

## Contribution of Women during Ancient India

Dr. Yashpal Singh

M.A. & Ph.D. in History, Principal, Govt. College Julana (Jind), Haryana, India

Received: 18 Sep 2022, Received in revised form: 15 Oct 2022, Accepted: 25 Oct 2022, Available online: 30 Oct 2022

### Abstract

*Women are society's greatest blessing. Women played a significant role in India's ancient history. In India, Rig Vedic women held high social status. They were in great shape. The women were given the chance to achieve intellectual and spiritual heights. They were misplaced by the Samritas; Manu asserts that a woman will require her father when she is a child, her husband when she is a teen, and her son when she is an adult. Prostitution, the Devadasi system, sati, and child marriage all gained popularity. Women held a much higher status than men did in the ancient Bharat Varsa. The feminine word "Shakti" means "power" and "strength." According to literature, a single woman bothered the rulers, which resulted in the devastation of towns and kings. The Valmiki Ramayana, for instance, teaches us that when Ravana kidnapped Sita, his entire kingdom was destroyed. Draupadi's public humiliation resulted in the deaths of all the Kauravas in Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata. According to Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram, Pandyan Nedun chezhayan accidentally injured Kannaki, which resulted in the burning of Madurai, the Pandya capital. Women and men were treated equally in many ways during the Vedic period. Together with men, women made public sacrifices. Vishvara, a female rishi, appears in one script. Women are said to have written some of the Vedic hymns, like Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant, or Indrani, the wife of Indra. Women may have had access to the Vedas and the sacred thread in the early Vedic era. The Haritasmrti talks about a group of women who studied and performed rituals their entire lives and were known as Brahmavadinis. They were never married. As the wife of a teacher or preceptor, Panini suggests that women could also be students and teachers of sacred Vedas at the time.*

**Keywords**— Vedic, Samritas, Feminine, Ravana, Kannaki, Vishvara, Indrani, Haritasmrti.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Women are the greatest blessing in society. In India's ancient history, women played a significant role. Rig Vedic women held high social status in India. They were in fine condition. The women were given the opportunity to attain spiritual and intellectual heights. Many of the Rishis at this time were women. Wealthier individuals were more likely to engage in polygamy than monogamy. There was no sati system or early marriage. Women, on the other hand, were still able to hold respected and unrestricted positions in Rig-Vedic society when they began to face discrimination in education and other areas of society after the Later Vedic period. Women's lives were made worse by the purdah, child marriage, widow burning, and polygamy.

The epics and Puranas equated women and property. Buddhism did little to help women. Even though the Maurya kings frequently employed female bodyguards, spies, and "Stri- adhyakshamahamatras," their status was still quite low. Upper caste women had to accept the purdah. During this time, men were polygamous, and widows were frequently burned. Because Kautilya didn't believe in women's liberation, Arthashastra made it impossible for women to leave the house without their husband's permission. Their situation deteriorated under Gupta. The Samritas used them badly; According to Manu, a woman will require her father as a child, her husband as an adolescent, and her son as an adult. The Devadasi system and prostitution, in addition to sati and child marriage, gained popularity.

### **Ancient Women and Education:**

However, there are some bright spots in this gloomy scene. In ancient Indian literature, women play an important role. Ancient India had many educated women living there. The Brahnavadinis, or women who lived their entire lives studying the Vedas and never married, were the two kinds of scholarly women. as well as the Sadyodvahas, who, prior to getting married, read the Vedas. The Vedas that female students were studying were mentioned by Panini. Women educators were referred to as Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi by Katyana. Ashoka's daughter Sanghamitra joined the Buddhist religion. Jain texts tell us about Jayanti, the Kousambi princess who studied religion and philosophy as a spinster. Buddhist nuns frequently composed hymns. Sanskrit plays and verses were written by women, who were exceptionally skilled in music, painting, and other forms of fine art.

