

# The Vedic Era: Indian Women and Spirituality

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## Abstract

In this monograph, an attempt has been made to ascertain the spiritual state and spirituality of women in the Vedic period. The socio-religious status of women, their contribution and involvement in philosophical-intellectual debates, along with a comparison of Gender spiritual rights have also been revisited.

Since the concept of spirituality has changed and grown over time, various definitions coexist today. Saints or enlightened ones have shown higher degrees of spiritual growth than the common man. The word "spirituality" has been used here to refer to a religious reforming process that comprises the examination of some universal concepts, such as compassion, love, generosity, afterlife, enlightenment, and truth.

The Vedic civilization is an intriguing exception to the norm concerning the general situation of women becoming unsatisfactory as the years progressed. The role of women is increasingly gratifying the further back we look, including the spiritual realm. As a period of great social and political stability, the early Vedic era is regarded as the "golden age" of women. In contrast, the later Vedic era marked a sharp and apparent decline in the social standing of women.

This work emphasizes the spiritual empowerment of women and highlights the crucial role they had in forming religious and cultural traditions during this time through a review of Vedic texts, academic interpretations, and archaeological data. The approach used in this work is strictly descriptive, and the data needed was gathered from primary as well as secondary sources with reference to Vedic women in antiquity.

**KEYWORDS:** Vedic Era, Religion, Society, and Women's Spirituality.

## Introduction:

The Vedic corpus can be divided into two parts early Vedic or Vedic (c. 1500-1000 CE) and later Vedic (extends roughly from 1000 BCE to 600 BCE). Early Vedic texts refer to family books of the Rigveda Samhita. Later Vedic texts include books- 1,8,9,10 of Rigveda Samhita. By this period some Vedic tribes had moved from the 'Sapta Sindhava' region to the Upper-Ganga valley and other adjacent regions. During the period of this shift, several changes in their social, political, economic, and religious structure took place.

The advancement of Indian spiritualism may be traced to the time of sacred literature, which was religiously coded. As a result, great spiritual philosophers like Yajnavalkya, Maitereyi, Gargi, and Nachiketas cultivated the same spirit. In several Hindu Upanishads, Sastras, and Puranas, notably the Devi Upanishad, Devi Mahatmya, and Devi-Bhagavata Purana, the woman is revered as the most potent and empowering force.

What spirituality comprises is the examination of some universal concepts, such as compassion, love, generosity, afterlife, enlightenment, and truth, while bearing in mind that some individuals, such as saints or the enlightened, have shown higher degrees of development than the typical person. Historically, the word "spirituality" has been used to refer to a religious reforming process that "aims to reclaim the initial form of man-oriented at "the image of divine as represented by the founders and sacred books of the beliefs of the world."

**Early Vedic Age:** the golden age

- **Women's Socio-economic role:**

Vedic women held great social status and enjoyed a very advantageous condition. Throughout the early Vedic period, society and politics were stable, and women could express themselves and participate in many socio-cultural activities. Women frequently held leadership roles and got an education on par with that of their male colleagues during the period of the Vedas. She was referred to as a "Soma priest" in the historic Indian literature known as the Yajurveda. In the political history of early Vedic India, women have made significant contributions. This is evident from the many inscriptions that discuss women, their actions and beliefs, and their influence on society. The Hathigumpha inscription dates back to about 1500 BC. and is one of the first inscriptions to mention a female political figure. This inscription records the actions and words of a woman named Tvastara/ Tvastarī. Inscriptions show that in the beginning women participated in politics and influenced society. The Māmsāyana Arthashastra, sometimes called the Arthashastra of Kautilya, is another example.

<sup>1</sup>“O bride! You shall bring bliss to all and direct our homes towards our purpose of living.”

The wife was referred to as “ardhangini” or the other half and was regarded as his companion, advisor, and friend. All of this was connected to the husband's role system's equivalent role. Typically, the mother oversaw the household at home. According to the Vedic Samhitas, women actively participated in agriculture and other industries including leatherwork, gur-making, water-drawing, turning buttermilk into butter, producing wine, weaving mats, and stitching. They were also in control of the agricultural workers and household money

