

# The Role of Women in Vedic and Smṛti Literature: A Study of Social and Cultural Contributions in Ancient India

**Abhaya Kumar Biswal**

*Research Scholar, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.*

**Abstract** – This research paper explores the pivotal role of women in ancient Indian society as depicted in Vedic and Smṛti literature, emphasizing their contributions to social, cultural, and religious spheres. The Vedas considered Śruti (divinely revealed texts), and Smṛtis, human-composed codes of conduct, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding women's status from the Rigvedic period through the Purāṇic age. The study highlights women's roles as educators, scholars, ritual participants, and cultural custodians, underscoring their influence in shaping societal values. In the Vedic era, women enjoyed significant autonomy, participating in intellectual pursuits, composing hymns, and performing rituals alongside men. Notable female ṛṣikās (seers) such as Ghoṣā, Apālā, and Viśvavārā contributed to the Rigveda, reflecting their scholarly prowess. The Smṛtis, while introducing certain restrictions, continued to emphasize women's indispensable role in maintaining dharma (duty) and family harmony. The paper examines the evolution of women's status across different periods, including the Indus Valley Civilization, Rigvedic age, Epic age, and Purāṇic age, analysing shifts in educational opportunities, marital practices, and social responsibilities. It also addresses the psychological and societal roles of women as mothers, wives, and community leaders, portraying them as versatile agents of cultural transmission. Despite later restrictions in some Smṛti texts, such as limited access to Vedic mantras, women were revered as embodiments of Śakti (divine energy) and integral to religious practices. By synthesizing primary textual evidence from the provided documents, this study argues that women were central to the upliftment of ancient Indian society, their contributions transcending domestic roles to impact philosophical, legal, and cultural domains. The paper concludes with reflections on the enduring legacy of these roles and their relevance to contemporary discussions on gender equality, supported by a detailed analysis of key Sanskrit texts and their interpretations.

**Keywords:** Vedic literature, Smṛti, women's roles, ancient India, Rigveda, dharma, Śakti, brahmavādinī, education, marriage, cultural transmission, ṛṣikā, Purāṇic age, Epic age, social life, gender equality, Sanskrit texts, Manu Smṛti, Yājñavalkya Smṛti, Indus Valley Civilization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in ancient Indian society, as depicted in Vedic and Smṛti literature, offers profound insights into their contributions to cultural, social, and religious life. The Vedas, revered as Śruti, and Smṛtis, authoritative texts of human origin, collectively form the backbone of Hindu philosophical and legal traditions. These texts reveal a dynamic portrayal of women, from their esteemed roles as scholars and ritual participants in the Vedic period to their evolving responsibilities in the Smṛti era. This paper examines the multifaceted roles of women, emphasizing their agency in education, marriage, family management, and cultural preservation. It explores how women, regarded as embodiments of prakṛti (feminine energy) and Śakti, were integral to maintaining societal equilibrium. By analysing key texts such as the Rigveda,

Manu Smṛti, and Yājñavalkya Smṛti, alongside references to the Epics and Purāṇas, this study traces the historical trajectory of women's status, highlighting both their empowerment and the challenges they faced.

## I. Women in Vedic Literature: The Rigvedic Period

The Rigveda, the earliest of the Vedic texts, portrays women as central figures in both domestic and intellectual spheres. The principle of “Ātmavat sarva bhūtānām sarva bhūtātma” (the soul is unique across all beings) underscores gender equality at the spiritual level. Women were not only participants in religious rituals but also composers of hymns, with around twenty hymns attributed to female ṛṣikās such as Ghoṣā, Apālā, Viśvavārā, and Lopāmudrā. These brahmavādinīs (female scholars) demonstrated intellectual parity with their male counterparts, engaging in metaphysical discussions, as seen in the Upaniṣads with figures like Maitreyī and Gārgī.