## **II. WOMEN IN ANCIENT POLITICS**

Women held prominent political positions frequently. The Pandya women in charge of the government were mentioned by Megasthenes. The Satavahana queen stated, "Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son." The same was done by Pravabati, Chandragupta II's daughter, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. Soon after the Gupta era, queens ruled in Andhra, Kashmir, and Odisha. Princess Vijaybhattarika was the provincial ruler of the Chalukya King; Under Vikramaditya I, women in the Kannada region served as provincial and village administrators. While women from the aristocratic classes had access to education and other privileges, the common woman suffered shame, deprivation, and obstacles. Archaeology, ancient texts, and artifacts are being used to reconstruct the vast period of ancient India from 2500 B.C. to 250 B.C. Archaeological excavations' earliest finds indicate goddess worship.

The power of the goddesses to nurture and sustain life is mentioned in the earliest religious texts, which date back to 1500 B.C. Our comprehension is greatly enhanced by India's written texts, which date back to the time of the Aryan invasion and the rise of Hinduism and Buddhism. The earliest known civilization in India dates back approximately 2500-1500 B.C. The majority of these cities of archaeological interest are now in Pakistan as a result of India's independence and partition in 1947. However, Lothal, an ancient city-state, is located in Gujarat, an Indian state. A well-organized, prosperous agricultural and commercial society that

traded with other Near Eastern civilizations is revealed by extensive remains at Mohenjodaro, Harrapa, and Lothal. The oldest artifact that is most well-known is a picture of a young, thin girl posing confidently. A society that valued family life can be seen in many of the toys that were discovered. Meanings and numerous female images that suggest goddesses played a significant role have been deciphered from their ancient seals, despite the fact that the actual text has not been deciphered. Few depict women during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. They are frequently referred to as goddesses of fertility. A number of the seals point to a goddess of fertility and vegetation.

Significant natural disasters that altered the course of the Indus River appear to have been the cause of this civilization's demise. It was believed that the indigenous Aryans had conquered these Hindu Kush nomads prior to their arrival. However, when they arrived, the Indus Civilization was already in decline. These Aryans, who had lighter skin than the natives, enslaved the natives and eventually established the caste system. The Aryans' highly hierarchical society was ruled by Brahmin priests, who had political and religious power over the rest of the population. The tenets of Hinduism that are still held in high regard today are laid out in the sacred Vedas, which were written by Brahmins. The Rig Veda, the oldest of these, was mostly written by priests, but a few women also wrote it; provide the earliest writings that can be deciphered from ancient India and provide information about their various gods and goddesses. The goddess Aditi, also known as Prithvi, gives birth to the earth in a story about the creation. Mother Earth was to be kind to the dead, and Aditi was to be prayed to for salvation from sin.

The Rig Veda's depictions of a maiden and a bride highlight a significant aspect of the ideal role that women should play. The attractive jewelry, radiance, and beauty of a daughter and a maiden were praised. The young girl's capacity to bear children and her feminine sensuality may have been the subject of this description. At festival gatherings, young virgins met attractive men and began a romantic relationship with them. They then tied the knot and sought their parents' blessing before getting married. It was very important to be a virgin bride. The new bride received useful guidance, including: Instead of being enraged or hostile toward her husband, she was to be tender, amiable, glorious, and a mother of sons. The commonly used statement: "May you be the mother of a hundred sons" was how it came to be.

At the time, Hinduism held that a woman's job was to be a good wife so that the couple's needs could be met by the gods and goddesses. An altar that was mostly cared for by the father or husband was cared for by the wife or mother when he was away from the house. She was in charge of lighting the sacred flame at all times. Women were also expected to recite and sing hymns to the deities in the majority of other cultures. Divine couples like Surya and Soma and Indra and Indrani were used as models. Goddesses were generally regarded favorably, despite occasional glimpses of their darker side.

Additional early goddesses were the sisters Dawn and Night. The next group of ancient texts are the Upanishads, which were written around 800-600 B.C. Authors started reinterpreting earlier Vedic writings. The ritualistic knowledge of the Brahmin priests was no longer the only way to reach Brahman, the universal soul; Self-awareness, on the other hand, was the primary means. There is evidence to suggest that two educated women debated theology. How different this is from the same era in the Near East, when Pandora and Eve commit evil. In India, women are studying theology. Sadly, current Indian scholars have spoken negatively about these two women.

