



## **Explores the Origins and Complexities of the Purdah System**

*Neeraj Kumar Mahawar (Asst. Professor)*

Rajasthan University

---

### **ABSTRACT**

We have so far dealt with the position of women with reference to their family life. Modern readers, however, would be naturally anxious to know what facilities were afforded to women in ancient India to take part in public life and activities. Could they at all come out in public, or were they condemned to a Purda life? If they were allowed to move freely in society, what were the spheres in which they used to take an active part? Were there any careers open to them? If so, which? Could they take any part in the administration of the country? We shall now proceed to discuss these questions.

---

### **DISCUSSION**

Considerable discussion has been going on as to whether the Purda system was prevalent in ancient India or not. There is a divergence of opinion on the point. Some hold that it was quite unknown in the pre - Muslim days. The available evidence on the point is of a dubious nature, and can be manipulated to support either view. It therefore requires a very careful scrutiny. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Purda was unknown down to c. 100 B.C. In Indo - Iranian times women could move quite freely in society and manage the family farms if necessary. The same was the case in the Vedic age. The earliest reference to the Purda system is to be found in the Present version of the epics (c. 100 B.C.). There we see that some Kind of Purda was observed in certain royal families, which felt, Should not probably on account of a notion of prestige. At the time when Sita set out with her husband for the forest through the public thoroughfares of Ayodhyâ, a regret is expressed in the Rama- Yana that a lady, who had so far not been seen even by the spirits of the sky, should now become the object of public gaze. A similar observation occurs in the Mahabharata also at the time of Dhritarashtra's departure to forest.

The Ramayana further observes that there is no objection if women come out in public on the occasions of marriages, svayamvaras, sacrifices and public Calamities. It would appear that all the three passages above referred to are interpolations of a later age, when the Purda system was introduced in a few royal families. For the other data in the epics themselves go against the prevalence of the Purda. Thus, Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra go out to Chitrakuta to induce Rama. To return to Ayodhya, they move in public without any Veil. Sita herself feels no embarrassment of a Purda lady, when she is going out through the streets of Ayodhya. In the forests too, which were infested with demons and enemies, she is moving about without any veil. If she using a veil, her beauty could not have been seen by Surpanakha and reported by her to her Brother Ravana. So the poet's observation that Sita had not been seen even by the spirits of the sky is simply a poetic exaggeration made to heighten the pathos of her banishment to forest life. Draupadi's public appearance in the gambling hall presupposes an entire absence of the Purda. She no doubt shows some reluctance to go there, not because she was observing the Purda, but because she was in the monthly period. Neither Kunti nor Gandhari is seen to be observing it.

It would however appear that soon after the beginning of The Christian era; a section of society began to advocate a greater seclusion for women. This was more particularly the Case in royal families, where the notion began to prevail those royal ladies should not come within the public gaze. In the Svapnavasavadatta, Padmavati does not observe any Purda during her maidenhood, but after her marriage she does not like that her husband should receive the ambassador from Ujjayini in her Presence. The king, however, overrules her objection, pointing out that the elite of the society would feel offended, if the Purda was observed by the queen in their presence.

The Nagananda of Harsha (625 A.D.) also shows that maidens were expected to wear no veil; it was donned only after the marriage. The commentary on the Dhammapada (300 A.D.) shows that ladies were covering their faces when out on travel and that the girls of marriageable age were also segregated and not allowed to be approached by male servants. In the Mahaviracharit of Bhavabhuti (750 A.D.), we find Rama advising Sita to put on a veil, when she was about to approach Parasurama to pay him her respects. Some medieval poets like Magha observe how the beauty of the faces of ladies could be visualized only for a moment, when their veils happened to slip accidentally. It would therefore appear that by about 300 A.D. some royal families were beginning to think it desirable that their ladies should be seen only by the select few; when moving in public they should put on a veil. This view was, however, shared only by a small section of society, perhaps confined to Northern India. It appeared as all together irrational to women in general, who began to oppose it with all their might.

This rational opposition, which the Purda system was receiving from spirited ladies, resulted in the system not becoming Popular for several centuries. It may have been prevailing in a few royal families, but their number was very small. It was probably confined to a few royal houses of northern India.

