



The role of Women in Ancient Indian Society.

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Abstract

Women in ancient Indian society had multi-dimensional roles and impacted family, social and cultural life. Notwithstanding, their status fluctuated over time and wildly differed from place to place and period to period by region, community or period. Women in early Vedic period had great freedom, education and agency; and women like Gargi and Maitreyi had intellectual ideas comparable to men. Religious rituals made them a part and they had right to choose their spouses through swayamvara. Eventually, societal norms become more restricted, though. Texts like the Manusmriti sought to impart patriarchal values to the society by spatially confining women in the domestic sphere, and further placing them under the control of male family members. Nevertheless, women continued to provide through means of art, literature, and medicine, and also became advisers to kings. Rulers like Razia Sultana and even the queens of some regional kingdoms rose to power. So, ancient Indian society revered women but at the same time, had restrictions for them and this was an inimitably delicate balance between women's roles being valued, yet limited, by existing social norms. This legacy paints a multifaceted record of the resilience and impact amongst women across various different eras of ancient India.

Introduction

The roles of women in ancient Indian society is rich with complexity, referring to a tapestry of cultural, religious and social interactions throughout the country and its subregions at different times. Women in early Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE) enjoyed a prominent status and had the same rights as education, practice of religion and freedom to choose their husband in swayamvara. The mention of women like Gargi and Maitreyi; who were also female scholars and women that actively engaged in discourses regarding intellectual and philosophical facts along with men; appears in sacred texts such as the Upanishads.



Through time, (the status of women) changed according to the changing socio economic conditions, also the codification of the laws. During the later Vedic period and afterwards, texts such as the Manusmriti strengthened the conception of more restrictive roles for women. However, it was under the watch of male relatives that women were increasingly confined to domestic spheres, from daughter, to wife, to mother, who dutifully shouldered familial duties. There were also prevalent practices of child marriage and purdah (seclusion) which reflected the patriarchal nature of the society.

Nevertheless, women's efforts were indispensable for the cultural and dominant spiritual texture of society. Women express and influence themselves in the realms of matter, art, literature and religion. During the 6th–17th century Bhakti movement, the female saints Mirabai and Andal transformed social norms by expressing their spirituality in their devotional poetry and in fervent, and personal ways. Even to ascend to power in some parts, women; Queen Didda of Kashmir and Prabhavati Gupta come to play a significant role in governance.

To comprehend the role of women in ancient India, paradoxes need to be understood in a nuanced manner. Here it stresses the periods of empowerment against the periods of subjugation as a function of caste, class, and regional diversity. This historical journey is one that would illuminate the resilience of women who waded through and many times crossed social bounds. In understanding their role, we gain useful insights into the fundamental underpinnings of gender dynamics in India and offer contemporary input in the larger discussion on gender equality and social justice.

Overview of women's roles in ancient India.

In India of ancient times women played a wide and ever changing role and were very much part of the social, cultural, spiritual home. During the early Vedic period women had a freedom to study and participate in a religious ritual and had rights enjoyed by men. The few women as scholars that there were, like Gargi and Maitreyi, ably exemplified the intellectual prominence some women achieved as participants in philosophical debates, and in the shaping of early Indian thought. Also, women had some autonomy in choosing their partners, as marriage customs like swayamvara practiced. But these freedoms were



curtailed in the movement of society to the later Vedic period and beyond. The emerging patriarchal codes prescribed the position of women primarily as daughters, wives, and mothers within the family but ringed against their independence. Focussed on women's autonomy, I show how over the centuries, social practices like child marriage, 'purdah' (seclusion), and eventually the custom of sati (widow self-immolation) begin to emerge. Although she had to work within sketchy parameters, women did create works of art, music, literature, and spirituality. For example, the Bhakti movement moved a way, female saints have expressed personal devotion, and Mirabai and Andal is a fine example of challenging social norms. Whilst the power of women was not limited to queens, a select few women such as Queen Didda of Kashmir and Prabhavati Gupta also yielded power or influence or even leadership, in some cases. Consequently, the roles that women played in ancient India were complex and multi layered – determined by overlaps between region, religion, caste, and class. This evolution of history is the obverse of the reverence for their capabilities and the responses of social infestation upon them, providing a backdrop to the grass roots of gender dynamics in India.