The next set of texts that talk about women in ancient India are The Laws of Manu. We can learn about women's legal status, but not necessarily what was done, like earlier legal documents from the Ancient Near East. The majority of law codes are not descriptive but rather prescriptive. Men were in charge of women, as was the case in other ancient societies: father, husband, and son. A woman's marriage was seen as her second birth with a new name. The wife was required to be present in order to make use of her fertility powers in successful religious ceremonies. Adultery was not punished as severely as it was in other ancient cultures. If he was insane or unable to conceive, the woman could also divorce him. In ancient Rome, a wife could be divorced if she drank, was rebellious or dishonest, was unmarried (even if she had children), or was a spendthrift. Some evidence suggests that the ancient Hittites and Hebrews engaged in levirate marriage. However, it would appear that the majority of widows never married again.

Women made significant contributions to the economy in ancient India. Women were needed to assist men with the various seasonal tasks because India was an agricultural nation. Like today, India used to be made up of thousands of villages. The family was the primary unit, not the individual. Families typically consisted of three generations living together, with the exception of

the Malabar Coast in the southwest, where matriarchal social organization predominated. Tamil women in the south wrote poetry about singing at work and with their families, sometimes with aristocratic feats in the title. This patriarchal system dominated the religious ceremonies. The oldest male was given the responsibility of regularly carrying out the ancestor worship rituals at home among the Indians.

The pyre for his parents' funeral was started by the oldest son. Studying the holy Vedas or serving as Brahmin priests was forbidden to women. However, some women may have psychic abilities. In the past, courtesans and prostitutes were a part of Indian society.

Courtesans in ancient Greece were often literate and skilled in music and dancing, in addition to providing the usual sexual services. People who regularly worked as prostitutes in busy areas. Prostitutes will one day belong to a specific caste. Prostitutes and courtesans who had professed their sins were frequently accommodated in Buddhist nunneries. As Hinduism developed, certain aspects dominated: the caste system, karma, dharma, reincarnation, and In the beginning, there were four primary castes, all of which included women. Caste dictated everything from your diet to the people you could hang out with and marry. In some cases, a lower-caste man could marry a lower-caste woman, but a lower-caste woman couldn't do so without hurting her family and making herself unclean. In India, women have a lower status than men do, so if you didn't do your dharma or duty, you didn't have enough good karma to be reincarnated in a higher caste or in a different form of life, like a woman who was less important than a man. Hindus came to believe that each deity was an incarnation or avatar of Brahma, the world's soul. Each god has been born multiple times. Devi, Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi, and Kali were especially adored.

Saraswati was Brahma's wife and the one who created the world; however, after Shiva and Vishnu were born, she lost her significance. Saraswati was the goddess of writing, mathematics, the arts, music, magic, and eloquence. She invented the first alphabet. Many people believe that she is the mother of all life because it was her divine energy that united with the awareness of Brahma, who was born from the golden egg from the sea. The two created all of the world's knowledge and creatures as a result. Saraswati was also a river goddess, and her name means "the flowing one." She is typically depicted seated on a lotus blossom throne and with a white swan. Her four arms indicate that her power extends everywhere. She is demonstrating her spiritual knowledge by playing the vina, an Indian lute, while

simultaneously holding books and beads in two of her arms. Parvati was Shiva's wife. She is frequently depicted with Him in statues and paintings. They seem to be the perfect couple who are in love.

She is also Kali, the pretty goddess who rides on a tiger, Durga, the ten-armed goddess of battle, and Kali in some of her incarnations or reincarnations. Parvati, which means mountain girl, is thought to be the daughter of the Himalayas.

