

Women in Goa through the Ages

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Abstract

The status of women is an important aspect of study in every era. It is said that the worth of a civilization can be judged by the position and status given to its women. India was and still is a patriarchal society, a society in which women live in the shadow of men. She was an unquestioning wife, a caring mother and an obedient daughter. This was the description of the perfect woman as per ancient scriptures

The status of women in Goan society varied throughout time. Just like the rest of the country in ancient times, Goan society too was male dominated. Women were considered the inferior sex and were subjected to innumerable socio-religious and economic injustices. The coming of the Portuguese had a huge impact on women in Goan society. We witness a gradual change in the condition of women, especially that of the converted Christian woman. They were deeply concerned with the way women were treated in society. The Portuguese passed a number of egalitarian reforms and made an attempt to improve the position of women.

The post liberation period saw numerous changes in Goa. The status of women in the state was much better than that in the rest of the country. High literacy rates, longer life expectancy, low fertility rates are some of the factors which have led to a better standard of living for women in Goa. In spite of all these advancements there is a lot more yet to be desired in the field of women emancipation. Development of the socio-economic status of tribal women and changing the attitude of outsiders towards Goan women created by the tourism industry and the media are still some of the grey areas which need a lot of attention.

Women in Goa through the ages

The position and status of women in a society is the index of the progress and culture of that society (Mitragotri). The health and status of women is the single most important influence on the health and well-being of society. Throughout history and among all cultures women have played a vital role in shaping and nurturing human civilizations. In Indian culture women have always taken up the responsibility as the caretakers of the household. In spite of playing such a pivotal part in human history, women have fallen victims to social inequalities, violence and injustice. Our very own traditions, customs, social norms and even our religion suggest that women should be dependent on her man without whom she is incomplete.

Women in Pre-Portuguese Goa

Women in Pre-Portuguese Goan society suffered from social disabilities and discrimination right from birth till death. The position of a woman was far inferior to that of a man. The very birth of a girl child was seen as an unfortunate event in the family. Preference was always given to a son.

The *Dharmashashtra* containing old Hindu socio-religious rules say "The daughter was not greeted at birth not due to the lack of love on the part of the parents, but because the daughter was a source of anxiety for the parents". The *Athurvaveda*, which is one of the four vedas contains chants which would ensure the birth of a boy. Thus, we see the discrimination faced by a girl child even before she was born. The girl child was unwanted and there was every effort made to make her feel that way. She was always reminded that she was a guest in her own house and eventually had to leave, to go to her husband's house. As the girl grew up, her position deteriorated. She had no individuality and was subjected to further exploitation. Women were confined to the house, the temple and the king's palace.

"Educate a man and you educate an individual, educate a woman and you educate the entire family". This idea was alien to the medieval period. Education was a luxury that could be afforded only by the women of the royal family. A girl did not receive any kind of formal education. It was considered a waste of time, money and energy to educate the girl child, as eventually after marriage she would take all that knowledge to her husband's house and leave her father's house. Girls from the upper classes received training in singing and dancing. Young girls spent most of their childhood performing kitchen duties, maintaining and cleaning the house and in service of the other male members in the house. (However one must note that even though girls were not educated, it did not mean they were uncultured.) It is the lack of basic education that led to the further decline in the position of women in the society.

Getting their daughters married off as soon as possible was the only thing on the parents mind. A daughter's marriage was considered as a huge responsibility and a financial liability for the parents. A girl was denied the liberty of choosing her own partner for marriage. Child marriage was prevalent during the ancient and medieval times. Eight to nine year old girls were married to men twenty to thirty years their senior. These girls were physically, mentally and emotionally not ready for marriage. She was robbed of her childhood and innocence by their older husbands who saw them as objects of sexual pleasure and servitude. They were too young to realize the significance of the sacred bond of marriage. These early marriages resulted in a large number of maternal deaths during delivery. Child marriage was also one of the root causes of the degeneration of women in society.

A married woman was considered to be the property of her husband and his family. In a joint family set up which existed in Goa during the time, the eldest male was the head of the family. His word was final. The women of the house had no say in the decision making of

the house. The status of a woman in the house or the society depended on the status of her husband. The newly wedded bride was expected to be quiet and submissive. She was also expected to treat her husband like a 'demi-god' and be at his service at all time. Women were to be faithful to their husbands and adultery was considered to be a crime worse than rape. She had absolutely no ownership rights and was mostly confined to the premises of her home. She was permitted to leave her home on a few occasions and social functions. Another place where women were confined to was the king's palace. She was there for the entertainment of the king and his guests.

