

Status of Women in Vedic Period

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Abstract: - During the Rig Vedic period, women were treated equally to their male counterparts in terms of status and position. Only married men with their spouses were permitted to perform religious rites on numerous occasions. Women have not only had equal position but have been described as more than the better half in the scriptures, a status that she has lost with the passage of time. In Vedic civilization, women were revered and valued not only as mothers who brought up new generations, but also as individuals with immense ability to see the truth and contribute greatly to human society. In the early Vedic period, women received adequate education. Women were free to choose their husbands and "Swayamvar" provide them with the choice. Even though the patriarchal system was prevalent in ancient India, women were treated with respect and devotion. There was abstract of women engaged in battle field in Rig Veda. The Hindu faith has been attacked for increasing male-female inequity due to the detrimental status of women. This assumption is erroneous. Women were regarded as mother goddess (Shakti) in the **Vedic Period (1500-1000 BC)**, a symbol of life with enormous ability for tolerance and sacrifice, and so they held a respectable place in society. Women were associated with property in the Epics and Puranas. Even Buddhism didn't help women much. Manu ordered that a woman would be reliant on her father in childhood, her spouse in youth, and her son in old age. We should follow Vedic advice to empower women in society.

Keywords – Ancient India, Education, Goddess, Patriarchal, Swayamvar

INTRODUCTION

Women's labour has conveyed the picturesque of civilization through its history of superiority and restraint, resulting in the foundation of human civilization and the affirmation of its power. Since the dawn of time, women's efforts have played a significant role in enhancing the life of human civilization via their superiority and willingness to achieve rapid development in all disciplines on this planet. Despite the fact that women's achievements have been obscured throughout history, ancient Indian literature depicts women's visibility in this regard, where women's standing has altered over time and space. The status of a woman refers to her place in a network of social roles, advantages, rights, and

responsibilities. It alludes to her family and social rights and responsibilities. The level of prestige and respect afforded to a woman is often measured in comparison to that accorded to a male. In India, Hindu women's status has been in flux. Throughout history, it has undergone significant transformations. Women in India have historically gone through two stages in their lives: subjection and deliverance. She has been oppressed and suppressed at times, and she has also been revered as the deity of the household.

From the Vedic era till today, her status as well as position has been changing with the passage of time. They were regarded as caretakers of morality and ideals. What's more significant is that they're shown as people with enormous

potential for realising the deepest truths. Woman is a creature of institutions. The subject of women's position and status is broad and extensive, and so crucial. By virtue of their creativeness, intellect, and spirit of sacrifice, they played an admirable role in family and social life and made a magnificent contribution to society's overall development.

We are proud of the accomplishments of Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosa, Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi. They are still role models for today's women. Such women's character and intellect were glorified in the past, and old customs were revered. In terms of access to and capacity for the ultimate knowledge of the Absolute, they were fully equal to men. They were Mantra-perceivers; they undertook huge penances and did what only men could do. The society imposed no restrictions of any kind. They possessed great wealth, land, and were the only guardians of their offspring. They were viewed as embodiments of Divinities, Sustainers, and creative force that is beneficial to human society's growth and prosperity.

There are various factors to consider while analysing the position of women in India during the Vedic period. We can learn more about the past by studying the Vedas, Arthashastra, Dharmashastra, Ramayana, Mahabharat, Gita, and other old literary works. The situation of women in Vedic times is described by **Manu, the father of Indian political theory**, as one of dependency and subjugation. The antique political literature Arthashastra confirms that women in society were subjected to several restrictions.

Laws were mostly derived from conventions and religious factors in Vedic

era or ancient India. India has a long and documented legal history, as well as a body of laws known as **Smritis**, that date back to the Vedic era. India had a collection of laws and a legal system that served as the backbone of society and governance even during the Indus Valley Civilization. Dharma was the foundation of Hindu law, and it is described in Manu's Dharmashastra. It was made up of the **Varna system**, which stands for Caste system. According to the Hindu Varna system, society was divided into four classes. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras made up the group. **Dharmashastra** included life-cycle rites, daily rituals, specific responsibilities, and proper behaviour for all four varnas.

