

# Women Empowerment: Identity of Women in Ancient India and Modern Indian Globalized Society

**Dr. Vandana Singh**

Assistant Professor (English), P.G Dept. of English, Maharaja College, Ara, Bihar, India

## Abstract

India's history and culture have earned itself a unique place on the global orb. In the world's top ten, our nation excels in terms of culture, politics, economy, military might, and other areas. Even if there were attempts to ameliorate these circumstances in the nation following independence, these measures have been more intense recently. Given that women comprise 50% of the population, they should be given ample deliberation. Consequently, to empower the human resources of the society, efforts are being initiated to strengthen, empower, and develop their innate qualities. Dr. Ambedkar had once stated that understanding a society's women's status is crucial to understanding its advancement. Just how robust can a civilization get? The idea of women's empowerment has gained traction in recent years and is now a hotly debated subject in today's culture. Women have historically been disadvantaged and mistreated in countries like India, thus empowering them is now essential to societal advancement. Globalization has brought about a paradigm shift in the Indian women's identity, presenting them with new opportunities as well as challenges in the contemporary world. Women in ancient India had a distinct identity that was moulded by cultural customs, religious beliefs, and social conventions. The purpose of this paper is to examine women's identities in Ancient India and Globalised Modern Indian scenario, with emphatic emphasis on their rights, roles, and difficulties. Patriarchal core value is the persistent perception of women as second-class citizens.

**Keywords:** Historical milieu, Patriarchy, Socio-Economics stratum, Cultural binary, Women empowerment, Vedic culture, Education, Grassroots Barriers

## Introduction

Globalization, however, has opened up new avenues for women to transcend these cultural constraints and recast their identities. In terms of women's standing, ancient India and modern India are two quite different societies. It is crucial to look at the various facets of women's lives, including their positions in society, educational attainment, marriage, and legal rights, in order to compare and contrast the status of women during these two eras. The primary responsibilities of women in ancient India were to be brides and mothers. Women were supposed to be subservient, obedient, and responsible for taking care of the home. They were supposed to put their husband's wants and welfare ahead of their own goals and aspirations. Modern India, on the other hand, has come a long way toward achieving gender equality, with women today having greater freedom and chances to pursue vocations and education. Though societal

expectations have changed and women are now encouraged to be independent and self-reliant, conventional gender roles still exist.

### **Objective of the Study**

In contrast to the West, where women had to fight for more than a century to obtain some of their fundamental rights, like the right to vote, the Indian Constitution has always guaranteed equal rights to men and women. In the modern Indian civilization, women either maintain or lose their status from the ancient and medieval eras in terms of equality, education, marriage and family life, caste and gender, religion, and culture. This paper also aims to shed light on the various problems that women have encountered and discuss their roles in these situations. Based on the findings, we will be able to envision how important women were in ancient society, religion, and household and economic life.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on a research study that was carried out through a structured review of various government documents available in archives and several libraries. Over the past few decades, women's empowerment has been a topic of intense debate and thought on a global scale. Data regarding such were accessed from government offices. Additionally, this agenda item has been at the top of the lists of the majority of government plans and programmes. Every country has regularly undertaken efforts to address this problem and improve women's socioeconomic standing. Still, it has been noted that the majority of laws and initiatives only consider empowerment from an economic perspective, meaning that conviction that women are empowered by economic independence while ignoring other factors like health, learning, reading, etc. Grey Literature was also used. Methodized structure was put into implementation to identify and search for exact data to be followed and evaluated. Literature that was needed for the research via electronic database and manuals were accessed. The following search engines were used Google Scholar journals, prescribed books, and magazines.