Sati

There have been numerous sati stones discovered in Goa, indicating that this practice was very common in this region. Sati is an abbreviation of the phrase *Sati-sahagama* which means journey of the wife along with her dead husband.

Sati was an age old custom where in a widow was to jump into the funeral pyre of her dead husband. This practice is considered to be one of the most inhumane and brutal customs in Indian culture. Sati was prevalent among the upper classes of the society. It was not practiced during the Vedic period. According to Hindu beliefs, marriage was the union of man and woman for eternity. A married woman was supposed to be loyal to her husband even after her death. It was believed, that if a woman committed sati, she and her husband would be "together in heaven". Interestingly, men were not expected to do the same. They could remarry, have children and go on with their lives.

Women who committed sati were glorified and sometimes even honored with shrines. There were women who committed sati voluntarily, but on many instances, women were forced to jump into the pyre. Widows were ritually bathed, drugged and intoxicated and then pushed into the pyre. People with long wooden stakes would stand around the funeral pyre to make sure she does not escape. Even child widows were not spared. Such was the brutality of this heinous crime.

It is believed that the practice of sati spread to Goa during the Silahara-Kadamba period. We find epigraphic records belonging to 1000 AD -1600 AD indicating the presence of sati in Goa. In many cases, it used to be the widowed wives of Goan soldiers and army generals who committed sati. If a woman escaped the brutality of sati, life in no ways was easy for her. Very often woman who did not commit sati were disowned by their family. They were forced to live an immoral life in order to sustain themselves.

Widow remarriage was not permitted as per Hindu laws. If a woman continued to live in the house of her dead husband, she had to lead a life of seclusion and prayer. Widowhood was considered to be retribution for her sins in her past life. She had to face insults, was ill treated and was often blamed for the death of her husband. Her head was shaved bald so that no man would be attracted to her. The only colour she could wear was white and the use of cosmetics was strictly prohibited. She was given only one meal a day

and had absolutely no social life. Her very presence for occasions such as weddings was considered as a bad omen. She was reduced to the status of a servant in her husband's house with even the smallest of comforts being denied to her. In such a backdrop one really has to wonder – Does not sati seem to be a better option?

The '*Devadasi*' or the dancing girls played an important role in the socio-religious lives of the Hindus. *Devadasi* literally meant 'Servant of God'. In Goa they were called '*Kalawants*'. These girls performed, danced and sang for the local temple deities. There were *Kalawants* at well known temples of Goa like the Mahalsa, Mangeshi, Shantadurga and the Saptakoteshwar temple. Many a times these girls were offered to the temple as gifts by their families for granting them a favour or making an irrevocable vow. In times of famine, there have been instances where parents have sold their girl child to the temple, in order to survive. These girls were dedicated to the temple before they reach the age of puberty. During the Silahara-Kadamba period, these *Devadasis* were respected. They were looked upon as talented artists and dedicated servants of God. It is only after the downfall of the Kadambas that the status of the *Devadasi* degenerated. It is around this time that their exploitation and association with prostitution began. A *Devadasi* who was a servant of God eventually became the servant of the priests. *Devadasis* offering their bodies to the priests was ultimately considered as an offering made to the Gods.

Thus we see that the woman in Pre-Portuguese Goan society was treated just like another commodity owned by man. She was exploited, not respected and life on the whole was very difficult.

Women in Goa during the Portuguese era

The conquest of Goa by the Portuguese is one of the most important events in the history of Goa. In the course of the next 451 years, the course of Goan history, society and culture was dramatically changed. Every aspect of Goan life ranging from food, dress, language to religion, economy and architecture was heavily influenced by Portuguese culture.

The coming in of the Portuguese brought a ray of hope to the miserable conditions of women in Goan society. It marked the beginning of change. Alfonso de Albuquerque and his successors made a conscious effort to improve the position of women in Goa. It began with Albuquerque passing a legislation banning the practice of Sati in the newly conquered region. Besides this, the State and the Church introduced a number of reforms which aimed at the betterment of women. The Portuguese Uniform Civil Code gave the daughter a share in her father's property, which was unheard at the time in the rest of the country.