The Vedas are ancient texts that contain the earliest known human concepts and serve as the bedrock of ancient society. As shown in the **Taittiriya Samhita**, two wheels of a cart, man and woman, imply that both man and woman resemble two bulls yoked in a chariot. Women, according to the Samhita, are stepping stones in their families. According to Vedic belief, Brahma (the Creator) had a man arise from his right side and a woman emerges from his left side. The lesson delivered by the Vedas through this symbolic account is that there is equality between men and women in this world, and that humanity should be mindful of it in all their dealings.

In a scene from the **Brihaddharma Purana**, Maharshi Jabali asks Maharshi Vyasa, "What components are supreme in all three worlds?" There is no better location of pilgrimage than the Ganges, no greater world sustainers than Lord Vishnu, no one as venerable as Lord Shiva, and no greater master than one's own mother, says Maharshi Vyasa. Apart from the foregoing,

the **Manava Dharma-Sutra** states that motherhood is ten lakh times more important than that of a teacher (upadyaya, one who gives formal knowledge), a lakh times more important than that of a preceptor (acharya), and a thousand times more important than that of a father.

Their position decreased throughout the later Vedic period. The glorious Rig-Vedic ideals of fairness and harmony started to erode. They were deprived of the right to study the Vedas, recite Vedic mantras, and practise Vedic rituals. Women, on the other hand, were forced into marriage or domestic life, as well as indisputable devotion to their husbands. Their parents were not pleased with the birth of a girl. Several authors of Dharmasastras and Puranas mocked women and Sudras. They were commonly regarded as the most immoral. According to the Brahma Purana, members of the first three Varnas should undergo Vedic bathing and prayer mumbling rites, but women and Sudras are not permitted to do so.

The study will assist us in visualising women's engagement in social, economic, religious, education, political and domestic affairs in Ancient times.

SOCIAL STATUS

The Rig-Veda, the oldest of the Vedas, is filled with hymns on natural events. Women's status is portrayed in the Rig-Veda with tremendous reverence. Usha (the goddess of Dawn) and Aditi, the mother of many Gods such as Mitra, Varun, Rudra, and Aryaman, are depicted in the Rig-Veda. The goddess Usha brings in the new day by dispelling the darkness and reawakening the mortals. Rati, the Night, is Usha's sister, and it is because of her that all creatures rest after a day's work, i.e. Usha and Rati are

daughters of Heaven. Family was a significant institution in the Rig-Vedic era. Duhitri was the name given to the family's daughter. Although it appears that society values the male child, allusions in the Rig-Veda suggest that female children are equally valued. In Vedic times, a parent did not want to differentiate between his son and daughter. He treated them all the same. Women were provided excellent education so that they may live their social and personal lives to the fullest.

Gosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Saci, and Vishvavara, for example, penned hymns and rose to prominence as intellectuals. Marriage was viewed as a sacred task in the Vedic era. Daughters were given the opportunity to choose their husbands in this manner. Unmarried daughters, on the other hand, might stay at their father's house. Because the girls were grown at the time of their marriage, there is no record of child marriage in the Rig-Vedic period. Brides were thought to bring good luck to their groom's home once they married. They were given a high-ranking position. It is said that matured girls used to attend numerous festivals and public gatherings to meet with potential husbands, and that their mothers would also let them to do so. One of the most essential responsibilities of Vedic women was to nurse and tame their offspring. Women should conduct sacrifices, weave garments, irrigate plants, and fulfil the wants of her family members, according to a Rig Vedic hymn. During the Vedic time, the concept of '**Dan**' or gift was widely used. The practice of dowry, on the other hand, was unknown. In Vedic writings, the term '**Dampati**' was frequently employed. This expression means "two joint proprietors of the household".