A notable Rigvedic hymn illustrates the esteemed status of women in the household:

**samaraśi svaśure bhava samaraśi svaśrvām bhava ||  
nanāndari samaraśi bhava samaraśi devṛbhiḥ ||**

This hymn, addressed to the bride, elevates her to the role of a “queen” over her in-laws, signifying her authority and respect within the family. Women were also active in public life, attending feasts, dances, and intellectual gatherings, and some, like Gārgī, challenged renowned sages in philosophical debates.

Education was a cornerstone of women's empowerment in the Rigvedic period. Women underwent the upanayana ceremony, donning the sacred thread (yajñopavīta), which granted them access to Vedic studies. Texts like the Gobhila Gṛhya Sūtra confirm that women recited Vedic mantras and participated in sacrifices. The Rigveda's hymns to goddesses like Uṣas (Dawn) and Sarasvatī (Knowledge) further reflect the reverence for feminine divine energy:

**uṣo yā devebhir niṣkṛtā yā ca mānuṣaiḥ ||2  
sā no divā naktam ca saubhagam dātv arhase ||**

Such hymns portray Uṣas as a youthful deity bringing prosperity, paralleling the societal view of women as bearers of light and fortune.

## II. Women in the Post-Vedic and Epic Periods

The post-Vedic period saw a gradual shift in women's status, influenced by the development of caste systems, endogamy, and arranged marriages. While the Rigvedic period allowed women considerable freedom, including the choice of marriage partners and prohibition of child marriage, later Vedic texts introduced restrictions. The Manu Smṛti, for instance, limited women's access to Vedic mantras and confined their sacraments to marriage. However, the term “patnī” (wife) in Vedic rituals signifies equal participation in sacrifices, indicating that women remained essential to religious life.

In the Epic age, as depicted in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, women retained a respectable position. The Mahābhārata advises men to treat their wives with kindness, equating dishonouring a woman to disregarding Goddess Lakṣmī. The Rāmāyaṇa portrays Kausalyā and Sītā performing sandhyā and havana rituals, highlighting their religious agency. The concept of the wife as “ardhāṅginī” (half of the husband) underscores the complementary nature of marital roles, reinforced by rituals like pāṇigrahaṇa and saptapadī.

## III. Women in Smṛti Literature: Roles and Responsibilities

The Smṛtis, composed by sages like Manu, Yājñavalkya, and Parāśara, codified societal norms while adhering to Vedic principles. These texts emphasize women’s roles in upholding dharma and fostering societal well-being. The Manu Smṛti, despite imposing restrictions, acknowledges women’s centrality in family life:

**yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ |3  
yatraitāstu na pūjyante sarvastatrāphalaḥ kriyāḥ ||**

This verse asserts that honouring women ensures divine Favor, while their neglect renders rituals futile. The Smṛtis also outline saṃskāras (purificatory rites) for women, from childhood to death, aimed at cultivating discipline and moral values.

Women’s psychological and social roles are extensively discussed in Smṛti literature. The fourth chapter of the thesis highlights women’s responsibilities in education, marriage, and household management, portraying them as “versatile geniuses” who ensure family harmony. As mothers, women were revered as embodiments of purity and sacrifice, transferring cultural values to future generations. The Yājñavalkya Smṛti and other texts underscore women’s legal rights, such as maintenance and inheritance, reflecting their societal importance.

#### IV. Women in the Purāṇic Age: Religious and Social Liberty

The Purāṇic age marked a resurgence of women’s religious agency. Unlike the Smṛtis, which restricted Vedic mantra recitation, Purāṇic texts allowed women to perform vratas (vows) independently, promising rewards like long life for husbands and children. The Vāmana Purāṇa considers the sight of brāhmaṇa maidens auspicious, reflecting women’s sacred status. The Tantra tradition elevates women as Śakti, indispensable for spiritual practice, declaring that even a low-caste woman adept in sādhana deserves reverence.