Women in the Early Vedic Period

In India during the Early Vedic period (c. 1500–1000 BCE) women enjoyed a great degree of freedom, social participation and respect. In family and religious life they were considered essential partners, whose roles exceeded domestic spheres. Education of women was permitted and many of whom earned themselves due to scholars and philosophers. The esteem for women's intellect is also demonstrated in Vedic figures like Gargi and Maitreyi mentioned in Vedic texts, who contested and debated about theological ideas as women. Also, women had a say in marriage through practices such as swayamvara where they could choose their husbands, indicating women's autonomy and agency in important life decisions. Alongside men, they took part in religious rituals sometimes as priestesses and often actively playing a part in performing rites. Daughters were blessings, and widow remarriage was socially acceptable rather than a curse, keeping women a part of, and integrated honorably into the society. During the Early Vedic period, women played a balanced role with certain rights and contribution acknowledged and their influence was also felt across intellectual, social and spiritual spheres. This is one of the more egalitarian



periods before more stringent norms gradually became the norm in the later Vedic and post Vedic periods.

Social, Educational, and Religious Rights of Women in the Early Vedic Period

In India during the Early Vedic period (c. 1500–1000 BCE), women generally had fairly high status as well as a balanced social role. Unlike the interpretations in later periods, the ancients valued them as integral parts of society and reportedly accorded them respect and rights in different spheres of life. Women were seen as major part of social life: Apart from domestic life women were participating in every community. Their voices were heard when it came to familial and, sometimes, communal matters too and, they would engage in decision making processes. Women were neither owned nor appraised merely as dependents, but as higher beings, with their own agency.

Women could be educated and they were incited to learn, comprising in the study of sacred texts, science and philosophy. The central focus on education resulted in a society including both male and female intellectuals. Access to the resources used for the pursuit of knowledge was equally available to women and men, indicating the rather egalitarian nature early Vedic society. Women were involved in religion, and also officiate religious ceremonies. In the spiritual and social order they were of such importance that they even filled important positions as priestesses and were allowed to complete religious rites besides men. Religious duties and sacrifices, according to the ritual texts, were frequently shared by husbands and wives in a partnership in spiritual as well as household duties. On the whole, women in the Early Vedic period enjoyed social freedom and social respect and brought contribution towards family, education and religion.

Prominent Women Scholars and Philosophers (e.g., Gargi, Maitreyi)

Until the Early Vedic period produced remarkable women scholars and philosophers who quite noticeably contributed to the ancient Indian thought and spirituality. Amongst these, Gargi and Maitreyi—whom we find documented extensively in sacred text such as Upanishads—are well known and revered both for their intellectual grit and philosophical acumen. In addition, these women were not content with simply being learned in their Vedic scriptures, but rather they participated full on in debates and discussions with male sages, something quite unusual in later periods.



It refers to Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where GargiVachaknavi is mentioned, and is also the name of one of the most famous female philosophers. She was a known accomplished scholar in metaphysics and spirituality. Gargi was a celebrated woman who debated with the sage Yajnavalkya, and asked him questions on the profound corners of the universe and of existence, demonstrating her understanding of cosmic principles. Both of her inquiries were complex, and even compared to Yajnavalkya, they were challenging, indicative of her status as a women who had established herself as a respected thinker in the area of ancient Indian philosophy.