Gods such as Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Indra, Agni, and others are worshipped in Vedic hymns, while Goddesses such as Saraswati, Laxmi, and Mahashakti are given equal honour and prominence. Kshatriya girls were also permitted to settle marriages according to their own inclinations, according to Vedic literature. This was accomplished through the '**Swayavara**' or self-choice custom. This is a symbol of their respectability in Vedic society. The Vedic people were completely unaware of the notion of marital relationships being broken or dissolved. In Vedic times, widow remarriage was fashionable, and the deceased husband's brother looked after the bereaved sister-in-law.

Hindus have believed in dual worship from the Vedic era, Siva with Sakthi, Vishnu with Lakshmi, Rama with Sita, and so on. Lord Shiva and his wife (Shakti) appear to be merged in a single body, with he on the right side and her on the left. **Ardhanariswara**, God's half-man, half-woman avatar, is the source of this creation. In the Hindu mythology, each of the three main Gods, Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector, and Siva the Destroyer, is accompanied by a Shakti, who is both his feminine counterpart and his force of manifestation. This more positive element of women's great status in ancient India explains only one side of the story. However, the portrayal of women from the opposite side does not appear to be as bright. Polygamy was common among the kings, nobles, rich, and high caste men, according to several inscriptions and references in literature. Apart from polygamy, keeping female slaves was considered a social status symbol.



Women Empowerment: Vedic Period
Kiradu Temple (1153 A.D.-1178 A.D.),
Rajasthan, India.

Source: National Gallery of Art,
Government of India

ECONOMIC STATUS

The Vedic women were economically independent. Some of the ladies worked as teachers. Clothing spinning and weaving were done at home. The place of manufacturing was at home. Women also assisted their husbands in their agricultural endeavours. Personal property, such as jewellery and clothing, was allowed for the women. The Arthashastra allows women to have up to 2000 **silver panas** in their possession. The funds in excess of this limit were kept in trust for the wife by the husband. Only in the direst of circumstances might a husband use a woman's possessions. When a lady dies, her property is passed down to her daughters (not to the husband or the sons). In the event that her husband died without a son, the widow inherited his property. In some cases, women appear to be treated as commodities. She may be given away or rented out like any other object. This was the mindset of a patriarchal, private-

property-based society. Women had no proprietary interest under **Brahmanical law**, and the provision for Stridhana is quite restricted, extending only to the wife's rights to jewels, decorations, and gifts given to her at the time of her marriage.

In the Vedic era, a widow did not have the right to inherit her slain husband's possessions. The Rig Veda, on the other hand, recognised a spinster's right of ownership in her father's property. Daughters who were not married had a share of their father's property. In the absence of a boy, the daughter held complete legal rights to her father's possessions. Mother's estate was split evenly among her sons and unmarried daughters following her death. Married women, on the other hand, had no claim to their father's property. A woman had no direct share in her husband's property as a wife. A bereaved mother was entitled to certain benefits. Manus also inhibits women from their economic rights. "A wife, a son, and a slave are deemed to have no property; the wealth that they earn belongs to him to whom they belong," he says.

Women always had distinct economic role to play right from ancient ages and that it took its contours according to different class, age, place and socio-religious conditions of that age. There was also a direct link between the social status of women and their role in production. The association of women with productive and creative work is an aspect on which most ancient texts are silent, where ever the work on women we get; it usually seems to follow the pattern laid by Dharmasutras that is women in relation to household work.

RELIGIOUS STATUS

Women were encouraged to perform certain chores according to their abilities throughout the Vedic time. She had religious liberty that allowed her to conduct the rituals. She was entrusted with a significant role in the sacrifice. In **Brahmavidya**, the ultimate knowledge, we see Gargi and Maitreyi standing out. In a sacrifice, Visvavara takes the place of a Rtvik. In the religious sphere, the wife had full rights and routinely joined her husband in religious rituals. The husband and wife performed religious ceremonies and sacrifices together. Women were even active participants in religious debates. Manus asserts of women and their relationship to men, "Women must always be honoured and respected by the father, brother, husband, and brother-in-law who wished their own wellbeing", also "Where women are honoured, the very Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite even could yield rewards."