- **Women and Religious Rituals and Ceremonies:**

Goddesses were revered by the Vedic population. These include the forms of Lakshmi, (the goddess of prosperity and the consort of Lord Vishnu), Sarasvati, (the goddess of knowledge), Durga, (the goddess of strength and power), Kali, (the goddess of time), and other Vedic goddesses who represent inner power and divine qualities. Half-man, half-woman ‘Ardhanareeshwar’ was a deity who received a lot of adoration. Women took part in religious rites and tribal gatherings in Vedic culture (sabha and vidata). Even a divine force, known as Shakti, is regarded as female. The hymns of the Rig Veda were written by women, and they took part in rites along with their husbands. In actuality, such rituals were viewed as invalid when the woman did not accompany her husband. Additionally, it is prescribed that the lady whose hand is taken in marriage should be treated with respect and care and that she should be provided anything that she requests. All of them point to the fact that women once enjoyed status on par with men and were subject to far fewer limitations on their outside-the-home activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Atharvaveda 14.1.61

Beyond the ideological sphere, the concept of an enlightened woman also has an impact on the material world. The Vedas contain prayers for a daughter who is scholarly. Young females had the option of beginning their education in Vedic philosophy. Women had the option of choosing between the Brahnavadini or the Sadyovaha path. While the latter were students till they got married, the former studied religious and philosophical subjects their entire lives.

The Vedas also suggest that equitable participation in religious ceremonies is important: <sup>2</sup>“O women! You get these mantras in the same way that males do. May the harmony of your ideas extend to you. May everyone be able to attend your assemblies without any discrimination. Your consciousness and mind should be in harmony. I provide you all the same ability to absorb the entire force of these mantras as I grant the men who receive these chants.”

- **Women in Intellectual and Philosophical Discourses: prominent Vedic scholars**

1. Maitreyi: number of Puranas also make reference to Maitreyi, who is regarded as one of the most intelligent and virtue-filled women in ancient India and represents intellectual women in India. She was a renowned academic who generously contributed to the spread of education. In addition to being a "brahmavadini," Maitreyi had an extensive knowledge in Hindu scripture.
2. Gargi: The daughter of Vachaknu, Brahnavadini Gargi Vachaknavi, is revered as a great natural philosopher and eminent Vedic interpreter. Numerous hymns in the Rigveda are credited to her as being authored. She participates in the Brahma Yajna, a philosophical debate sponsored by Brahma Gyani King Janaka of Videha, and challenges the Brahma Gyani Sage Yajnavalkya, making her name known in the 6th and 8th Brahmana of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.
3. Ghosha: a highly informed and skilled Rishika of the Vedas. Ghosha is the author of two complete hymns from the tenth book, each with 14 verses, and is the granddaughter of Dirghatamas and the daughter of Kakshivat, both of whom wrote songs honoring Ashwins
4. Lopamudra: Lopamudra was the spouse of Agasthya, who was renowned for his proficiency in Tamil and Sanskrit. The phrase "Lopamudhra" means "one who is completely immersed in herself" (i.e., she is a member of the Brahnavadhini Rishi-patnis). She is credited with two hymns from the Rig Veda (I.179.1-2).

### **Later Vedic Age: Influence of Patriarchy and Sacred Texts**

- **Women's socio-economic role:**

later Vedic age is considered to be the age of Dharmashastras and smritis. The status of women in this period immensely declines. Women lost their rights and their power in the ideological and economic spheres is significantly reduced. In the later Vedic period around 100 CE King Manu authors the Manusmriti; a law code for society. The scripture in itself is written by one man in contrast to the Vedas, which have multiple men and women contributors. Women's right to education was withdrawn with Manu's codification of laws, several problems started to creep in with the various restrictions on women's ability to obtain an education. There is a rise in pre-puberty marriage. Manu, the lawgiver of Indian society gave the declaration that women have to be under their father in the course of youth, beneath their husband during adolescents, and below their son all through the antique age. Their identity is determined solely in relation to men. The practice of sati stressed the idea that men were in control, as no such practice existed

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<sup>2</sup> Rigveda 10-191-3

for men. Up to 500 BC in Vedic literature marriage wasn't obligatory but rather desirable however around 300 BC marriage became compulsory for girls. Manu, the famous law-giver of the second century, established the rule that "a woman does not deserve freedom" and that her existence should always be one of dependency on a man. This dictated how women should behave.

