

## Daughters of the Vedas, Shadows of the Smritis: Women in Ancient India

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### Abstract:

The status of women in ancient India has been a subject of considerable scholarly interest, reflecting the complexities and nuances of gender roles across different historical periods. This paper examines the status of women during the Vedic and Post-Vedic periods, highlighting the evolution of their roles, rights, and societal perceptions. By analyzing primary sources such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Dharmashastras, and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the shifting dynamics of women's status in ancient Indian society. The paper concludes that while women enjoyed a relatively high status during the Vedic period, their position gradually declined in the Post-Vedic era due to changing socio-religious norms and the institutionalization of patriarchy.

**Keyword:-** women ,Vedic ,ancient ,Indian

### Introduction:

The status of women in ancient India has been a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, influenced by religious, social, and cultural factors. The Vedic period, spanning from around 1500 to 500 BCE, is considered a foundational era in Indian history. The Vedas, a collection of religious texts, provide insights into the social, cultural, and religious practices of the time. The post-Vedic period, which followed, witnessed significant transformations in Indian society, including the rise of new religious movements, the development of complex social hierarchies, and the emergence of powerful empires. The Vedic period (circa 1500–500 BCE) and the Post-Vedic period (circa 500 BCE–500 CE) represent two distinct phases in the history of ancient India, each characterized by different attitudes towards women. This paper seeks to explore the status of women during these periods, focusing on their roles in family, society, religion, and education as well as the changes impacted the lives of women in India.

### The Vedic Period: A Time of Relative Equality

During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a relatively high status in society. They had access to education, participated in religious ceremonies, and even composed hymns found in the Vedas. Women like Gargi and Maitreyi were renowned scholars and philosophers. They had the freedom to choose their partners through the practice of swayamvara and could even remarry if widowed. The Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedic texts, provides evidence of women's active participation in religious and social life.

There were, however, instances of women rising to important positions in Vedic society. Women who excelled in academia and philosophy, like Gargi and Lopamudra, were well-respected. The Rigveda also makes reference to female seers, or rishikas, who wrote hymns and took part in religious rituals .

Some of the Womens during those period:-

Gargi: During India's Vedic era, Gargi Vachaknavi, prominent philosopher and scholar, existed. Her contributions to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, one of the earliest and most significant of the Upanishads, are what are most well-known about her. Gargi converses with the wise man

Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad on the Gargi makes one of her most well-known utterances when she requests Manavalkya to describe the of the cosmos. After asking several difficult questions, ality eventually gets Yajnavalkya to say that Brahman is "neti, neti" (not this, not that), beyond all things. Gargi is regarded as one of the most significant female philosophers in Indian history and is well-know for her contributions to the Upanishads. Hindu philosophy ha ariety greatly benefited from her work, which has also inspired numerou generations of academics and thinkers.

Lopamudra: In Hindu mythology, a well known character who is credited for adding to the Rigveda, on Hinduism's oldest sacred books. She was supposedly a poet philosopher who lived in India during the Vedic era. Several h in the Rigveda are attributed to Lopamudra, including song which is renowned for its exquisite language and pre philosophical ideas. Lopamudra reflects on the nature of ex and the connection between the human soul and the cosmos hymn. The poetic excellence and the profound spiritual insidas Lopamudra's writing are highly respected. Her hymns are vegane the Rigveda, and as some of the most important additions to have influenced many generations of Indian academics and philosophers. Lopamudra is well-known for her literary works well as her autobiographical writing. She challenged the sa Agastya, to whom she was married, to bestow upou her the same degree of spiritual insight that he possessed. Agastya was moved by depumudra's commitment and tenacity, and he folder a result, she gained a reputation as one of the most enlightened and spiritual ladies of her day. Along with her profound spiritual insights, Lopamudra was renowned for her command of Sanskrit grammar and syntax.

Apala: Apala was a female poet and seer who lived in ancient India during the Vedic era. She is renowned for her hymns to the god Indra, some of which are preserved in the Rigveda, one of Hinduism's earliest holy books. Her hymns, which are included in the eighth book (mandala) of the Rigveda, are regarded as some of the most potent and masterfully crafted in the body of work. Apala praises the attributes of Indra, the thunder and battle god, and his role in guarding the neighbourhood and ensuring its residents' welfare in her songs. She also makes personal supplications and pleas to Indra, requesting his blessings and defence for her and her family.