The following keywords were used for the initial search: Women Empowerment, Gender Disparity, Marginalisation. Government Schemes

### **Exclusion Criteria formulated for collection of primary resources:**

- Irrelevant to Research data not prioritized
- Literature & Data that were irrelevant were not included
- Study focus was women empowerment in ancient & contemporary India so basic literature was used.
- Comparative literature was used for identifying the disparity level in different states and global counterfeit
- Interaction with local women and families for opinion survey
- Questionnaire prepared with relevant question regarding Government schemes benefits

### **Historical and Cultural Milieux**

It is crucial to acknowledge the historical background in order to comprehend the current identities of women in India. For generations, Indian society has been deeply patriarchal, with women being relegated to subservient roles and having little possibilities to pursue higher education and financial independence. Women were supposed to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, follow social standards, and acquiesce to their families. The process of granting women equal rights, opportunities, and

access to resources and authority is known as women's empowerment. Women's issues have long been a source of concern in India. But both in ancient and modern times, tremendous strides have been achieved in the direction of women's empowerment over time. The journey of women empowerment in India will be examined in this paper with an emphasis on both historical and modern context.

### **Ancient era**

India has a long history that includes numerous examples of women's emancipation, dating back to prehistoric times. Between 1500 and 500 BCE, the Vedic era is seen as a time of relative gender equality. Some of the oldest known writings, the Rigveda, includes hymns written by women sages. Girls' education was not disregarded. The Rig-Veda chronicles achievements of erudite women who authored mantras and became Rishis, including Maitreyi, Gargi, Lopamudra, Sakata Viswavara, Apala, and Ghosa. These ladies become well-known for their scholarly contributions to spirituality and philosophy. When the girls reached puberty, they got married. In the society, "Swayamvara" was also widely practiced.

Under Emperor Ashoka, the Mauryan empire (322-184 BCE) saw a number of changes aimed at improving the status of women. The wellbeing of women was mandated by Ashoka's rock edicts, which forbid child marriage and promote more job and education options for women. His spouse, Rani Asandhimitra, was a major force in the propagation of Buddhism and the advancement of women's rights. Later on, his daughter Sanghmitra and her brother spread the Buddhist doctrine in far off land of Sri Lanka and other nations. The Gupta era (320–550 CE) saw tremendous progress made by women in a number of areas. Academics who actively participated in philosophical discussions and challenged the authority of male intellectuals included Gargi and Maitreyi. Women were involved in the arts as well, and they expressed their creativity through dance, singing, and writing. Even with these examples of empowerment, it's critical to recognize that ancient Indian civilizations were predominantly patriarchal and that customs like child marriage, sati, and the purdah system were common. Women's rights were restricted and they were denied equal chances as a result of these behaviours.

### **Impact of Imperialism on Women empowerment: Positive vs Negative**

The infiltration of colonial rule in India resulted in notable shifts in the position of women. Although the British Raj first served to uphold patriarchal standards, it unintentionally cleared the path for women's liberation. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of Indian women's movements, which were influenced by Western concepts of equality and independence. Women's empowerment was given top priority by the newly established Indian government after independence.

### **Post Independence Efforts of Indian Government**

Women were granted equal rights and legal protections under the Indian Constitution. constitutional clauses that support gender equality, such as those that reserve seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and in educational institutions and public services. In the Lok Sabha, and state legislatures, one-third of the seats are to be reserved for women under the Women's Reservation Bill, which was introduced in 2008. If this measure is passed, it will support women's political empowerment and increase their representation in decision-making bodies. In addition to legislative actions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements have been instrumental in empowering women at the local level. Many women have been successful in achieving financial independence and economic self-sufficiency through self-help groups. S.E.W.A (Self-Employed

Women's Associations) and other organizations have actively supported and fought for the rights of women who labour in the unorganized sector.

It is imperative to recognize that numerous obstacles still exist in modern-day India, even in spite of advancements in women's empowerment. In the nation, discrimination, violence against women, and restricted access to healthcare and education all impede the full realization of women's rights. Given the higher discrepancies that rural and underprivileged groups must contend with, it is critical to address caste, class, and religious intersections that affect gender.



