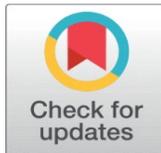


FROM PURDAH TO PARTICIPATION: CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S PRACTICES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The role and status of women in Indian society have undergone significant transformation from the Mughal period to contemporary India. Practices such as purdah, child marriage, and restrictions on education once defined women's position, limiting their agency. Purdah Pratha is a traditional practice followed in many parts of India, where women were expected to cover their faces and stay out of public view, especially in front of men who were not part of their family. This practice was common in both Hindu and Muslim communities and symbolized control over women's mobility, freedom, and participation in society. Over time, many changes have taken place in Indian society. Education, social reform movements, laws for women's rights, and growing awareness have helped break the barriers of purdah. Women have started stepping out of traditional roles and are now seen in schools, offices, politics, and leadership positions. This paper looks at how women's lives in India have changed from the time of Purdah Pratha to today. It discusses the struggles, the progress made, and the work still needed to ensure gender equality. The paper shows that while women have come a long way, continuous support and efforts are necessary for true empowerment and equal participation.

Keywords: Purdah, Women's Practices, Mughal India, Social Reform, Gender Roles, Participation

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of *purdah*, meaning "screen" or "veil," has played a significant role in shaping the gender norms and social practices concerning women in India. Though commonly associated with Muslim communities, *purdah* has been practiced among various Hindu groups as well, particularly in North India. It refers not only to the act of covering the body and face with concealing garments but also to the physical and social seclusion of women from public life. Within the household, this separation was often maintained through the use of curtains or inner quarters, ensuring minimal interaction between women and the outside world.

Historically, the roots of the *purdah* system are traced back to Persia. During the 7th century AD, it was adopted by Islamic societies and later introduced to India through the Muslim invasions, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule. However, evidence suggests that *purdah* began spreading in India even before the Mughal period. The Rajputs, among other elite Hindu groups, adopted similar practices, influenced by both the invading Muslim rulers and the social need to preserve honor during times of war and defeat. The story of Queen Padmavati reflects how deeply these ideas were embedded in cultural memory.

In Mughal India, practices like *purdah* (seclusion), polygamy, and restrictions on property rights reflected a patriarchal framework. Yet, elite women such as Nur Jahan played important roles in administration and culture. With

the advent of colonial modernity and subsequent reform movements, the rigid boundaries around women's lives began to be questioned. The trajectory from purdah to participation illustrates the resilience and agency of Indian women in negotiating their identities.

Over time, *purdah* came to be seen as a symbol of status and respectability, especially among upper and middle-class women who could afford not to work outside the home. The imitation of royal customs by ordinary citizens further strengthened its presence in Indian society. This paper explores how *purdah*, once a mark of social prestige and female modesty, gradually gave way to greater public participation by women, and how this transformation reflects broader shifts in Indian society regarding gender roles, identity, and empowerment.

2. WOMEN IN THE MUGHAL ERA

Women in the Mughal Era: Condition of Purdah

The Mughal era (1526–1857) was a significant period in Indian history, marked by cultural richness, political power, and a complex social structure. While the empire brought advancements in art, architecture, and administration, it also reinforced patriarchal norms that impacted the lives of women—especially elite women—through the widespread practice of *purdah*.

The *purdah* system during the Mughal era referred to the physical and social seclusion of women from public life. It involved both the veiling of women when they stepped outside the home and the creation of separate spaces within the household, such as the *zenana* (women's quarters), where they lived in seclusion. This practice was particularly common among royal and noble families, where maintaining family honor and status was deeply tied to the control and modesty of women.

The origins of *purdah* are older than the Mughal Empire itself. It was practiced in Persia and other Islamic societies, and entered India with the early Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate. However, the Mughal period further strengthened the institution of *purdah*, especially among the elite. Women from royal households rarely appeared in public, and if they did, they were heavily veiled and often traveled in curtained palanquins. Their lives were confined to the inner chambers of the palace, where they had limited interaction with men outside the family.

This isolation was not merely social but symbolic—it reinforced ideas of female modesty, honor (*izzat*), and obedience. Royal women, such as queens and princesses, had access to wealth, education, and influence, but always within the boundaries set by patriarchal norms. While some Mughal women like Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, and Zeb-un-Nissa managed to gain political and cultural influence despite the restrictions, they remained exceptions rather than the rule.

Purdah also spread beyond Muslim households into Hindu upper-class families, particularly among Rajputs and other elite groups. This cultural borrowing was driven by both the influence of the ruling class and the fear of violence or dishonor during invasions. The practice soon became a symbol of high status and was imitated by those seeking social prestige.

However, the experience of *purdah* was not uniform. Class played a major role in determining how strictly the practice was followed. Upper and middle-class women were more likely to observe full *purdah*, as they did not need to work for a living and could afford to remain in seclusion. In contrast, poor women, especially in rural areas, often had to work outside the home and could not fully follow the system. Thus, the idea of *purdah* as a symbol of honor and respectability was also tied to privilege and economic status.