Manus believes that a family in which women suffer is certain to perish, whereas a family in which women are content thrives. He also instructs everyone to maintain order with the ladies of the home. He also tells every householder to love his daughter as the most precious object of affection and to respect his mother as the most beloved person on the planet.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS

In ancient India, women's education was very significant. Education improves and enriches a person's life by strengthening their intelligence and wisdom. As a result, women's education has been prioritised since the Vedic era. During the Vedic era, women's education was at its peak. In terms of knowledge and education, women were

on par with males. The girl studied several topics while practising celibacy throughout the Vedic era. Philosophy and logic were two subjects in which women excelled. They used to sing the Rigveda's shlokas. Women pandits included Ghosha, Lopamudra, Vishvavara, Appala, and Urvashi.

In addition to the woman's **Upanayana**, there was also the sutra, or inclusion ritual. Women, like males, used to be required to be celibate in order to obtain an education. After Brahmacharya's life had come to an end, Samvartana ceremonies were performed. Sages' names include Gargi, Barwa, Sulabha, Maitrei, and others. Women were taught celibacy even in the later Vedic period. She was also skilled in other aspects of Vedic knowledge. In that era, there were two types of women. One is a **sage bride**, while the other is a **Brahmavadini**. Before marriage, Sadu brides followed Brahmacharya, and Brahmavadini continued to learn throughout her life. Up to around B.C. 300, many females from wealthy households were given a good education.

Acharyas were women who worked as teachers. Instances of women's education can be found even during the Buddhist era. There were thirty two lifetime Brahmacharini and eighteen married in Theri Gatha's poetry. Khema was a well-educated woman in her time. Subhadra, a well-known monk from the Sanyukta nikaya, was well-known for his lectures.

Women's higher education dates back to the pre-Vedic era and was practised until the Buddhist era, when it was outlawed during the Smriti Yuga. Female education was forbidden by Manu and Yagnayavalakyam. In their Upanayana ceremonies, the chanting of Vedic mantras

has now been halted. Memory based learning developed this arrangement most likely due to their inability to pronounce mantras correctly. Women, like Shudra, were kept apart from education and culture.

Despite this fact, the epics have reference of female education. In the epic Mahabharata, Kunti, the Pandavas' mother, was well versed in the Atharvaveda. As per the epic Ramayana, some ladies were engaged in life-long study and remained unmarried. This statistic demonstrates that in that society, women not only received education but also left the house to attend a seminar. Upadhyaya was the name given to such women. **Panini**, known as "the father of linguistics" describes a school for female teachers. It may be argued that women in the former Middle Ages were completely dedicated to their education. Co-education is also referenced in these epics, which means that boys and girls were educated together. Atreyi, Luv, and Kush were educated in the ashram of Valmiki and this tradition dates back to the Vedic period. Mahabharata also contains examples of women's education. Amba and Shekhawati are supposed to have attended the same school.

There used to be a home schooling system for women, which was thought to be the finest for them. This custom dates back to the pre-Vedic era. Although education was common among upper-class women, she was allowed to attend debates with her father, brother, or spouse. This shows that even upper-class women were not completely self-sufficient. Because the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Manusmriti are the pillars of our civilization, which does not believe in the individual identity of women, this practise persists in modern Indian society as well.



Musician and Learned Women: 600 B.C.
Palitana Jain Temple (early 11th Century),
Gujarat, India.

Source: National Gallery of Art,
Government of India.

POLITICAL STATUS

In Vedic civilization, women played an important role in politics as well. According to the **Atharvaveda**, she is the most important member of society. The Sabha, Vidatha, were the public meetings to which women came and spoke freely. According to an **Atharva Vedic scripture**, a newly married girl was privileged to be a member of the Vidatha when she was sent to her husband's household. Women were used as messenger forms at the time. In those days, women received the same military training as males. Vispala and Mudgalani are seen on their way to the battlegrounds. That was possible because of the military education they received earlier in life.