Manu also established the same rule that women should be subordinate to men at all times, including "in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and his elderly kins, and to the son when widowed". References to women's work in later Vedic texts include- tending cattle, milking cows, and fetching water. There are also the Vayitri and Siri ( female weaver), peshakari( female embroiderer), bidalakari(female splitter of bamboo), rajayitri( female dyer), and upalaprakshini( woman corn grinder). The contribution of women to society began to be outshone by that of men. Under the then-Indian socio-economic system, women were absolutely barred from inheriting any portion of their husband's property. The Arthaśāstra disclosed that 'no woman shall succeed in her attempt to establish her title to the property of her husband'. Throughout the course of this period, there is a shift in power from diffused to authoritarian and individual to collective. As a result of these advancements, women lose access to authority as society becomes an authoritarian one.

- **Women and religious rituals and ceremonies:**

Women appear only as gifts and commodities of exchange, for instance, the references of Rajas gifting their daughters to win over sages. The only form of ritual giving or exchange that women could be part of was giving the first alms to the 'Brahmachari', who was supposed to begin his stint by begging from his mother or his teacher's wife. <sup>3</sup>A.S Altekar attributes this aversion to girl child to the enforced widowhood and the prevalence of sati custom from about the 5th century AD'. 'Later Vedic texts reflect the idea that the menstrual blood of women is dangerous and polluting'<sup>4</sup>. A menstruating wife was not supposed to participate in sacrifices. The sacrifice had to be postponed or it had to be performed without her

- **Women and spirituality:**

It is argued that women, as virtuous selfless, nurturing mother, wife, and daughter, automatically attained salvation by virtue of surrendering of her ego. This has been the insidious logic of all canonical literature like the smritis and the Dharmashastras which glorify women. By being put on a pedestal and worshipped as the self-sacrificing mother, chaste wife, and an obedient daughter, a woman is stripped of all individuality and becomes an ornamental symbol of a patriarchal society. In Mānu's formulation of social laws, women were seen as impure and inferior people. Following this, throughout the Dharmastras and Mānusmiti periods, a rigorous ban and oppression of women making sacrifices, giving prayers, and going on pilgrimages were enacted. They were completely forbidden from performing penance as well. She is asked to serve and worship her husband even if he is not a person of all virtue and character. Since service and worship of the husband are the primary duties of a wife, by so performing she can hope to attain heaven. Women are praised and exalted in some places in later Vedic texts. For instance, the *Shatapatha Brahmana* states that the wife is half her husband and completes him<sup>5</sup>. The *Brihadaryanka Upanishad*

<sup>3</sup> Anant Sadashiv Altekar. 1959. The Position of Hindu Women in Hindu Civilisation, from prehistoric times to the present day,(India, Motilal Banarsidass)

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Frederick M. 1991. Indra's Curse, Varuna's Noose, and the Suppression of the Woman in the Vedic Strauta Ritual'. In Julia Leslie(ed.), Roles and Rituals for Hindu women. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, pp 17-45.

<sup>5</sup> Shatapatha Brahmana (5.2.1.10)

mentions a ritual for obtaining a learned daughter<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, women were generally excluded from the study of the Vedas. Although their presence as wives was required in the *shrauta* sacrifices, they could not perform such sacrifices independently in their own right. Later texts even introduce the possibility of an effigy of gold or grass in place of the wife. Most of the *samskaras* (except of course marriage) did not apply to them. In such crucial respects the position of a woman no matter what her *varna* was similar to that of a *shudra*. In fact, the later *Dharmashastra* equation between woman and *Shudras* goes back to the Vedic texts.

### **Women and Sacred Texts: Vedic Literature, Upanishads, and Epics**

Hindu literature contains a variety of contradictory ideas about women's duties, from restrictive gender norms to female leadership as the highest deity. The *Rigveda*, a Hindu literature, has the *Devi Sukta* song, which asserts the feminine energy to be the essence of the cosmos, the one who generates all matter and awareness, the timeless and infinite reality (*Brahman*), a combination of metaphysical and empirical reality, and the soul (supreme self) of everything. In the comparatively more recent *Shakta Upanishads*, the *Rigvedic Devi Sukta* concepts are expanded on. Some of the predominant notions of women's roles during the post-Vedic eras are captured in the 'Apastamba sutra' (c. 4th century BCE). The *Apastamba Sutra* demonstrates the enhanced status of women in the fourth century BCE:

-It is forbidden for a husband to abandon his wife. (A 1.28.19).

-Daughters are allowed to inherit from him (A 2.14.4). Because a husband and wife share equal ownership of the property and are firmly related to one another, there cannot be a property partition between them (A 2.29.3). So, while her husband is away, a wife is permitted to give gifts and manage the family's finances independently (A 2.12.16–20).