While *purdah* isolated women physically, it did not entirely erase their influence. Within the *zenana*, women managed domestic affairs, arranged marriages, and even took part in diplomatic negotiations. Some royal women commissioned buildings, patronized poets, and participated in charitable activities. Yet, their visibility and voice in the public sphere remained limited.

The *purdah* system during the Mughal era, therefore, was a complex institution. On one hand, it protected elite women from public exposure and gave them a secure, if confined, life. On the other hand, it restricted their freedom, education, and social participation. It symbolized a broader system of gender hierarchy that placed men in control of power and women in roles of silence and modesty. The condition of women under *purdah* in the Mughal period reflects the deeply rooted patriarchy of the time. Although some women navigated their way to positions of influence, the system

as a whole reinforced the idea that women should remain hidden, modest, and dependent. The long-lasting impact of *purdah* would continue to shape gender roles in India for centuries to come.

3. PURDAH DURING BRITISH RULE

During British rule in India (1757–1947), *Purdah Pratha* remained a widespread social practice, especially among upper-class Hindu and Muslim communities. The tradition of secluding women—either by physical barriers like curtains or by veiling—continued to be a symbol of social status, honor, and modesty. The British administration, while not directly interfering with cultural or religious customs, largely viewed *purdah* as a backward and oppressive tradition. Colonial writings and reformist discourses often portrayed Indian women as victims of a rigid and patriarchal society, using *purdah* as a key example of their subjugation. However, British policies did not actively attempt to abolish the practice, as the colonial rulers generally followed a policy of non-interference in the personal laws and customs of Indian communities.

At the same time, the 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of Indian social reform movements, many of which began to question and challenge the practice of *purdah*. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and later, nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women's education and participation in public life. Women from progressive and educated families slowly began to step out of seclusion, especially in urban centers. Access to English education, print media, and nationalist movements created new spaces for women's voices. Still, *purdah* continued to be strictly observed in many conservative households, particularly in North India. Thus, during British rule, *Purdah Pratha* existed in a period of transition—caught between tradition and reform, between colonial perceptions and emerging Indian feminist voices. This era laid the foundation for the gradual decline of *purdah* in the decades following independence.

4. THE ANTI-PURDAH MOVEMENT IN INDIA: A STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S FREEDOM

The *Purdah* system, which refers to the social and physical seclusion of women, had been deeply rooted in Indian society for centuries. It was practiced among both Hindus and Muslims, especially in North India and among upper-class families. The practice required women to cover themselves from head to toe and avoid public spaces, limiting their freedom, education, and participation in public life. However, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several social, political, and cultural changes led to the weakening and eventual decline of the *Purdah* system. This movement against *Purdah* was slow but powerful, supported by education, nationalism, reformers, and brave individuals who stood up for change.

5. FACTORS THAT CHALLENGED THE PURDAH SYSTEM

Several developments during British rule in India contributed to weakening the hold of *Purdah*. One of the most important factors was the **spread of women's education**. As more girls began attending schools and later colleges, the idea that women should remain hidden behind veils and within the home started to lose strength. Co-education and the entry of women into professions like teaching and medicine encouraged families to question the need for *Purdah*.

Another key influence was the **contact with Western ideas**, such as democracy, equality, and women's rights. These ideas came to India through books, newspapers, and educated Indians who had studied abroad or interacted with British officials. Transport improvements like railways and buses also helped women travel more easily, exposing them to public life and reducing their isolation.

The **increase in the age of marriage** was also important. With the delay in early marriages, girls had more time to study and grow independently, which slowly changed how society viewed them. The **grant of voting rights to women**, the growth of **women's organisations**, and **participation in the nationalist movement** also helped women to break free from *Purdah*.

Above all, the **leadership and influence of Mahatma Gandhi** played a major role. Gandhi not only spoke against *Purdah* but also encouraged women to join the freedom movement and public life. His ashrams did not practice *Purdah*, and men and women lived, worked, and ate together without barriers. By the end of the 19th century, social reformers had begun to speak openly against the *Purdah* system. One powerful voice was that of **Shri G. Subramania**, editor of *The Hindu*, who remarked:

“To say that Purdah is necessary to protect the moral purity of women within the four walls of the home is as absurd in theory as it is a gross libel on Hindu women.”

This statement reflected the changing mindset of many educated Indians who believed that *Purdah* was not a guarantee of purity, but rather a system that insulted women's dignity and reduced their opportunities in life. Despite these early criticisms, the *Purdah* system remained strong into the late 19th century. It was only in the **20th century** that serious cracks began to appear in its foundations.

6. NATIONAL MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The **Swadeshi Movement** (1905), which started after the Partition of Bengal, was one of the first movements to draw women out of their homes in large numbers. Women began participating in public protests, attending meetings, and boycotting foreign goods. This early involvement created the foundation for greater female participation in later national movements.

Women also took part in the **Home Rule Movement (1914–1918)**, led by **Mrs. Annie Besant** and **Bal Gangadhar Tilak**. They protested when Annie Besant was interned by the British government in 1917. These protests showed that women were ready to speak up in public and take risks for the country's freedom.