Lakshmi was Vishnu the preserver's wife. She is frequently depicted seated on a lotus because she was born standing on one. She is the goddess of success, beauty, wealth, and luck. She represents everything that is feminine, whereas her consort Vishnu represents everything that is masculine. In numerous paintings, they are shown flying across the land on the back of Garuda, the enormous king of birds. Vishnu went with Lakshmi. They had a son named Kama who was the god of love and is depicted in numerous paintings as resembling the cupids on Valentine's Day cards. Her attendants are white elephants. Lakshmi is also worshiped as Sita, the reincarnation of Rama's ideal wife, in the Indian epic known as the Ramayana. On the night of the new moon in November, Indian women clean their homes once a year and hang tiny lanterns outside that look like stars. Women hope that Lakshmi will come to their homes and bring them good fortune and prosperity in the coming year. Together with the stars—the most exquisite jewels of all—Lakshmi resides in the sky. The warrior goddess Durga is one of Devi's avatars. She is invincible in battle and was made by the gods to kill the buffalo monster that was threatening their power. She used each of her ten hands to kill the beast with a weapon.

The goddess Devi was the Shakti, which was more abstract than anthropomorphic because she was the essence of existence. She was in charge of the elements of air, water, fire, and earth and was the only great mother goddess. In the early cultures of the Indus Valley, goddess worship was the inspiration for the legend of Devi as Kali. Devi is incomprehensible and omnipotent. Kali is Devi's worst quality. Kali was sent to Earth to eliminate the demon race, but her actions were so disastrous that many people perished. To put an end to the slaughter, Shiva, her husband, threw himself on the bodies. When Kali realized that she was stepping on Shiva's decaying body, she woke up. She has four arms and hands. The sword and the severed head that represent death are held in the hands of both. With her other two hands, she is holding a prayer book and beads that represent life. Kali is sometimes depicted as a black

goddess, her dark skin representing the essence of all perishable things and reflecting the earth's dark soil. Her teeth are stained with blood, and she has rivers of blood flowing from her.

Bloody sacrifices are still made to her at her Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, India, which is named after her. Varuna, the Lord of Universal Order or dharma, and Shiva, the destroyer and giver of life, were the two male gods with the greatest popularity. Varuna also appears as Vishnu, the great hero who reincarnated as Krishna.

The Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, depict women as having greater autonomy and competence than religious or legal writings. The Mahabharata contains evidence of both polyandry and polygamy. The events in these stories demonstrate the management and problem-solving abilities of women. The Ramayana's heroine, Sita, is a good wife who remains determined to manage her life. Because public opinion continues to deny her innocence, she is forced to go into exile and return to Earth, her mother. The model for sati, a later Indian tradition

in which a wife sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre, is this ritual suicide. Wives and daughters could become ascetics, just as they did in the medieval West, if their current circumstances were unsustainable.

Between the sixth and seventh centuries, two new religions, Jainism and Buddhism, emerged in India. They would have a significant impact not only on India but also on other parts of Asia. Buddha's father was Siddhartha Gautama, prince of a powerful tribe in Nepal's Himalayan foothills. When Siddhartha realized that his parents had purposely kept him ignorant of the widespread poverty, he gave up his tribal prestige and wealth. After that, he went looking for the reasons behind this. He started by studying the Brahmin sages, and then he tried meditation with extreme asceticism. When he reached a pipal tree in Sarnath, which is now outside of Varanasi, he suddenly understood. He transformed into the Buddha, the enlightened one, at this point. Over time, people began to follow his eight-step path and his Four Noble Truths in order to achieve his goal of ending suffering everywhere in the world. Buddha saw himself as a philosopher and teacher rather than the founder of a religion. He did not disparage Hindu deities or rituals. The dharma should be practiced in accordance with Brahmin customs, ritual sacrifices should be made, and the caste system should be abolished, according to Buddha. Keeping the Hindu concept of karma alive, Buddha was correct that what

we do in life has an effect on other people. Nirvana was within reach of everyone.

In the same way that the West did nearly a thousand years later, Buddhism developed monasticism. Buddha taught for forty-five years until his death in 483 B.C., but he discouraged women from becoming nuns. Buddhism in India emphasized the importance of marriage as the best relationship. Encourage wives to create a home environment that contributes to the upkeep of society.

