

THE ROLE AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN WODEYAR-RULED MYSORE: APPRAISAL OF HISTORICAL RECORDS

A. Ushadevi

Assistant Professor of History
Government First Grade College, H.D. Kote,
Mysore District.

ABSTRACT

The pivotal role of women's empowerment in addressing gender inequality has been prominently demonstrated throughout historical epochs. From ancient civilizations, women have encountered systemic injustices and limited access to equal opportunities, particularly prevalent in developing nations. India, as an emerging economy, has experienced considerable gender disparities, with substantial reforms materializing during the 19th century. Before India's independence, women's rights were extensively suppressed, with detrimental practices such as Sati and the prohibition of widow remarriage perpetuating oppressive traditions. Nevertheless, certain indigenous rulers, notably the Wodeyars of the Mysore Kingdom, made remarkable contributions toward women's empowerment. Multiple legislative measures have been enacted to foster gender equality for women in India.

Keywords: *women empowerment; gender inequality; traditional practices; Sati; widow remarriage prohibition; social reforms*

INTRODUCTION

The global development framework has consistently emphasized women's empowerment, especially in developing countries where diverse welfare policies strive to enhance women's social standing. Despite constituting approximately 50% of the world's population, women frequently experience minimal participation in decision-making processes, property ownership, and political authority. Various organizations and institutions have devoted considerable efforts to promoting gender equality, with Western nations acknowledging the significance of women's equal participation following the Second World War.

India, as a former colonial territory, presented distinctive challenges for women, who were influenced by multiple socio-economic and cultural determinants. Social reforms in 19th-century India represented the initial endeavors to improve women's circumstances through education and enhanced social status. These initiatives encompassed abolishing Sati and child marriage, removing restrictions on widow remarriage, and establishing educational opportunities.

The latter portion of the 19th century witnessed women from middle and upper-class families spearheading the movement for women's rights, challenging the existing disparities in male-

dominated Indian society. The advocacy for women's liberation gained momentum during the independence struggle, with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant, and Jyotirao Phule actively promoting gender equality.

Different regions in India, governed by various authorities under the East India Company, localized the struggle for women's liberation. The Mysore Kingdom, particularly under Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's rule, emerged as a progressive state. Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar implemented comprehensive reforms to provide opportunities for all societal segments, including women. The Hindu Law Amendment Bill of 1934, effective from January 1, 1934, played a crucial role in shaping women's position in Hindu society within the Mysore state.

Prior to Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's reign, Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar issued an ordinance in 1892 prohibiting the Devadasi System and Gejje Puja System, considering them immoral practices and social stigmas for lower-caste women. In 1910, legislation was enacted to prevent the practice of Gejepooje, with violations subject to legal punishment. The Muzarai proceedings of June 29, 1910, specifically directed the discontinuation of "Gejje Puja" or similar ceremonies by dancing girls within Muzarai temple premises. Additionally, in 1911, the Prevention of Juvenile Smoking Act was introduced to protect adolescents from smoking habits.

Queen Kemparajammani, as a widow, skillfully governed the State during Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's minority, demonstrating her exceptional administrative capabilities. Before Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's reign, societal norms and customs prevented women from pursuing education, with only Rajamatas as exceptions. Krishnaraja Wodeyar's perspectives on women's roles evolved during his international travels; his 1901 visit to Burma exposed him to women's active participation in trade and commerce, creating a lasting impression.

Similarly, during his 1916 visit to Baroda, Krishnaraja Wodeyar, serving as Chief Guest, presented awards to female teachers, inspiring transformative changes. Motivated by this experience, he expressed his intention to establish a women's teacher training college. This vision materialized with the establishment of Maharani's Women's College in Mysore during Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's era, marking a significant advancement in promoting education for female students within the Mysore Samastana.

Beyond promoting women's education, various social reforms were introduced to eliminate harmful practices prevalent in society, ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment. Among the targeted detrimental customs were the Devadasi system, Basavapadati, and Gejje Pooje.

To address these issues, a state-level committee was established to investigate and evaluate anti-prostitution laws in major cities including Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. The Committee was tasked with submitting a comprehensive report to serve as the foundation for formulating new legislation. Consequently, Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar enacted the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of women's status during the Wodeyar era has attracted scholarly attention from various historians and researchers. Altekar (2010) provides a comprehensive analysis of women's position in Hindu civilization, offering valuable insights into the historical context of women's roles in Indian society. His work establishes a foundational understanding of traditional Hindu practices and their impact on women's social standing.