**Source: NFHS Survey-2019-2021**

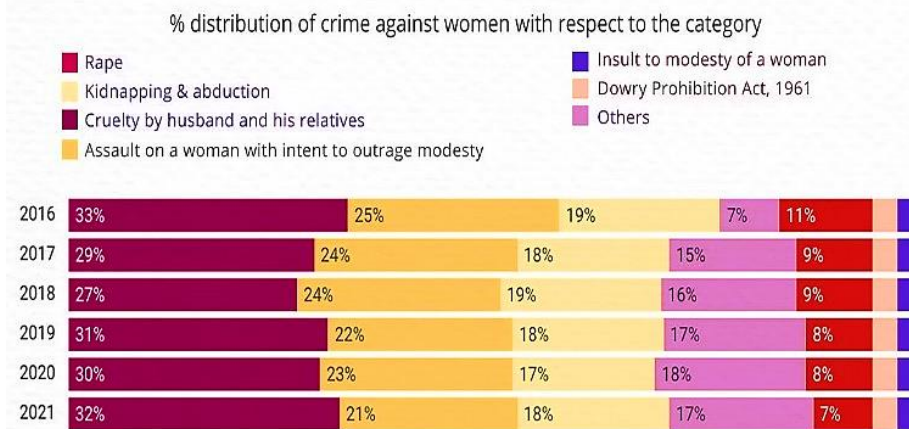
Another important area where women's standing has changed significantly between ancient and modern India is education. Only a limited percentage of girls in the past had access to education, and it was mostly given to members of noble families and higher castes. Women's education was frequently restricted to religious doctrine or domestic skills. In contemporary India, there has been a significant shift in the perception of women's education, with the government striving to ensure that everyone has equal access to education. Women's literacy rates have risen dramatically in recent years, and more females are enrolled in colleges and institutions.

In Indian society, women hold significant roles. Indian women in antiquity enjoy good health and a high social standing. In the modern Indian civilization, women either maintain or lose their status from the ancient and medieval eras in terms of equality, education, marriage and family life, caste and gender, religion, and culture. Marriage has always had a significant impact on how women are viewed. In ancient India, women were supposed to be obedient and devoted to their husbands, and marriage was regarded as a sacred responsibility. Families would frequently arrange marriages with little involvement from the women. But in modern India, women have greater freedom to select their partners. While arranged weddings are still common, love marriages and unions founded on understanding have gained traction in society. Nowadays, women can decline a marriage proposal and participate in the decision-making process.

Women's legal rights and protections have also changed significantly throughout time. Women in ancient India were considered the property of their husbands or fathers and had few legal rights. They were not entitled to inheritance or property. But as time has gone on and social reform movements have gained traction, women's legal rights have improved. Domestic Violence Act was formulated for the

protection of Women. Dowry Prohibition Act, and the recently passed Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act are just a few of the laws and ordinances that safeguard women in modern India. In spite of these developments, modern India nevertheless faces difficulties. Gender-based violence, including female infanticide, dowry deaths, and domestic abuse, continues in spite of legislative protections. In many areas of life, including work and politics as well as inside their own families, discrimination against women persists. It is still challenging for women to achieve full gender equality because of the patriarchal mindset's persistent influence on public views toward them.

### CRUELTY BY HUSBAND AND HIS RELATIVES TOPS LIST OF CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA



Source: MoSPI 'Women & Men in India 2022: NCRB

### Socio-Economic & Cultural status of women in Indian Vedic Culture

When we look back at our Vedic society women were self-sufficient financially. There were female teachers in the workforce. The house served as the work space. Weaving and spinning were done at home to make clothing. Women assisted their husbands in farming as well. Within the religious sphere, women were granted complete rights and frequently engaged in ceremonies alongside their spouses. The husband and wife took part in religious sacrifices and rites together. Women were actively participating in religious conversations as well. Women's status did not significantly improve during the Buddhist era. Ancient Indian literature gives women a significant role. In ancient India, there were a lot of educated women. This research paper examines the sociology of women's standing in India throughout the ages.