Maitreyi, like her other female scholar, was Yajnavalkya's wife and features in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Maitreyi was known for her wisdom and was very inquisitive about the soul and immortality. Maitreyi famously asked when Yajnavalkya offered her wealth, wealth has no connection on the road of spiritual fulfillment; what is important is knowledge, not materialism. Her dialogues are a testimony to the level of philosophical and truth seeking intonement attributable to women during the Early Vedic period. However, these figures show that women were not limited to the domestic sphere where they're typically located, but were active participants, active agents, in intellectual circles, and they contributed very richly to the spiritual and the philosophical discourses of the time.

Swayamvara and Marriage Customs

Early Vedic times saw relatively high status and autonomy of women as indicated by the marriage custom. Swayamvara was one of the most prominent customs, a custom which that gave women the right to choose their husband herself. In this system the bride would pick a groom from a set of suitors based on her(predetermined) preferences and criterion. Often swayamvara ceremonies were elaborate affairs in which the bride could select her choice of groom from among suitors to which challenges or contests were attached. This practice reflected the respect and control women had in marital decisions.

In the Early Vedic period marriage was a partnership of mutual respect and shared responsibilities. Early Vedic marriages were dissimilar from later periods where marriage becomes far more restrictive and hierarchical in nature, in that they consisted of alliances which required husbands and wives to contribute equally to family and social life. Economic, social, companionship, as well as sharing of religious duties, were all important components



of the concept of marriage. Marriages were often done worshipping together by the couples, which is a symbol of equal partners. The balance showed what a vital part women played both in household life and in spiritual life.

Child marriage was absent and widow remarriage was also accepted, which showed a comparatively more progressive view towards women's role and choices during this period. Depending upon circumstances, widows could remarry without stigma and women could have a word in choosing their own life partner. However, customs relating to marriage like swayamvara and the joint decision making nature of marital relationships demonstrate that the society would have respected women's autonomy and also included them in important life decisions setting a precedent of equal respect and equality between spouses.

Women in the Later Vedic Period

In the Later Vedic period (c. 1000–500 BCE) the status of women sank under the influence of a patriarchal outlook. In contrast to the early period of Vedic times during which women enjoyed much freedom and participation in intellectual and religious life, during this period enervation of their rights and roles began to set in. In the process, texts like the Manusmriti began continuing to codify societal norms—of which women's roles in the family began being shaped as daughters, wives, and mothers subordinate to male relatives. Women's education was more and more limited, women were less encouraged or allowed to study holy stuff and the study of the same and participation in scholarly pursuit, etc.

In this vein, social practices started to move towards women led to restrictive domestic domains and upheld the practice of child marriage and certainly male authority. Later, widow remarriages were accepted but gradually discouraged and practices like purdah and sati (self-immolation of widows) too began to appear but sati was not widespread in this period.

Even religion gave fewer roles to women, who as central participants in rituals or ceremonies were relegated to a largely male role. The Later Vedic period marks a shift towards more confining and gendered norms—of a society that became focused on matters of patriarchal control and the social exclusion of women from participation in the public sphere and scholarship.



Marriage and Family Structure

During the Later Vedic period, marriage and family structure became deeply patriarchal in nature wherein women were wed to the domestic sphere and thus traditional family dynamics were solidified. Wedding used to be arranged more usually, for the sake of family alliances, social status and economic purposes, rather than being an individual choice or basis on affection. Other practices like swayamvara, however, start to be spoken of less and young women possessed little autonomy in choosing partners. Child marriage started to develop as a formal social norm, a reflection of the rising need to control women's sexuality and guarantee their commitment to husbands and families. Upon marriage, women were brought into the service of their husbands' families, should obey their husbands, and fulfill duties of the family. For a wife's role was primarily that of a homemaker – taking care of household affairs, raising children, keeping family rituals.

There were also sharp gendered norms and values regarding family structure, too, defined in the Manusmriti and other texts which laid out patriarchal authority of husbands, fathers, and sons over women, a life of mute docility under these men throughout her life. Men saw sons as necessary to the continuation of the family lineage and to perform ancestral rites, while daughters were considered, usually, transient members of the family destined for other households. The focus on lineage and inheritance also further emphasized the need for a wife to be both loyal, chaste, and committed to family.