The number of Portuguese women in Goa was very small. Financial implications and the perils of the journey by sea resulted in a very few Portuguese women travelling to Goa. However, Albuquerque wanted to create a generation of Goans who would show their solidarity to the Portuguese Crown and to achieve this, Albuquerque started '*Policio des*

Casamentos'. Albuquerque encouraged his Portuguese counterparts to get married to the native women and settle down in Goa itself. These men were called '*Casados*'. They were given incentives such as dowry in cash and kind, land and cattle, and even positions in the Government to enter into such an arrangement. In most cases, it was the widows of Muslim soldiers who got married to these Portuguese men. Most of these women belonged to the lower castes of society. The Church was highly critical of these mix marriages carried out by Albuquerque and disapproved of it as the Church claimed that the *casados* did not follow the rules laid down by the Church..Inspite of yhis criticism from the Church and other high ranking Portuguese official ,Albuquerque continued with these mixed marriages.

It goes without saying that these women were converted to Christianity. At first, the native parents were reluctant to marry off their daughters, but then they realised that the Portuguese men treated their women with respect. Legally, these women became the heirs to their husband's property. They were taught Portuguese and Latin. Their social interactions and movements increased. The husband and wife moved out together for religious and social occasions. The women were consulted in all matters of importance. They enjoyed rights and privileges which were denied to them during the pre-Portuguese era. Thus the Christian woman became a symbol of emancipation and womanhood.

Even after the initial ban of Sati by Albuquerque, the practice did continue illegally and sometimes unreported. In 1555, the prohibition on Sati was lifted on the request of the Hindus of Goa. However, in 1560, Governor, Constantino de Braganca re-introduced the prohibition on Sati. Anyone convicted of breaking this law would be sent to the gallows.

The role of the Church

The Church and the state worked hand in glove in an attempt to attract the locals of the land to Christianity. .There were many decrees issued which acted as an incentive for women to join the Catholic faith.. On 22nd March 1559 a law was passed asserting thae the wife and daughters who died without having a male child were entitled to his property provided they accept Christianity.. As per the law existing during the time the property would be taken over by the state. Similarly in July 1559 another law was passed which declared that the daughters who embraced Christianity could gain inheritance from her parents, in case she did not have brothers. If a married women accepted Christianity and her husband did not and he rejected her then she could acquire the rights of possession of all the ornaments, wardrobes and fifty percent of movable and immovable resources receieved at the time of marriage.

In the 16th and 17th century the orders and resolutions of the Church Provincial Council in 1567,1575,1585,1592 and 1606, were considered as decrees issued by the king.. The Church and the State encouraged widow re-marriage. The Second and the Third Provincial Council (1575 and 1585 respectively) not only denounced Sati but also issued a decree permitting young widows to re-marry if they wished to do so. In 1844, Governor Ferreira Pescanha issued an order to abolish Sati in the new conquests..The Provincial

Council also passed a decree to stop the exploitation of female slaves by their masters. The Council tried to direct the masters of the slaves to abide by the principles of the Christian doctrine. On 26 January

1559 the king issued an *Alvara* ordering the Portuguese masters not to be brutal to their slaves, both male and female. The fifth Provincial Council of 1606 banned the tonsuring of widows who were not yet fifty years of age, and the *Alvara* of June 1684 allowed the remarriage of widows irrespective of caste to which they belonged to.

The Portuguese state and Church developed several institutions of social assistance which worked to improve the condition of women in Portuguese Goa. The widows, orphans, converts who were abandoned by their relatives and female slaves who were ill-treated by their masters were taken care of by these institutions. Although these institutions were discriminatory in accepting members, in rendering assistance they transgressed the boundaries of religion, race, colour and sex.

Education for women in Portuguese Goa

The Portuguese era witnessed a change in attitude towards educating the girl child. Although formal education was still not available to girls in the first two centuries of Portuguese rule, women married to Portuguese men were taught Portuguese and Latin. Converted women went to church and attended Catechism classes. Hindu girls received religious education at home. Girls were taught needle work, knitting and embroidery. It was only in 1846, that the first Primary School for girls was established at Nova Goa. Later, primary schools were opened at Margao and Mapusa. In the 1880's, co-ed schools were started in Goa. Students were taught how to read and write. Unfortunately, the number of girls taking advantage of the facility provided to them was very low. The *Colegio de Nossa Senhora de Piedade* was started in 1887 and was the first college to impart education to girls. Its curriculum included History, Geography, Grammar and Arithmetics.