Women constituted the majority of the social hierarchy and enjoyed a great standard of living and a high social status in Rig Vedic India, no doubt. Women's identities were also expressed in ancient Indian literature and art and in a variety of other mediums. In temples and shrines, sculptures of female deities like as Devi, Saraswati, and Lakshmi showed women in authoritative roles and with reverence. Ancient epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana are among the literary works that provide a variety of representations of female characters, from brave and bold to virtuous and submissive. In ancient India, women's identities were intricate and varied, influenced by religious convictions, cultural customs, and social conventions. Women's identities were closely linked to their social and familial obligations Their identities were greatly influenced by their families because they were viewed primarily as mothers, wives, and daughters. While ladies were expected to be faithful and committed to their husbands, girls were expected to be submissive and respectful to their parents as daughters. Having sons was highly prized

since it guaranteed the continuation of the family lineage, and motherhood was regarded as the apex of a woman's identity.

Women had certain rights and benefits, but their lives were nevertheless filled with obstacles and limitations. In certain areas, widows were required to self-immolate on their husband's funeral pyre, a rite known as "sati," which severely limited their independence. In addition, customs such as the dowry system and child marriage continued to maintain women's inferior position in society. No doubt the opportunities for advancement and self-improvement were restricted by patriarchal conventions and the need for male progeny. Women did, however, also have certain rights and advantages in addition to these assigned responsibilities. Women were encouraged to advance their intelligence and skill sets and had the right to an education. Texts such as the Rigveda, which mention female sages and intellectuals who pursued intellectual pursuits, provide evidence of this. In addition to taking part in religious rites, women were revered for being the keepers of family customs and traditions. Higher levels of intellectual and spiritual development were open to women as well.

The identity of women in ancient India is important to recognize and contextualise in contemporary India because it puts historical hardships and accomplishments of women into perspective and emphasizes the need of continuing the current movement for women's empowerment. It's crucial to remember, too, that these depictions frequently mirrored idealistic ideas rather than the realities that the majority of women had to face. Social conventions frequently imposed constraints on women's lives, limiting their agency and limiting their ability to create their own identities. The religious rituals and beliefs of ancient India also had a significant impact on women's identities. The prevalent religion at the time, Hinduism, had a significant influence on the expectations and standards that society placed on women. Women were expected to preserve moral and ethical standards, and they were frequently associated with the concept of "purity". As symbols of the feminine divine force, or "Shakti," women were valued for their ability to nurture others. However, women experienced discrimination in the later Vedic era with regard to education and other rights and amenities, after enjoying unlimited and important roles in the Rigvedic society. Indian culture does not think that women are going through a major revolution right now. The voices of women are starting to be heard more often in courts, legislatures, and public forums.

### **Women constitute fifty percent**

India is a country where various civilizations come together. Despite being the focal point of every civilization, women are far from it. According to Simone de Beauvoir, a woman is created, not born. Women have been shaped by society to fit its wants. Man has attempted to dominate her thought process and manner of existence up until this point and still does. All the norms have been determined by the patriarchal society. The society is put on trial whenever the issue of empowerment comes up. The battle to bring about changes in society is ongoing.