### III. CONCLUSION

In the ancient Bharat Varsa, women had a much higher status than men did at the time. Power and strength are the meanings of the feminine word "Shakti." Literature suggests that a single woman bothered the rulers, leading to the destruction of towns and kings. For instance, the Valmiki Ramayana teaches us that when Ravana kidnapped Sita, his kingdom as a whole was destroyed. In Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata, Draupadi's public humiliation led to the deaths of all the Kauravas. Sillapathigaram by Elango Adigal asserts that Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan injured Kannaki in error, which led to the burning of Madurai, the Pandya capital.

In the Vedic era, women and men were treated equally in many ways. Women made public sacrifices alongside men. One script features Vishvara, a female rishi. Some of the Vedic hymns are said to have been written by women, such as Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant, or Indrani, Indra's wife. In the early Vedic era, women may have had access to the sacred thread and the Vedas. The Haritasmrti talks about a group of women who were called Brahnavadinis and lived their whole lives studying and doing rituals. They never had children. Panini, a wife of a teacher or preceptor, suggests that women at the time could also be students and teachers of sacred Vedas. There were three notable historical female scholars: Kathi, Kalapi, and Bahvici. One of several female philosophers mentioned in the Upanishads who disagreed with their male colleagues is Vacaknavi, who challenged Yajnavalkya. The Rig Veda also mentions women engaged in combat. Even Megasthenes, a witness from the fifth century B.C.E., mentions a single queen named Bispala, and female guards who protect Chandragupta's palace are heavily armed. The Hindu religion has occasionally been criticized for encouraging gender inequality, which has hurt Hindu women. This is a false assumption. During the Vedic era, we find female scholars like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Romasha, and Indrani.

The Upanishads talk about women philosophers like Sulabha, Maitreyi, and Gargi. In terms of religion, Hindus have elevated women to the status of divinity. The notion that men rule India and Hinduism is one of the most prevalent misconceptions. This is not the case, however. In this religion, the words for strength and power are credited to the feminine. Shakti means "power" and "strength" in Sanskrit. All male power comes from the female. There is a distinction between upadhyaya (a preceptor) and upadhyayani, as well as between an acarya (a preceptor) and an acaryani (a lady teacher or a preceptor's wife). The Trimurti, consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, are powerless without their female counterparts.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Chapter 2. (n.d). Status of Women in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Period. Retrieved January 04, 2019 from [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/123356/8/08\\_chapter2.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/123356/8/08_chapter2.pdf)
- [2] Mohapatra, H. (2015). Status of Women in Indian Society. Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science, 3(6), 33-36. Retrieved January 04, 2019 from <http://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol3-issue6/F363336.pdf>
- [3] Rout, N. (2016). Role of Women in Ancient India. Odisha Review. Retrieved January 05, 2019 from <http://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2016/jan/engpdf/43-48.pdf>
- [4] Roy, S. (2017). Educational status of women in the Vedic period: An Introduction. International Journal of Applied Research, 3(8), 357-358. Retrieved January 05, 2019 from <http://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2017/vol3issue8/PartF/3-6-228-625.pdf> Status of Women in India. (n.d). Retrieved January 01, 2019 from [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/8102/9/09\\_chapter%202.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/8102/9/09_chapter%202.pdf)
- [5] Gate, Smita; (2001) Empowerment of women in Watershed Management: Guraiya Panchayat, Madhya Pradesh, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Vol.8, JULY-December
- [6] Karl, Marilee (1995); Women and Empowerment- Participation and Decision Making, Zed books: London and New Jersey.
- [7] Narasimham, S (1999). 'Empowering women: An Alternative Strategy from Rural India'. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- [8] Paswan and Jaideva (2002). 'Encyclopedia of Dalits in India'. New Delhi: Kalpiz Publication, Vol:9
- [9] Sethi M. Raj (1982). 'Female Labour in Agriculture'. Chandigarh: Amrit Printing Press.