Thus, we see that the coming of the Portuguese in a male dominated Goan society brought about a considerable change in the status of women. A converted Christian woman led a better life compared to her Hindu counterpart. Hindu women still suffered from the inequalities and injustices of the Pre Portuguese era. The ones who did not convert to Christianity also suffered from religious persecution by the Portuguese.

Women in Goa after liberation

19th December 1961 is a day etched in the pages of Goan history. It was the day when the four and a half century long Portuguese rule in Goa was brought to an end and the Indian flag fluttered proudly over the Goan land. By the passing of the Indian parliament's 12th Amendment Act in 1962, Goa, Daman and Diu was integrated into the Indian Union and included into the first schedule as union territory. On 31st May 1987, Goa got Statehood and was made the 25th state of the Indian Union.

It has been 54 years since liberation and Goa has come a long way since then. Goa has made tremendous advancements in the fields of infrastructure, health and education. Ranked as the best placed state by the Eleventh Finance Commission in terms of infrastructure facilities, Goa is also ranked first among all states by the National Commission on Population with reference to 12 indicators on quality of life.

Just like other indicators the status and condition of women in Goa is much better than the average Indian. Education being an important vehicle for change, has played a major role in bringing about development and improvement in the lifestyle of Goan women. Female literacy rate in Goa is 76% as compared to the all India female literacy rate which stands at about 54%. Female literacy rates are higher than that of Goa only in the states of Kerala and Mizoram. The life expectancy for women in Goa is comparatively higher at 72 as against 62 for the rest of India. Around 90% of all births take place under medical supervision and as a result the maternal mortality rate in Goa is very low. The fertility rate in Goa is at 1.7, where as in the rest of the country it is 3.2.

But however after all that is said and done, there is another side to the coin. There are still a number of areas which require serious attention when it comes to women empowerment in Goa. To begin with, one serious concern is the declining sex ratio (number of female per thousand males) in Goa. The sex ratio in Goa parallels that of the rest of the country with an excess of males. Goa's sex ratio has shown a steady decline since 1971. As per the *Economic survey 2003-04, Directorate of Planning Statistics and Evaluation, Government of Goa*, the number of females for every thousand men was 981 in 1971. This number has come down to 960 in 2001. What is even more disturbing is the fact that the juvenile sex ratio in 2001 was 939 implying that there would be further reduction in the number of adult females. Goa had yet to come out with a plausible explanation for this disturbing trend. Sex selective abortion is believed to be one of the major contributing factors to the declining sex ratio in Goa.

Goa ranks 12th with regard to crime against women according to the National Crimes Record Bureau Report (1995). A report by the *National Family Health Survey* (1998-99) revealed that 18% of Goan women admitted to being physically abused since the age of 15. Many cases of domestic violence go unreported and those which are reported to the police are dealt with callously. There has been an increase in murders and rapes in the state shattering the image of Goa as a safe haven for women. There are sufficient laws to ensure the safety of our women but due to corruption in the system the conviction rates like in the rest of the country for perpetrators of crimes against women are very low.

The last few decades has seen a boom in the tourism industry in Goa. This industry is a significant earner of foreign exchange and a major contributor to the economy of the state. However tourism has had its adverse effects on the socio-cultural fabric of the state. Goan women are marketed just as any other item, thrown into the holiday package to make the Goa holiday experience a little more memorable. Goan women are portrayed as sex objects

ready to be consumed. We often see tourism brochures and magazines showcase Goa where women are scantily clad and in most cases either with a wine glass or a beer bottle in hand. A German magazine, Praline contained a write-up on Goa's carnival in which it said "Carnival in Goa is something very special. The girls here are wild and men crazy...." Women who are easy and with relaxed morals-this is the kind of image that is projected to the thousands of local and international tourists visiting Goa.