Women wielded a great deal of power at home in the domestic sphere, but within the male's bounds. The highly valued this role for performing household rituals as well as for contributing to the family's prosperity by means of religious observances. Nevertheless, widowhood entailed serious limitations and remarriage became increasingly infrequent while widows often isolated or limited socially. Though not too widespread, sati symbolized the ultimate sacrifice of the devotion of a widow to her husband. Thus, in the later Vedic period, the structure of the married and family reflected the evolving social themes of patriarchal values, the limit of women's agency, and the definition of familial roles in ways such as can be used to strengthen male dominance in both the family and society at large. In a subsequent model of marriage and family dynamics, later social practice in Indian society would be deeply influenced.



Educational and Intellectual Contributions

In India, during Early Vedic age, women had good opportunities for education and intellectual pursuits and took active part in cultural and philosophical discourse of the society. Training was made available to women to study all the Vedas and other sacred texts equally as her male counterparts. This education freedom produced a generation of women who became learned and participated in the intellectual activities of those times and contributed in (early) Indian philosophy by proposing ideas and engaging in debates. Prominent female scholars of this intellectual engagement are GargiVachaknavi and Maitreyi. A philosopher, Gargi is famous for many profound metaphysical debates she held with one of the best known sages, Yajnavalkya, about the nature of the cosmos. Like that, Maitreyi, Yajnavalkya's wife too was acknowledged for her series of questions about obtaining spiritual fulfilment and seeking understanding.

Their education included more than religious studies, and included subjects like music, astronomy and medicine. Vedic system placed education as a necessary part of well rounded life and educated women would have often be well versed in all the possible disciplines. Not only did they contribute to religious and philosophical thought, but they contributed to the arts and sciences. They believed actively in engaging people's intellect and sided with the view that knowledge, spiritual wisdom did not belong to one gender; they subscribed to progressive courses of education in an era when the vices of sexism were still rampant.

But as the society progressed to the Later Vedic period these opportunities started to decline. Restrictions on women's education and in fact their intellectual involvement, in combination with social norms and values, grew increasingly patriarchal. Through centuries, the number of educated women eroded, and their roles became more and more domestic. By the ending of the Vedic period, women had added mainly to oral traditions and folk practices, and had awfully little access to formal education. However, women had a major educational and intellectual role to play in the early Vedic period and this provided a base upon which later generations of women could be encouraged to play the similar role in a situation where societal norms were becoming increasingly restrained. Their legacy lives on as proof of the abilities and achievements they made in ancient India.



Economic Role and Work

Women had played important economic roles in ancient India, participating fully in earning the family's or community's livelihood. In the early Vedic period women participated in different kinds of economic activities along with men, engaged in joint and individual efforts necessary for the agricultural and pastoral economy. Women in rural areas were engaged in farming cattle rearing and other agricultural tasks and were found to work together with men to make sure their family was fed. Fieldwork and also domestic jobs, such as processing grains, preserving food and also taking care of dairy items, were of critical value to the agrarian lifestyle, and also it is for this factor that they assisted in such task.

Women's economic contributions in the area of craftsmanship, were another notable area. They were skilled weavers, spinners and makers of textiles, a trade which held as much value in society as any other. However, they produced cloth and garments, and also other materials sometimes which they sold in local markets hence earning enough degree of economic independence. They also practiced making pottery, jewelry, and other crafts, which were at once functional and valuable trade items. Their skills joined to the household economy as well as product that could be sold or traded, thus the gain of families in terms of wealth.

Women in some areas even owned some small businesses and trade. You could see them in markets as vendors selling goods or exchanging their own communities for other communities. In spite of this, women were permitted a certain amount of financial control over smaller transactions and engagement allowed them to build networks.