### **Patriarchal vs. Matriarchal**

A patriarchal society has governed both India and the rest of the world. Here, it is crucial to clarify that discussing women's empowerment does not entail transforming the patriarchal culture into a matriarchal civilization. The Khasi and Garo & certain other tribes in Northeast India, where women are the majority, embody the idea of a matriarchal society. Kerala in India also follows the Matriarchs. Certain global tribes, such as the matrilineal clan communities in East Pomio, Papua, New Guinea, the Mosuo tribe in China, and the Bribri tribe in Costa Rica, are matriarchal. Only women make key-decisions in this domain on

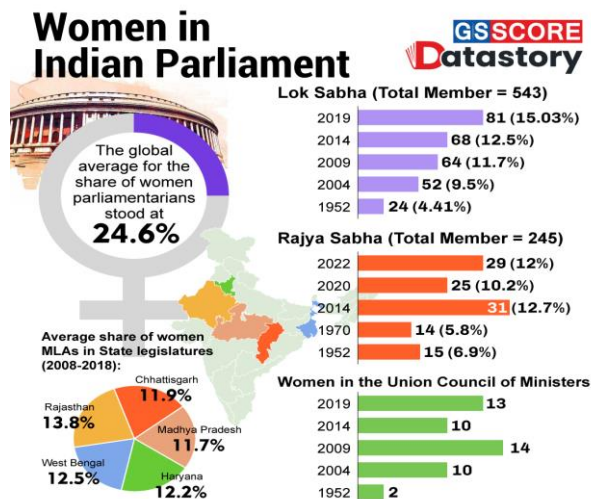
politics, the economy, and social issues. A better social structure will be built and men and women will truly be equally empowered if society is to forge forward robustly and avoid becoming either patriarchal or matriarchal.

**Employment and Education:**

In contemporary India, education is vital in forming a woman's identity. Women now have more access to education, which has given them the knowledge of their rights and the self-assurance to question social conventions. With an education, they can become self-sufficient financially and become less dependent on their spouses or family for support. Furthermore, women now have more options to pursue occupations outside the stereotypical roles that have been allocated to them because to greater educational opportunities. This has given women the confidence to realize their potential and advance the economic development of the nation.

**Representation of Women in Election:**

Political engagement is another facet of empowerment in contemporary India. Women have always had a low representation in politics and decision-making. Globalization has, nevertheless, raised awareness of women's rights and the necessity of their active participation in politics. Women's political representation has expanded as a result of initiatives like the reservation of seats for them in municipal and national legislatures. Women who hold positions of authority can advocate for causes that impact women's lives and have an impact on policy decisions. By doing this, their issues are taken seriously and their voices are heard. As of right now, the Lok Sabha of the nation has 542 MPs in total, of which 78 are women. The Rajya Sabha has 24 MPs. Recently 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha Bill was formulated and passed. But does this empower women? In my perception it does not.



Source: <https://iasscore.in/data-story/data-story-women-in-indian-parliament>

There is now only one female chief minister among 28 states. There has only been one other female president, the one in office right now. The fact that just one woman has been appointed to the position of Prime minister in India indicates that this position is regarded as more realistic than the presidency. The "Women's Reservation Bill," also known as the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, received approval from Indian President Draupadi Murmu on September 28, 2023. The legislation modifies the Indian Constitution to reserve one-third of all seats in the state legislative assemblies, the

Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, and the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's bicameral Parliament, for women. Additionally, the statute mandates that women be granted a third of the seats in these legislative bodies that are designated for the Scheduled Castes. There are CEOs in private sectors like Indira Nooyi and 15 other women CEOs does not qualify for the concept of Indian Women Empowerment.

#### **4. Paradigm Shifts in Culture and Society:**

Globalization has had a profound effect on social and cultural standards in addition to the political and economic domains. Impact of western culture, especially in the media, has put conventional gender norms and prejudices to the test. Today's Indian women have access to a diverse range of ideas and lifestyles, empowering them to make decisions about who they are. They are embracing their uniqueness and escaping the bonds of uniformity. Feminist movements have grown in popularity as a result, with women demanding equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life.

#### **5. Hurdles and Opportunities**

In India, women have benefited much from globalization, but there have also been drawbacks. Globalized economies are fast-paced and sometimes demand women to juggle professional and personal obligations, which increases stress and increases the risk of burnout. They may also be hampered by the urge to become mothers and get married according to social norms. Furthermore, the rising flood of materialism and consumerism has the potential to erode women's true identities and foster false goals.