The **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)** and the **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1932)**, both led by Mahatma Gandhi, created major opportunities for women to come forward. Gandhi believed that women had an important role in the fight for independence, and he encouraged them to step out of *Purdah* and take part in marches, picketing, and community service.

During these movements, **many women—young and old, married and unmarried, from all communities—gave up the veil** and joined public life. This was a huge shift in Indian society, where women had traditionally been kept away from politics and public events. Despite growing support for ending *Purdah*, the system still had strong defenders, especially among conservative sections of society. Even among **women's organisations**, the demand to abolish *Purdah* was not as widely accepted as other reforms, such as ending **child marriage**.

By **1929**, nearly all women's conferences had passed resolutions demanding an end to child marriage. However, only **eight** of these conferences passed resolutions against the *Purdah* system. Many women were still afraid of social backlash, and cultural norms remained powerful.

In some Muslim gatherings, *Purdah* was still supported. For example, on **21 October 1924**, a large meeting of Muslim women was held in **Bombay**, led by **Begum Nafis Dulhin Saheba**. Although social reforms were discussed, the meeting supported the continuation of *Purdah*. This showed that change was happening, but slowly and with resistance. Bihar was known as a strong supporter of the *Purdah* system. Mahatma Gandhi himself observed that *Purdah* was followed more strictly in Bihar than in other parts of the country. On one visit to **Darbhanga**, he was asked to speak to a group of women hidden behind a screen. Gandhi was saddened by this and later said:

“A woman within the Purdah was not necessarily purer than a woman without it.”

He criticized the system for being unfair, calling it “**vicious, brutal, and barbarous.**” Gandhi also questioned why men were so concerned about women's purity while ignoring their own responsibilities. He believed that women should have equal freedom to grow, learn, and live just like men.

The anti-Purdah movement in Bihar began seriously in **1927**, though there had been earlier attempts, such as during the **Indian National Congress session in Gaya in 1922**. One of the early leaders of this movement was **Shri Ramanandan Mishra**, a khadi worker from Darbhanga. He wanted to free his wife from *Purdah*, but faced opposition from his family members. To get Gandhi's support, he took his wife to the **Sabarmati Ashram**, where Gandhi encouraged him and gave his approval.

With Gandhi's blessing, **Radhabahen**, daughter of Maganlal Gandhi, and **Durgadevi**, daughter of Dalbahadur Gin, accompanied Mishra to Bihar to help with the anti-Purdah campaign. This gave a personal and emotional touch to the movement. When **Maganlal Gandhi** later came to Bihar to see his daughter, he fell ill and passed away in **Patna on 23 April 1923**. His death gave the movement more attention and strengthened the determination of its supporters.

A historic moment came on **8 July 1928**, when a **public conference** was held at the **Radhika Sinha Institute in Patna**, presided over by **Shri Braj Kishore Prasad**. The event was remarkable because many women who had been in *Purdah* just a day before attended the meeting without veils, sitting side by side with men.

The Searchlight, a major newspaper in Bihar, reported:

“A unique spectacle was witnessed... half of the spacious hall... was crowded with ladies, three-fourth of whom were such as had been observing Purdah a day before, an hour before.”

At this meeting, a powerful resolution was passed:

“We, the men and women of Patna assembled, hereby declare that we have today abolished the pernicious practice of the Purdah which has done and is doing incalculable harm to the country, and particularly to women, and we appeal to the other women of the province, who are still wavering, to abolish this system as early as they can and thereby advance their education and health.” A **provisional committee** was formed to continue spreading awareness and encourage education among women. It was also decided to establish **Mahila Samitis (Women’s Institutes)** in every town to support the campaign.

7. CONTEMPORARY ACHIEVEMENTS AND WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION AND BREAKING PURDAH

Even today, the legacy of *purdah* persists, especially in rural and deeply conservative areas where women’s mobility and public presence can still be limited. However, compared to the past, there has been a significant increase in women’s visibility and participation outside the home. Education has played a crucial role in this change; higher literacy rates among girls and young women have opened doors to diverse professional opportunities in fields such as medicine, teaching, administration, and technology. Employment has empowered many women to become financially independent, gradually challenging traditional restrictions.

8. CONCLUSION

In the political arena, women have made remarkable strides. Reservation policies in local governance bodies, like Panchayats, have ensured greater female participation in decision-making. There is also a growing number of women representatives in state assemblies and the Indian Parliament, reflecting a shift toward inclusive leadership. Despite these gains, challenges remain. Gender-based violence, wage inequality, and social discrimination continue to affect women’s everyday lives, limiting their full empowerment. Addressing these issues requires ongoing efforts in education, legal reforms, and social awareness. Overall, while the *purdah* system’s strict seclusion has largely diminished, the journey toward complete gender equality and women’s full participation in all aspects of life continues. The journey from *purdah* to participation reflects India’s broader historical transformation. While women once lived under restrictive practices, today they actively shape politics, culture, and the economy. However, the struggle is not complete. Historical practices still cast shadows, demanding constant negotiation. The narrative of Indian women is thus one of resilience, transformation, and ongoing pursuit of equality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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