The period got opportunities for economic activities for women as the earlier period allowed but the Later Vedic period decreases it. At the same time, women's roles became more and more confined to household tasks and their role in economic activities outside the home decreased. As patriarchal texts such as the Manusmriti made social structures stiffer, it dissuaded women from working in those fields involving public interface or trade. However, despite these limitations, women still supported the family through unpaid domestic labor and cottage industries, and were integral to the household economy. While their economic role in sustaining ancient Indian society and supporting family livelihoods across various social classes is often not acknowledged in historical records, it was crucial to at least the survival of the human race at that time.



Women in Religion and Spirituality

During the early Vedic period in ancient India, the roles of women were very significant and the evidence shows that women were active participants in rituals, ceremonies and philosophical discussion. Women were seen as spiritual figures of great importance, and sometimes they were partners equal to men in religious ritual performance. A Vedic society was one in which both the husband and wife were expected to perform rituals as a balance partnership in spiritual practice. This belief that women were a good for spiritual prosperity was highlighted in this role.

During the early Vedic period as well as currently, many women attained sages, thinking and poets. We had Gargi and Maitreyi who were not only educated in the sacred texts but were in theological debates with male sages, questioning established concepts and philosophies. Intellectually they shone and by their intellectual prowess the respected place of women in spiritual matters was understood, as women could discuss and teach profound spiritual and philosophical ideas. Hindu philosophical traditions remember these women as leaving a legacy of spiritual agency of women.

As well as taking part in formal Vedic rituals women played important roles in folk and domestic religious practice. They started performing household ceremonies, seasonal festivals and rites to honor fertility, health and prosperity deities. Such practices strengthened ties of community because of the spiritual influence women had on their family, and within their communities. Women were seen as the protectors of the spiritual sanctity of the home, standing each day to pray, to fast, and to perform the rituals believed to secure divine blessing on the home.

But later, patriarchy took hold and women's roles in the formal religious practice became more and more limited. Women's public religious activities and priesthood offices became almost totally male and their spiritual roles were confined almost entirely to the household. However, it is surprising that, within these limitations, women found a voice in the movement called Bhakti, a development which spread during the 6th and 17th centuries. Female saints like Mirabai, Andal, and AkkaMahadevi were revered for their devotional poetry and personal spiritual expressions that spoke against the society, and proved that spiritual devotion is not bound to the constraints of gender.



Essentially, it encompassed women's involvement in religion and spirituality in ancient India in various aspects, as they could influence religious rituals and philosophies at a time when different types of social restrictions were taking place. Their contributions reflect a range of spiritual roles women have played in India's history, and show the way women are diverse and resilient.

Conclusion

In ancient India, it was a very complex role for women in society because it varied from period to another and also whether it was worshipping or chating. Women were free in early Vedic period and allowed for education and to take part in religious rituals and swayamvara was the custom for choosing her own spouse. Gargi and Maitreyi were esteemed figures in intellectual and spiritual discussions which symbolise a society that allowed women to be heard, and imparted wisdom into the works. Yet, with the change in Indian society, into the Later Vedic age, women lost their rights and the social and legal norms started getting more and more focused on enforcing patriarchal structures. Women lost educational opportunities, had their roles in public religious rituals reduced and restrictive practices such as child marriage and seclusion, closed off women's role from the public sphere relegating them to the domestic sphere. Despite these constraints, women were able to play roles in family, culture, and as spiritual beings, they continued to work within the boundaries placed on them, and contributed to household economics and the activities of the community. Early religious movements, particularly the Bhakti movement, gave women a forum for devotional and spiritual individuality that overshadowed gender norms, the influence of which still resonates today. Based on this, the years of women in ancient India can be viewed as an example of resilience and flexibility, from their rise and fall. The study of this evolution helps us understand the roots of the founding of gender dynamics in Indian society and explain the relevance of gender roles and equality today.

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