Sculptures and paintings of the first millennium of the Christian era do not at all disclose any veils over ladies faces. The Sculptures at Sanchi in Central India, for instance, show that the Women of the 2nd century B.C. could see a procession from the Balconies of their houses without covering their faces with veils. The same was the case in the Deccan during the 5th And 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., as may be gathered from several paintings at Ajanta. This is clearly incompatible with the Purda System. Ajanta supplies further and more significant evidence to show that the Purda was altogether unknown in the Deccan at this time. We find queen Mayadevi seated in the open court without any veil, when astrologers are being consulted about the wise minister Vidhurathe implications of her dream.

Pandita delivers his sermons to royal ladies, none of whom cares to veil her face in his presence. Both at Sanchi and Ajanta we come across mixed throngs of men and women moving together. In streets and participating in worship at public temples women are, however, not to be seen wearing any veils. To show a veil round the face may be rather difficult for a sculptor, but not at all for a painter. If therefore we see even married Women moving about in public without any Purda in Ajanta Paintings, the conclusion is irresistible that it was hardly much in vogue even in the higher and fashionable sections of society. The evidence of sculptures and paintings is corroborated by the data of Dharmaustra and classical Sanskrit literature. Several Smritis like those of Manu and Yajnavalkya lay down detailed rules about the life of women, but they nowhere lay down that women were not to go out except when properly veiled. In most of the Sanskrit dramas, we do not find any traces of the Purda system. The plots of the Sakuntala and the Malati-Madhava, for example, would not have been possible in a Purda ridden society. In the first Act of the Sakuntala the maidens do not cover their faces with veils, even when they see and converse with Dushyanta. In the Malati-Madhava the heroine and her numerous friends go out to the temple without any veil what so ever; the hero is thus able to perceive the maddening beauty of the heroine and falls in love with her. Similarly, in the Kadambari of Bana, neither Mahasveta nor Kadambari, nor any of their numerous friends and attendants observes any Purda. From the Meghaduta we learn that women of Ujjayini used to go to the Sipra for sport in water at the time of bath. This would not have been possible if the Purda were in vogue there. Yuan Chuang has given an intimate picture of the Hindu Society of the 7th century A.D., but he nowhere refers to the Purda system. We learn from him that Rajyasri the widowed sister of Harsha, used to come out without a veil in her brother's Court.

---

### PURDA BY WOMEN IN DIFFICULTIES

Fore clear that the Purda was confined to a very small section of the ruling classes down to the 10th century A.D. Though in Hindu society as a whole there was nothing like the modern Purda system in existence, there were certain restrictions on the movements of women. They could go out to Visit their friends and relations, but decorum required that they should not stay at their houses for the night, or when their business was over. They were to observe a certain amount of reserve in the presence of strangers. They could speak with merchants and doctors and transact the necessary business, but they were to be circumspect while dealing with unknown persons. They could receive male guests, but they were relieved of this duty, if there were male relatives in the family to discharge it. There were here and there some jealous husbands, who would not allow their wives to go out without their permission stop see shows and amusements, but they were exception rather than the rule. Though there was no Purda system, women who felt themselves to be in a rather helpless condition, would often avoid going out in public. Such was the case of widows and maidens without proper guardians, and of married women, whose husbands had gone out on a journey. Thus, in the Svapnavasavadattā of Bhasa, queen Padmavati observes that it was but natural for Tapasi to avoid strangers, because her husband was out on a Journey. If it was necessary for such women to work for their Bread; Kautilya lays down that the Superintendent of the Weaving Department should make arrangements to send cotton to their homes for being spun into thread. They were not required to go to his office, unless they chose to do so.

When they moved out, or had to converse with strangers, they used to put on a veil. When their guardians returned, they used to discard it. To conclude, we find that even in pre - Muslim times there was a section in society from 100 B.C. which advocated the use of the veil for royal ladies for the purpose of increasing their Prestige. There is, however, no evidence to prove that a large section of royal families observed this custom during the Hindu Period. Women of richer classes led a more sheltered life than what would be welcomed by the educated ladies today. This is shown by the 'inner apartment' and averred Place without accesses used to denote the harem in the palace. Strangers were not expected to enter it. Women themselves would often retire into seclusion, when they found that therewith their return; Natural guardians were not with them. They would again begin to move out as usual, of course with due Regard to decorum and propriety.