The hymn known as the "Apala Sukta," which is regarded as one of the most beautiful and poetic hymns in Rigveda, is among Apala's most noteworthy compositions. Apala praises Indra for helping to direct her along the path of righteousness and enlightenment as she recalls her life as a seer in this hymn. The hymn, which is well-known for its beauty and profound meaning, is full of vivid imagery and complex symbolism. Overall, Apala's hymns provide a distinctive viewpoint on the position of women in that period.

However, the later Vedic period saw a gradual decline in the status of women. The influence of patriarchal ideologies increased, and women's roles became more restricted. While they still held important positions within the household, their participation in public life diminished. The practice of child marriage began to emerge, further limiting women's opportunities.

#### Religious Roles:

Women in the Vedic period had the right to participate in religious rituals and ceremonies. They were known as brahmavadinis (women who recited Vedic hymns) and could even compose hymns. Prominent female sages such as Ghosha, Lopamudra, and Maitreyi are mentioned in the Rigveda, indicating that women had access to spiritual knowledge and were respected for their intellectual contributions.

**Education:**

Education was not restricted to men during the Vedic period. Women had the opportunity to study the Vedas and other sacred texts. The upanayana (sacred thread ceremony), which marked the initiation of a student into Vedic studies, was also performed for girls, although it was less common than for boys.

**Marriage and Family Life:**

Marriage during the Vedic period was considered a sacred institution, and women were respected as equal partners in the marital relationship. The concept of *sahadharmini* (equal partner in religious duties) highlights the complementary roles of husband and wife. Widows were allowed to remarry, and there was no stigma attached to widowhood.

**The Post-Vedic Period:**

The Post-Vedic period, marked by the composition of the Dharmashastras, epics, and the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, saw a gradual decline in the status of women. This period was characterized by the institutionalization of patriarchy and the imposition of stricter social norms.

**Religious and Social Restrictions:**

In the Post-Vedic period, women's participation in religious rituals became increasingly restricted. The Dharmashastras, such as the Manusmriti, prescribed a more subordinate role for women, emphasizing their dependence on male relatives (father, husband, and son). Women were excluded from Vedic studies and were no longer allowed to perform sacrifices independently.

**Education and Intellectual Life:**

Access to education for women declined significantly during the Post-Vedic period. The Dharmashastras advocated that women should be educated only in domestic skills, and their primary role was confined to the household. The ideal of *pativrata* (a devoted wife) became central to the identity of women, overshadowing their intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

**Marriage and Widowhood:**

Marriage became more of a social obligation, and the practice of child marriage began to emerge. The concept of *stridharma* (duties of a wife) emphasized obedience and service to the husband. Widow remarriage, which was acceptable in the Vedic period, was increasingly discouraged, and widows were expected to live a life of austerity and celibacy.

**The Influence of Buddhism and Jainism:**

Despite the overall decline in women's status, Buddhism and Jainism offered some avenues for women's spiritual and social empowerment. Both religions allowed women to join monastic orders (*bhikkhuni sangha* in Buddhism and *sadhvi sangha* in Jainism), providing them with opportunities for education and spiritual growth. However, these opportunities were often limited by the prevailing patriarchal attitudes within these religious communities.

**Comparative Analysis:**

The transition from the Vedic to the Post-Vedic period reflects a significant shift in the status of women. While the Vedic period was characterized by relative gender equality and opportunities for women in religious and intellectual spheres, the Post-Vedic period saw the erosion of these rights and the imposition of stricter gender roles. This decline can be attributed to the increasing complexity of social structures, the rise of Brahmanical orthodoxy, and the institutionalization of patriarchal norms.

**Conclusion:**

The status of women in ancient India was not static but evolved over time, influenced by changing socio-religious contexts. The Vedic period offered women a degree of freedom and respect, particularly in religious and educational domains. However, the Post-Vedic period witnessed a decline in women's status, as patriarchal norms became more entrenched. Understanding these historical shifts is crucial for comprehending the broader trajectory of gender relations in Indian society.

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