-Women are upholders of traditional lore, and *Āpastamba* tells his audience that they should learn some customs from women (A 2.15.9; 2.29.11). Women uphold traditional lore, and *Āpastamba* encourages his audience to obtain some of their habits from them (A 2.15.9; 2.29.11).

<sup>7</sup>Among the main global faiths, Hinduism, according to Bryant, has had the most solid presence of the divine feminine throughout history. Womenhood was idealized as an honorable position both in and outside the home during this period of Indian civilization. The two great epics of India, the *Ramayana* by *Valmiki* and the *Mahabharata* by *Krishna-Dwaipayana* or *Vyasa*, depicted women as the root of *dharma*, pleasure, and prosperity.

### **Spirituality: Stigmas and Stereotypes**

There has been considerable scholarly discussion on the complicated and multidimensional subjects of gender and spirituality in the Vedic era. Women's spirituality has been subject to a number of stigmas and misconceptions over the years. Because of the influence of societal standards and patriarchal institutions that result in the marginalization and devaluation of women's spiritual experience, women's spirituality has frequently been ignored or subjected to such issues. When men take to the spiritual path or even opt out of society as do the wandering ascetics, it is looked upon as a religious quest or sometimes as escapism from social responsibilities. However, when a woman takes to the spiritual path unless she is content to be a pious housewife, she is automatically held guilty of defiance and revolt.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Brihadaryanka Upanishad*(6.4.17

<sup>7</sup> Bryant, Edwin (2007), *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, Oxford University Press, p. 441



Depending on the person, spirituality may also take many various forms. Others may connect with spirituality via artistic expression, nature, or close relationships. Some people may achieve spiritual fulfillment through prayer, meditation, or religious rituals.

In the Vedic era, sacrifices and rituals were primarily performed by male priests, and these activities were strongly related to spirituality. However, female mystics and seers also contributed significantly to the growth of Vedic thought and spirituality. During the Vedic era, the idea of gender was intimately related to that of dharma or one's duty and obligation in life. While women were expected to fulfil their domestic and household duties, males were encouraged to pursue worldly success. Overall, the Vedic era's complex and varied relationships between gender and spirituality were a reflection of the period's larger social and cultural setting.

Spirituality gave Indian women the independence that traditional Hindu culture had previously denied them. The lengthy history of male tyranny and sexual exploitation that characterized the situation of women in traditional India is where the morphology of feminine spirituality in India comes from. Due to the fundamentally patriarchal nature of Indian society, women were seen as holding a much lower status. In old Indian society, women were expected to play one of these two extreme roles: prostitute or chaste wife, dutiful daughter, or selfless mother. Therefore, it appeared that conventional culture did not allow women to be independent or to express themselves. She expands on this by stating that the two main causes of social exploitation were "lack of education and economic dependence on males of their family." It is frequently assumed that women's spirituality is motivated by feelings rather than logic; they are additionally disregarded as valid spiritual practises. Women are frequently limited in their spiritual experiences to the domestic sphere and are supposed to be passive followers rather than spiritual leaders. Women had prominent roles in religious rites and participated significantly in the spiritual realm. Since they were able to perform a variety of rituals, including fire rituals, they were considered as being essential to maintaining household and family ceremonies. One of Hinduism's oldest holy books, the Rigveda, contains a number of female seers and hymns written by women, demonstrating the participation of women in spiritual practices during the period. But even though they took part in religious ceremonies, women in the Vedic era often retained a lower status than males. Their access to political power, property rights, and education was constrained by the patriarchal social order. Men enjoyed higher social rank and were mostly in charge of making decisions.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the Vedic era reveals ample evidence of women's active involvement, influence, and contributions to spirituality. Women in the Early Vedic era enjoyed spiritual empowerment through access to education, engagement in intellectual and philosophical discourses, and the significant roles they played in religious rituals while challenging contemporary notions of gender roles and spiritual empowerment. Women's position and roles, however, suffered substantial changes with the onset of the Later Vedic Age and the establishment of patriarchy, this caused their social, political, and religious significance to decline. Despite these obstacles, women were nonetheless able to make outstanding contributions to spirituality and philosophy, having a significant effect on Indian culture and intellectual history. The intricacies of gender dynamics and their impact on society and culture now may be better understood by taking into account the historical development of women's roles and spirituality in ancient India. Women's spiritual development throughout the Vedic era can serve as an inspiration for current and following generations to embrace gender parity and spiritual diversity

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