#### **Effects of the global feminist movement in India**

The late 19th and early 20th centuries represent the initial stage of the women's movement. Its primary goal was to give women equal chances in America's liberal, industrial, and urban environments. It is believed that the second wave began in the 1960s. It acknowledged that disparities in law and reality were closely related and needed to be addressed. The 1990s mark the beginning of the third wave. This resulted from the response to the second wave. This called into question the second wave's notion of femininity. Globally, feminism was viewed and formed in a similar way. Simultaneously, significant attempts were being made in India to improve the socio-economic conditions of women. It was brought up to declare opposition to the Sati and Devdasi systems, among others. A significant amount of work was done by individuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and few others like Jyotiba, Savitri Phule to remove the issues that women faced in the society of the time and create an environment that was supportive of them, and empower them.

The second wave of women's movements in India, aimed at empowering women, is said to have begun in 1915, coinciding with Gandhi's arrival in the country. During this time, women were actively involved in the call. The Indian Women's Association was founded around this same time period in 1917. There are various facets of women's empowerment in different fields today, yet there are equally as many problems.

#### **Women Empowerment Reality Check: Expectations and Barriers**

March 8th is observed globally as International Women's Day, According to Harishankar Parsai days are celebrated for the weak, not for the strong. Being strong entails more than merely walking shoulder to shoulder with guys or leaving the house to perform a task. Here, empowerment is defined as



having the capacity to make decisions, whether independently or in dependence on another person. Patriarchy remains the fundamental social structure of our civilization. In rural places, the patriarchal framework is still very much in place. Khap Panchayats and other similar organizations periodically propose different measures for moral policing with relation to the wearing of women's clothing. There are occasions when religion is relevant in this. The most recent outcome of this is preventing women from accessing places of worship. It is against fundamental rights to prevent people from visiting Sabarimala or other places of worship.

Women have been further exploited by the intersection of religion and caste, customs, and superstition. From the beginning of time till the present, males have had exclusive control over the sphere of politics. On this, women's monopoly was never established. Politics serves to rule and guide society, extending beyond the walls of the family. The economic empowerment of women determines their whole destiny. Dependencies influence our choices on a wide range of topics. Women in the Indian social structure had no economic independence because they were not allowed to work outside the home. They used to rely on their father, brother, husband, or son, among other men in the family, for financial support. These days, the situation is different. Women are now working in all sectors, studying, and leaving their homes. Both the public and private sectors pay them equally, yet in the former, they frequently and everywhere still have to deal with discrimination.

Girls from rural areas have also begun to attend school in modern India. Even lower caste girls are now attending primary school, which is encouraging, despite the fact that caste-based ideas are still prevalent in rural regions. However, the majority of them are still limited to domestic employment. There is still a gap between the circumstances faced by women in urban and rural communities. Closing the current disparity between women's status and empowerment in the nation is crucial. Women's stature was not always as low as it is now, but they are still working toward improvement. They have led dignified lives from the time of the Vedic era until the present. Since the later Vedic time, women's standing has not suddenly changed. It began with the imposition of countless limitations on women. In the Mughal era, the status of women had degenerated into something pitiful during the middle times. Despite the fact that during the Bhakti movement in Indian history, attitudes towards women improved, women were once again confined to their houses in the face of persistent attacks. The most vulnerable group to abuse in any attack was women. Later on, it became customary practice to retain multiple queens in a harem and position of women changed to become a pleasure object.