Desai and Thakkar (2001) examine women's position in Indian society from a sociological perspective, highlighting the evolution of women's roles across different historical periods. Their research contributes to understanding the broader social context within which the Wodeyar reforms took place.

Sheik Ali B. (2014) specifically focuses on the enlightened rule of Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, providing detailed insights into the progressive policies implemented during his reign. This work is particularly relevant as it directly addresses the administrative and social reforms that impacted women's status in the Mysore Kingdom.

Puttaswamaiah (1980) offers an economic perspective on Karnataka's development, examining the continuity and change in economic structures. This analysis provides valuable context for understanding the economic dimensions of women's empowerment during the Wodeyar era.

The British Library's photographic archives (2008) provide visual documentation of the Wodeyar family, offering insights into the royal family's composition and the prominent role of women within the ruling dynasty. These primary sources contribute to understanding the visibility and status of women in the royal household.

Contemporary newspaper accounts, including reports from The Morning Tribune (1940) and The Times (1902), provide valuable contemporary perspectives on the Wodeyar rulers and their policies. These sources offer insights into how women's issues were perceived and reported during that period.

Jois (2004) examines the legal and constitutional history of India, providing comprehensive coverage of ancient legal, judicial, and constitutional systems. This work offers crucial context for understanding the legal framework within which women's rights were defined and reformed during the Wodeyar era.

Gandhi's writings in Navajivan (1925) reflect the broader national discourse on social reform and women's empowerment, providing context for understanding how the Wodeyar reforms aligned with or differed from national movements for women's rights.

Recent scholarship by Kumar (2015) examines the intersection of gender and governance in princely states, while Rao (2016) provides a comparative analysis of women's education policies

across different Indian kingdoms. These contemporary studies offer fresh perspectives on the Wodeyar era's significance in the broader context of women's empowerment in colonial India.

Sharma (2017) specifically analyzes the legislative reforms related to women's property rights in South Indian kingdoms, providing detailed examination of the legal changes implemented during the Wodeyar period. This recent scholarship contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the legal dimensions of women's empowerment.

OBJECTIVES

1. **Understanding Social Roles:** Explore and analyze the social roles assigned to women during the Wodeyar era, investigating expectations placed on women regarding family, community, and societal responsibilities.
2. **Legal and Political Status:** Examine the legal and political rights of women during the Wodeyar era, investigating legal frameworks that either restricted or protected women's rights, and assess their participation in political and administrative spheres.
3. **Economic Contributions:** Explore the economic roles played by women during the Wodeyar era, investigating their participation in agriculture, trade, and other economic activities, while analyzing the impact of societal norms on their economic contributions.
4. **Educational Opportunities:** Investigate educational opportunities available to women during the Wodeyar era, exploring whether educational institutions specifically for women existed and assessing overall literacy rates among women during that period.
5. **Religious and Cultural Influence:** Examine the influence of religious and cultural beliefs on women's status, analyzing how societal norms and religious practices shaped women's lives, including their roles in religious ceremonies and cultural traditions.
6. **Health and Well-being:** Investigate healthcare practices and general well-being of women during the Wodeyar era, assessing the availability of healthcare facilities, maternal care, and the impact of prevalent health beliefs on women's health.
7. **Social Mobility and Empowerment:** Explore instances of social mobility for women and empowerment during the Wodeyar era, analyzing whether women defied societal norms and achieved recognition or positions of influence.
8. **Comparative Analysis:** Compare the status of women during the Wodeyar era with other historical periods or regions, identifying similarities and differences to provide broader context for understanding women's roles and status in history.
9. **Impact of Wodeyar Rule on Women:** Assess the direct and indirect impact of Wodeyar rule on women's status, investigating policies, reforms, or cultural shifts that occurred during this period influencing women's lives.
10. **Legacy and Long-term Effects:** Examine the lasting legacy of the Wodeyar era on women's status, assessing whether changes in societal attitudes, legal frameworks, or cultural norms persisted beyond the Wodeyar period.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Furthermore, efforts were made to eliminate other societal problems, including restrictions on widow marriage, the Sati system, denial of property rights, and the Devadasi practice. A committee was formed to respond to desires expressed by members of the State's representative Assembly. This Committee, endorsed by the king, was established in 1929 under retired justice K.R. Chandrashekar's chairmanship to comprehensively address and recommend solutions to these social issues.

To address prostitution in major cities like Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, a comprehensive initiative was undertaken. Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar played a pivotal role by commissioning a report to formulate appropriate legislation, resulting in the enactment of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act.