The Vedic females went to the battleground to assist their men in political matters. To illustrate, Vispala, lost one leg in the fight and was cured by the Asvins by the addition of an iron leg. Furthermore, some sacrifices, such as Rajasuya, Vajapeya, Asvamedha, Purusamedha, and Sarvamedha, are linked to social and

political life. God Savita plays a significant role in the **Asvamedha** sacrifice. The evidence suggests that women's political responsibilities were not only introduced but also persisted in full force during Vedic times. In ancient times, there are very few examples of women participating in politics. Megasthenes described the Pandya ladies who ran the government. The kingdom of minor son was ruled by the Satavahan queen 'Nayanika.' Prayabati, Chandragupta II's daughter, also governed on behalf of the Vakataka prince. Queens ruled in Kashmir, Orrisa, and Andhra Pradesh during the conclusion of the Gupta period. Under the Chalukya King 'Vikramaditya I,' Princess Vijaybhattarika served as the province ruler. In the Kannada region, women also served as regional and local authorities.



Women Horse Riders: Vedic Period.
Kiradu Temple (1153 A.D.-1178 A.D.),
Rajasthan, India.

Source: National Gallery of Art,
Government of India.



Woman Archer: 600 B.C.

Palitana Jain Temple (early 11th Century),
Gujarat, India.

Source: National Gallery of Art,
Government of India.

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

One of the primary responsibilities of women was to bear and raise children. In most households, the mother was the mistress of the house. In ancient India, women's status was not as awful as described in the **Smritis**. She was both a deity and a slave at the same time. The ladies were to be properly cared for, with all feasible amenities given according to the husband's wealth. God would not accept the offering of a man who abuses his wife, thus the wives were not to be abused or mistreated. In ancient India, women were regarded as ideal housewives. They can effortlessly handle even the most difficult situations due to their exceptional mental tranquility. Indian women devote their entire lives to their family. They were

preached in the names of Goddess like Saraswati, Durga, Parvati, Kali etc.

Women's rights to liberty and equality were gradually eroded over time. When they have girls, their situation becomes worse. They were treated harshly by men. Not only they were confined in their house, but were also deprived to be educated. They were also expected to eat after their spouses or even eat their husbands' leftovers. Women were forbidden from dealing with both external and household concerns. The wearing of veils by ladies from upper caste families was fashionable. They were influenced by their parents prior to marriage and by their husband afterward.

CONCLUSION

In the Vedic period, women had far more independence than they did later in India. Hindus have elevated women to the status of divinity in religious concerns. The feminine is the source of all male power. The Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) are ineffectual without their feminine equivalents.

Woman was seen freely during festivals and celebrations, and she participated in sacred sacrifice with men. She had the ability to study and, like Gargi, engage in intellectual debate. There were no constraints on her remarriage if she was left a widow. In light of the foregoing explanation, a really empowered woman in the Vedic age is highly privileged and achieves higher position in the Vedic society as she possessed the attributes listed below –

- a) Accruing knowledge
- b) Achieving repute and honour in all walks of life

- c) Courage is a morality that all women should possess
- d) A woman is not only a guardian of her family, but also of society, and that she can also join the army to defend her country
- e) Economic progress and wealth
- f) Competence in all aspects of life, such as agriculture and warrior ship
- g) A female possesses an enlightening mind that provides wealth, food, and wellbeing

The glorious status of women during the Vedic, Epic, and Jain and Buddhist periods significantly declined during the Dharmashastras, Manusmriti onward. Manu's compilation of societal laws, Brahmanical austerities on Indian society, rigorous constraints of the social caste system, and the marriage relationship between Aryans and non-Aryans were all responsible for the deterioration of women's position.

The Vedic civilization has a great deal to teach modern society. The merits of Aryan womenfolk in the Vedic age should be given preferential treatment as women's empowerment is a matter of great interest in this contemporary era. Women who are oppressed and helpless in today's society can greatly benefit from adopting the characteristics and attributes of women in the Vedic era. The status of women in society is a gauge of social organisation.

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