Bollywood too has played its part in promoting Goa as "The destination" for the perfect cocktail of wine, women and fun. The original line from the 2011 Bollywood movie *Dum Maro Dum* "Goa is a place where wine is cheap and women even cheaper" sums up the attitude of this industry towards our women. This had created a huge stir in Goa resulting in protest by women's groups. The line had to be edited in the final cut. It is proving to be really difficult for Goan women to break free from this stereotypical image woven around them by Bollywood and the tourism industry

Many women not only from Goa, but from the neighbouring states are trafficked every year to meet the growing demands of the sex tourism industry which is very much real in Goa. Prostitution, escort services and massage parlour are the harsh realities of the sex tourism industry in Goa. Victims of sex trafficking live in adverse physical and psychological health conditions and social disadvantages. A National Human Right Commission report conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences on trafficking of women and children in India 2002-03, revealed that Goa had the highest levels of trafficking of women and children compared to other states in the country.

Thousands of Goan women are employed in the tourism industry, both directly and indirectly. Receptionists, hotel staff, guides, masseurs and small shops are some of the few ways that our women try to make a living. But employment in the tourism sector is seasonal and when they do get employed they get paid peanuts for the service they put in. In such circumstances prostitution becomes acceptable not only for women but for men as well.

The industrial sector is another major employer of women in Goa. Illiteracy and adverse economic conditions push many women into this intensive labour market. In some industrial units women are made to work under horrible condition with low wages and poor work environment ranging from improper safety equipment, handling of dangerous chemicals and not to forget long working hours. Goa desperately needs a labour policy for women, especially one that seeks to adequately protect the health of women

The high standards of living in Goa and the desire to give a better life style to their families has forced many Goan women to leave Goa in search of jobs. The most common place of interest in these cases are the gulf countries. These women find work in the form of domestic help, beauticians and nannies. Unfortunately many of our women in these foreign countries are subjected to harsh treatment by their masters often reducing them to the level of captives slaves, with meagre salaries and in many cases sexually and physically abused. At one point of time the number of women escaping the clutches of their master and getting

straded at the Indian Embassy was so great that the state government domestic workers from goin to the gulf. This move however did solve the economic reasons that were forcing these women to leave Goa in the first place

The population of Goa also includes the descendants of several ancient tribes. These ethnic tribal groups form an intrinsic part of Goan culture. Their lifestyle is based firmly on ancient practices, beliefs, customs and routin. Inspite of being aware of the modern developments in their surroundings, these tribal groups still prefer to stay connected to their roots. The four main tribes of Goa are the *Gowdas*, *Kunbis*, *Dhangars* and *Velips*.

The *Gawda*, *Kunbi* and *Velip* are found in all the talukas of Goa with concentration in Quepem and Canacona taluka. The position and role of tribal women in their society vary from tribe to tribe. For instance , among the *Gawdas* property is inherited by the wife after her husband's death. After her death it is distributed equally between sons and unmarried daughters. Women also play a very active role in economic matters .

The dress, folk song and dance of these women adds flavour and colour to Goan culture and tradition .The tribal women are very closely connected with nature. Dances like the *Dhaalo* and the *Kaatiyo* performed only by women at an auspicious place called the *Maand* (mostly in front of the village temple) depicts the abundance of natural wealth that the community is blessed with. Conservation and preservation of nature being the main theme of these performances.

In Goa most of the tribal women especially belonging to the *Gowda* community are engaged in agriculture and related activities. Many of them sell vegetables and other seasonal vegetable and fruits in the nearby district market as well as in the local market. Women prefer employment in informal sector because of the nature of work involved. Women can balance their family life as well as work life especially for the women with smaller kids. .

Tribal women are mostly involved in the collection of forest produce but also work as labourers in industries, households and as construction workers. In tribal societies, women were more important as they worked harder and the family economy depended on them .Tribal women play an important role in management of their resources and agricultural development. However these women still remain backward due to illiteracy, superstitions and social evils. Suggestions to improve the conditions of tribal women include diversification of agriculture to create job opportunities and to form tribal women's cooperative, taking up sericulture, dairy, fisheries, handicrafts and horticulture. It is also important to impart practical knowledge and training in modern techniques to all tribal women. AparnaMitra's (2007) study on the status of women among scheduled tribes showed that tribal women have a higher worker participation rate than non tribal women. This may be because the tribal population fares worse economically than the mainstream Hindu population and so the tribal women need to actively participate to in economic activities.

Conclusion

So we see that the journey of women in Goa has not been a very smooth one. It has been a journey with its highs and lows. As compared with the past women in modern society have achieved a lot but in reality there is still a long way to go. The struggle for gender equality is full of obstacle. Changing the mentality of society towards women as being the inferior sex is the most difficult part, a mentality which has been shaped by our culture for centuries together.

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