The Committee formulated a legislative proposal to modify existing Hindu Law, designating it as "A Bill to Amend the Hindu Law Regarding the Rights of Women." This proposed bill encompassed five reforms, each addressing distinct aspects of gender-based rights and legal provisions within the Hindu legal framework.

LEGISLATIVE REFORMS

1. Inheritance Reform

The first reform within the bill pertained to inheritance. The Committee proposed amendments to existing property inheritance provisions, intending to foster more equitable asset distribution among heirs, irrespective of gender.

2. Separate Property Adoption

Another significant aspect addressed adoption measures related to separate property. The proposed reforms sought to establish a legal framework facilitating and regulating separate property adoption, ensuring clarity and fairness in individual ownership matters.

3. Women's Full Estate

The third reform focused on augmenting women's rights concerning property ownership. The bill advocated for expanding women's control over property, aiming to confer complete and unmitigated ownership rights, thereby contributing to their economic empowerment.

4. Women's Limited Estate

Simultaneously, the bill recognized the need for a nuanced approach to property rights, introducing provisions for women's limited estate. This reform aimed to balance women's

empowerment with safeguards protecting their interests and preventing potential misuse or property alienation.

5. Maintenance Provisions

The fifth and final reform centered on maintenance rights for women. It sought to enhance and codify provisions ensuring financial support and maintenance for women, particularly in situations such as divorce or separation, to promote economic stability and social justice.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

1. **Gender Disparities in Socioeconomic Opportunities:** Investigate the extent of gender disparities in access to education, employment, and socio-economic opportunities for women during the Wodeyar era.
2. **Legal and Property Rights for Women:** Examine legal frameworks and property rights governing women during the Wodeyar period, exploring limitations and freedoms they experienced.
3. **Cultural and Social Constraints on Women:** Analyze cultural and social norms that influenced women's status, including societal expectations, cultural practices, and their impact on everyday lives.
4. **Political Participation and Empowerment:** Explore the extent to which women were involved in political activities, governance, and decision-making processes during the Wodeyar era.
5. **Impact of Religious and Cultural Changes:** Investigate how religious and cultural shifts during the Wodeyar era affected women's status and roles in society.
6. **Comparison with Contemporary Eras:** Compare women's status in the Wodeyar era with other historical periods or contemporary societies to identify patterns, changes, or continuities.
7. **Sources of Historical Documentation:** Evaluate the availability and reliability of historical sources documenting women's experiences in the Wodeyar era, identifying potential biases or gaps in the historical record.
8. **Influence of Royal Policies on Women:** Assess the impact of royal policies and governance on women's status, considering whether rulers actively influenced gender dynamics during the Wodeyar era.
9. **Resistance and Agency of Women:** Investigate instances of resistance, empowerment, or agency among women during the Wodeyar era, highlighting cases of women who defied societal norms or played pivotal roles.
10. **Long-Term Societal Effects:** Examine the long-term societal effects of the Wodeyar era on women's status and roles, considering whether changes initiated during that period had lasting impacts.

CONCLUSION

Historically, examining women's status in the Wodeyar era reveals a transformative period characterized by progressive reforms that significantly contributed to women's empowerment in the Mysore Kingdom. Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the ruler during this era, was instrumental in dismantling regressive practices and fostering an environment prioritizing gender equality.

The 19th-century social reforms in India established the foundation for challenging discriminatory norms, and the Wodeyars actively embraced this reformist spirit. Notable initiatives included abolishing the Devadasi System and the Gejje Puja System, which were recognized as morally reprehensible practices. The commitment to eradicating harmful practices extended to the Prevention of Juvenile Smoking Act, showcasing a comprehensive approach to societal well-being.

Women in the Mysore Kingdom found a champion in Queen Kemparajammani, who, as a widow, demonstrated exceptional governance skills during Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar's minority. The establishment of Maharani's Women's College reflected a visionary advancement toward promoting women's education, inspired by the ruler's exposure to progressive practices during his international travels.

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, formulated to address prostitution issues, and the comprehensive Hindu Law Amendment Bill of 1934 stand as legislative milestones. The bill's five-fold reforms addressed critical aspects of women's rights, including inheritance, separate property adoption, complete estate ownership, limited estate provisions, and maintenance rights. These reforms aimed to rectify gender-based disparities and ensure economic empowerment and social justice for women.

The Wodeyar era represents a significant chapter in the history of women's empowerment in India, demonstrating how enlightened leadership could effect meaningful social change. The legacy of these reforms continued to influence women's status in the region well beyond the Wodeyar period, contributing to the broader movement for gender equality in India.

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