The journey of women's empowerment in India has been marked by significant achievements and ongoing challenges. From ancient times, where women like Maitreyi and Ghosha were celebrated intellectuals, to the present where women actively participate in politics, education, and various professions, there has been remarkable progress. Legal reforms, grassroots movements, and changing social attitudes have played pivotal roles in empowering women. Innovative efforts have been reinstated to improve the situation occurred during the contemporary era. By fighting for their rights, women themselves created numerous new chances after putting in a lot of work and organizing movements. Women still have a great deal of untapped potential, but it will only materialize if they maintain their current level of empowerment. There are substantial differences between the position of women in ancient India and modern India. Modern India has made strides toward gender equality, but post Vedic India restricted women to traditional gender roles and restricted their prospects for education and self-determination.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Best strategy to empower women is to make changes to their social interactions and mobility. Central and State governments have been making changes, and policymakers have started schemes that alter how women work, how much control they have over resources, and how they may access them. Women's power over decision-making needs to be drastically overhauled and refurbished for their growth. They should be encouraged to choose careers in their areas of strength and progress. Women's identities have been greatly shaped by globalization, which has given them access to new possibilities and different viewpoints. Still, a long way to go since gender-based inequality and prejudice still exist in several zones of the nation. It is imperative that society keeps up its support for women's empowerment initiatives and makes sure that their goals and rights are upheld.

Women today enjoy more access to education, a wider range of marriage options, and legal safeguards. But obstacles still exist, and there is still more work to be done before there is actual gender equality. The concept of women's identity and empowerment is still a complicated phenomenon in integrated India in spite of contemporaneous development at par with globally developed nations, It is the outcome of several generations of women's battles and victories in the fight for representation, equal rights, and access to education. However, there is still much work to be done. Gender-based discrimination and violence persist, and women from marginalized communities face additional barriers. Achieving lasting gender equality requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses systemic issues, promotes education and awareness, and actively involves men as advocates for change. The goals of promoting women's empowerment must be streamlined and aligned with the values of social justice, inclusivity, and the understanding that women's rights are human rights. India can set the stage for a society that is more empowered and egalitarian by striving toward this objective.

## References:

1. Agarwal, Bina. 2010. Empowering Women Through Self-Help Groups. Pub. Oxford University Press
2. Ambedkar, B.R. 2016. The Position of Women in Ancient India: A Reconsideration. Pub. Dr. Ambedkar Foundation
3. Biswas, Brati and Kaul, Ranjana. Eds. 2016. Women and empowerment in Contemporary India. Pub. Worldview
4. Bose, Sushmita. 2014. Women in India: A Social and Cultural History. Pub. Routledge.
5. Bose, Janaki Agnes Penelope. 1996. The Position of Women in Indian Life. Pub. Asian Educational Services.
6. Chatterjee, Abha Ed. 2012. Women and Empowerment: Approaches and Strategies. Pub. PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd.
7. Gupta, Devendra Kumar. 2019. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day. Pub. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
8. Gupta, Lalita. 2011. Women in Ancient India: The Status and Empowerment. Pub. Aryan Books International
9. Khobragade, Dr. Grishma. 2021. Women Empowerment: Challenges and Strategies. Pub. Booksclinic Publishers
10. Manaktala, Gita. 2005. Empowering Women in Modern India: Challenges and Strategies. Pub.: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
11. Manchanda, Rita. 2008. Women and Empowerment in Modern India Pub. I.B. Tauris

13. Sharma, Kalpana. Ed. 2016. Empowering Women: An Alternative Policy Handbook for India. Pub. Zubaan Books.
14. Pub. Zubaan Books.
15. Smith, Rebecca. 2019. Women and Power in Ancient India: From Earliest Times to the Rise of Gupta Dynasty. Pub. Bloomsbury Academic
16. Uniyal, Chandra. 2006. Women in Ancient India. Pub. Sundeep Prakashan.
17. Warder, Anthony Kennedy. 1988. Women's Voices, Women's Lives: Documents in Early Indian History. Pub. OUP, India

**Online References**

1. Data Story: Women in Indian Parliament. 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2022 accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Nov., 2023
2. <https://iasscore.in/data-story/data-story-women-in-indian-parliament>

**Images:**

1. Google.co.in