women's lives, the rigidity of the caste system was another such controller. Hinduism, the prevalent religion in India, had immense stress on family honor and purity among women, especially in the upper castes. A woman's role was tied to keeping this honor, which often meant limiting her mobility and independence.

These religious texts, like the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**, greatly influenced women's roles, whereby the characters of Sita and Draupadi became symbolic of what constituted womanhood. Above all, Sita became the archetype of the obedient wife who was made to undergo various trials in order to prove her purity and loyalty. These were not mere stories but templates at which several generations of women were expected to emulate, further strengthening their roles of being dutiful wives and mothers.

Probably the most horrific example of women's subjugation in medieval India was a practice called *Sati*: the ritual burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyres. Considered both inauspicious and burdensome, a widow's self-immolation was viewed as the ultimate service to her husband. Though it was

never universally practiced, it came to be symbolic of the highest sacrificial expectation placed upon women on behalf of family and society.

Despite such ghastly traditions, women in medieval India also rose to positions that established them as rebels against societal norms. Figures like Mirabai, a 16th-century poet and Lord Krishna's devotee, rebelled against the strict caste and gender boundaries placed on her. It is through her devotional poetry that Mirabai turned her back on civic expectations and harked to the spiritual path above the limitations placed on her. She did not defy them in terms of political power or military might but refused to accept the civic framework that was meant to contain her.

Hindu and Hindi Perspectives: Cultural Boundaries and Devotion

In the Hindi-speaking parts of India, women's roles were also defined by religious and cultural ideals. The ideal of **pativrata**, or 'a wife's complete devotion to her husband', permeated much of the cultural and social fabric. Women were supposed to be steadfast in their loyalty, even when calamities befall their husbands, and their worth was often measured by the ability to uphold this devotion.

The immolation of women to avoid capture by invaders became a hallmark of Rajput women's sacrifice during medieval India. Probably the most well-known example of **Jauhar** is the story of Rani Padmini of Chittor. When the fort of Chittor was under siege by the Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji, she, along with the other women of the kingdom, decided to immolate themselves rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. While those acts have been romanticized both in folklore and later historical accounts, they epitomize the radical measures women were expected to go to in order to defend their honor, a concept deeply embedded within patriarchal values.

Yet, within these strictures, women also found means for self-assertion. Bhakti and Sufi movements during the medieval period offered spiritual paths beyond caste and gender restrictions. Women like Andal in South India and Lal Ded in Kashmir used poetry as an outlet for expressing their spiritual devotion, thus breaking the cobwebs of rigid societal norms. Both of these movements allowed women to seek personal liberation and recognition outside the confines of traditional gender roles.

Women and Power in Nepal: Between the Shadows of Kings and Deities

Most of Nepal's medieval history was marked by the rule of various dynasties, and throughout these times, the contributions of women were often eclipsed by those of kings and religious leaders. Goddesses, however, provided powerful symbols of protection, fertility, and divine female forces that Nepalese culture embraced. It was this conjunction of respect for divine female forces with the subordination of real women that has reflected in the complex social dynamics of that time.

Women in the Malla period were also assigned to household chores, much like their counterparts during the Lichchhavi era. Society was organized in direct relation to strict Hindu ideals, and the caste system further limited their social mobility. The idea of **pativrata**, **Sati**, and the **dowry** culture had deeply enthralled Nepalese society. Though it is a country that worships Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi, actual women were bereft from taking decisions independently, or commanding respect akin to these goddesses.

Still, there were noticeable exceptions: some royal women during the Malla period exercised great political power as regents or advisors when the male heirs were too young to rule. Like their Indian counterparts, however, their power is mostly masked and minimized in the records. Women were

expected to live in the shadows of kings, their contributions in history overshadowed by the deeds of their male relatives.

Yet, if there is one custom uniquely Nepali that is still practiced, it is that of the *Kumari*, or living goddess. Chosen for her perceived purity and fine spiritual qualities, a small girl is worshiped as the living incarnation of the goddess Taleju. As much as the role of Kumari is greatly honored, it suggests that a woman's worth is attached to her purity and her obedience. Although she holds a position of great reverence, the Kumari lives a reclusive life, and her role is considered to be over once she reaches puberty; she then goes back into obscurity. This reflects the broader expectations in society for women to be pure and sacrifice their freedom in order to perpetuate religious dogma and cultural norms.

Resilience and Defiance: Women Across Time

The number of stories of resistance, resilience, and defiance that are overwhelming in number dwarf the overwhelming odds and suffocating structures laid upon women in medieval societies. Whether through quiet acts of rebellion or even public demonstrations of strength, women did find ways to push back against the constraints of patriarchy.

In China, the most famous woman was Hua Mulan, who, against the canons of gender, took the place of her father in the army and fought in battle, hiding her sex as a man. Although it is open to some doubts whether the story of Mulan is actually historical or not, her legend became one of the strongest symbols of women's powerfulness and resistance.

In the 9th century, Fatima al-Fihri built what is considered the world's oldest continuously operating university in Fez, Morocco. Such was her contribution to learning that its uniqueness and greatness, especially for a region that often confined women's roles to the domestic sphere, were unmatched. Her legacy continued to further dispel the belief in the intellectual inferiority of women compared to men, leaving lasting changes in the educational landscape of the region.

Throughout medieval Europe, figures such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Hildegard of Bingen were able to amass a huge amount of political and intellectual heft, often directly in defiance of the masculine frameworks they found themselves working within. Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the most powerful women of her time and defied expectations by going on Crusade and later ruling England and France with her husbands and sons. A German abbess and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen utilized her religious authority in challenging issues related to several theological matters the Church had raised and made a great contribution to medieval scholarship.

Conclusion: From History to Advocacy

As I ponder on the conditions of women in medieval societies, their stories of resiliency against the tides of oppression, I am inspired to press onward with them in the contemporary fight for women's rights. Whether in Asia, Europe, or the Middle East, women faced-and continue to face-challenges that seek to limit their autonomy and power. Yet across centuries and cultures, women found ways to resist, push back against the forces that sought to confine them, and assert their worth and dignity.

The history of the struggle of women all over the world has inspired me to open my own NGO, dedicated to the safety and empowerment of women, including through physical strength. Women from years gone by-whether queens, warriors, scholars, or ordinary women-fought for dignity in ways that still echo today.

I hope that today's women can only honor that legacy by continuing to fight for a more autonomous and respectful life, assisted by diverse tools such as self-defense classes and economic independence means.

Their stories, just by being told, keep their memories alive and concrete struggles that reach up to our present time. The scars of history are deep, but in collective action and empowerment, we can begin the process of healing those wounds toward a world where women no longer have to fight in the shadows.