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Reflections

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The Changing Contours of Womanhood in India: An Overview

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The history of India is replete with the stories of great women like Savitri, Sita, Gargi, Maitreyi, Rani Laxmi Bai, Mirabai, Sarojini Naidu etc. But at the same time, it is also an untold story of shame, repression and abuse that millions of women have undergone in the past and continue to suffer in the present. During ancient period, that is the pre-Vedic and Vedic times, women enjoyed considerably high status and freedom. In pre-Aryan India, there were mainly agricultural communities who "lived according to seasons. God was female and it represented life in the form of Earth Mother. The religion of Indus valley was based on fertility and people worshipped the mother goddess together with other fertility symbols" (Nubile 2). Women in this age enjoyed a definite social as well as religious status in the society. According to *Rig Veda*, women were to "romp with Rudra and the Vasus, Adityas, Visvedevas, or the collective celestials and to uphold both Mitra and Varuna, Indra and Agni and the pair of Asvins" (Vaishista 101). They were skilled in music and various other arts. They used to participate in the *Yajnas* and *Upanayana*, the sacred thread ceremony was also performed for them. Some of the women such as Kaikeyi and Vishalaya even accompanied their husbands to the battlefields.

The women of Vedic India were neither primitive nor ignorant creatures, but were civilized and cultured. There is a mention of some highly educated and learned women like Sulabha, Maitreyi, and Gargi in ancient Indian literature. *Rig Veda*, the most ancient Indian scripture contains several hymns and poems composed between 1500-900 B.C by some twenty women sages like Ghosa, Surya, Vacha, Apala, Vishwavara and Yami. During the Vedic period, women were sent to Gurukuls, where they studied along with boys and were called *Brahamacharinis*. Atreyi attended Valmiki's ashram with Rama's two sons Kusha and Lava, Kaushalya, Rama's mother was said to be a *mantravit*, one well versed with the Vedas. With regard to marriage, women enjoyed complete freedom in the choice of husbands and they were married at a mature age. It is mentioned in the *Atharva Veda* that a woman should marry only after the completion of her education. Widows could remarry and women had the