Daughter - in - law to pay her respects to elderly relations by bowing at their feet. There is nothing whatsoever in our tradition or literature to suggest that the father - in - law or the elder brother- in - law could not see the face of a daughter -in-law or a younger sister -in-law, as is the case now under the Purda system in northern India the general adoption of the Purda system by the ruling and Aristocratic families of Hindu community is subsequent to the Advent of the Muslim rule. It was accepted by Hindu society partly in imitation of the manners of the conquerors, and partly as an additional protection for the women folk. In the Muslim Ruling families, the Purda was so strict that a message had to pass through three intermediaries before it could reach the in the zenana. The Hindu Chiefs and nobles desired person followed the example of their overlords in their own harems. This happened almost universally in northern India, where the Muslim rule and culture were in ascendancy for a long time. In the Deccan, the Muslim influence was Superficial, and so the Purda system got no footing in the Hindu Society there. It was, however, introduced in their families by The Maratha rulers with a desire to render themselves as respect table as the Muslim kings whom they had supplanted. There were some further causes to facilitate the general adoption of the custom at about 1200 A.D. As a rule, Hindu women at this time were illiterate and inexperienced. The times were unsettled, there was a general feeling of insecurity and Hindu life and honour did not count for much in the eyes of the conquerors. The Purda afforded some additional protection to beautiful Women while out on journey from the covetous eyes of an unscrupulous soldiery.

The Purda system became quite common among rich Hindu Families of Bengal, Bihar and U. P. in the 15th and the 16th centuries. Both Vidyapati and Chaitanya refer to it. When the wives of Raja Rudra Pratap Singh of Puri came to see Chaitanya, they travelled in covered litters. In Rajputana the custom

became universal in the ruling families. It was regarded as an essential insignia of respectability and high breeding. As a consequence, down to the present century, persons who had risen in wealth and importance were anxious to introduce Purda in their family in order to command respectability. Women of the peasant and working classes could of course not afford to remain in seclusion; they had to move out for their daily work. They used to move the lapel of their saris slightly over their faces when a stranger passed by them. The above survey of the history of the Purda system would show that it was confined to small sections of Hindu society down to the beginning of the 11th century A. D. In most strata of the community, there was no seclusion of women and they could take a fair part in the social life around them. They could Move about with a fair degree of freedom in the earlier period. They could visit temples and monasteries to listen to religious discourses. They could go to see shows in the company of their friends and lovers. These visits afforded convenient opportunities to young people, anxious to settle in matrimony. In Urban areas women could go out to public parks for sport and recreation. A fifth century inscription describes the parks of the City of Mandsore in Central India as full of young ladies singing gleefully. In the Ramayana we are told that when peace and Order prevail in society, maidens go out in the evening to gardens for play and recreation. Ladies in high families could even take part in dramas that were to be shown to a limited Audience.

---

## CONCLUSION

The above survey of the Purda system shows that the seclusion of woman was quite common in most of the eastern and western civilizations down to quite recent times. In recent years, however, the Purda custom has begun to beat a precipitate retreat. Social reformers and medical practitioners have been long pointing out its evil consequences. The education, which women have now begun to receive in larger and larger numbers, is proving fatal to the custom. Strange though it may appeal at first sight, the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements have helped a good deal in the annihilation of the Purda. They inspired many Purda ladies to come out in the public to take part in the political movement, and their example had a Magnetic influence. It may be confidently prophesied that in a Generation the Purda custom would be completely banished from Hindu society.

---

## REFERENCES

- Hauwa'u Evelyn Yusuf, (2014), American International Journal of Contemporary Research, 4 (1), 238-245.
- Riffat Haque, (2015), Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies, 47-71.
- Sachida Nand Mishra, (2013), Golden Research Thoughts, 3(3), 1-7.
- Annette Gomis, (2002), Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses, 45, 101-119.
- Adisa James, Muhammed Amina, Egbujo Ejike, Adeniyi David and Yahaya Isah, (2014), International Research Journal of Biological Sciences, 3 (7), 49-53.