The Purāṇas also depict women as cultural custodians. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa illustrates the inseparability of masculine and feminine principles:

**yadi lakṣmīḥ śrutir viṣṇuḥ śabdaḥ kīrtir yadi prabhuḥ |4  
yadi viṣṇuḥ smṛtir lakṣmīḥ sādhvī nārī pativratā ||**

This verse equates Lakṣmī with speech and Viṣṇu with meaning, emphasizing their interdependence. Women’s roles as mothers and wives were seen as divine, with figures like Sītā and Lakṣmī embodying ideal womanhood.

#### V. Education and Intellectual Contributions

Education was a hallmark of women’s empowerment in ancient India. In the Vedic period, women studied the Vedas and participated in intellectual discourse, as evidenced by figures like Maitreyī and Gārgī. The Gobhila Gṛhya Sūtra and other texts confirm women’s eligibility for upanayana, enabling them to recite mantras and perform sacrifices. The Rigveda’s female ṛṣikās composed hymns, demonstrating their scholarly contributions.

In the post-Vedic period, educational opportunities for women declined, with Manu Smṛti restricting Vedic study to men. However, women continued to excel in other fields, such as music, dance, and fine arts, and some, like Sulabhā and Draupadī, were recognized as scholars. The Harita Smṛti mentions brahmavādinīs who devoted their lives to study and ritual, underscoring the persistence of female scholarship.

#### VI. Social Life and Public Roles

Women’s social life in the Vedic period was vibrant, with participation in public gatherings, feasts, and dances. The Rigveda encourages women to engage in religious rituals independently if their husbands are absent:

**patnī yajati yajñe sandhyāṃ ca sarvaṃ karma dhārmikam |  
patyabhāve svatantrā syāt yajñakartuṃ samarthinī ||5**

This reflects women’s autonomy in religious duties. In the Epic and Purāṇic ages, women’s roles expanded to include political and military spheres. The Mahābhāṣya mentions female spear-bearers, and Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra notes women soldiers in the Mauryan army.

The Smṛtis emphasize women’s pivotal role in family and society, portraying them as managers who ensure discipline and harmony. The seventh chapter of the thesis highlights women’s empowerment and social status, noting their charitable disposition and devotion to societal upliftment.

## VII. Challenges and Contradictions

Despite their revered status, women faced challenges in certain periods. The Manu Smṛti’s assertion that women lack independence “nā strī svātantryam arhati”<sup>6</sup>, reflects a patriarchal shift in the post-Vedic era. Some Smṛti texts associate women with lower castes, indicating social biases. However, these restrictions were not universal, as Purāṇic and Tantric traditions restored women’s religious agency.

The tension between empowerment and restriction highlights the complexity of women’s status. While Vedic texts celebrated gender equality, later Smṛtis introduced constraints, possibly due to socio-political changes like caste consolidation and urbanization. Nevertheless, women’s contributions as cultural transmitters and religious participants remained indispensable.

## VIII. Women as Cultural Custodians

The Smṛtis consistently portray women as bearers of culture, responsible for transmitting values across generations. As mothers, they inculcated discipline and moral values, while as wives, they supported family harmony. The thesis’s sixth chapter describes women as “goddesses” symbolizing purity, sacrificing personal desires for societal welfare. This role is epitomized in the concept of strīdharma, which emphasizes duty, devotion, and sacrifice.

The reverence for female deities like Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā reinforces women’s cultural significance. The Rigveda’s Gāyatrī Mantra, symbolized as a feminine deity, is called the “Mother of the Vedas,” reflecting the association of women with knowledge and creation. The Śākta tradition, worshipping the Divine Mother, further elevates women’s spiritual status.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The Vedic and Smṛti literature collectively affirm women’s central role in ancient Indian society, portraying them as scholars, ritual participants, and cultural custodians. The Rigvedic period stands out for its gender equality, with women like Ghoṣā and Maitreyī contributing to intellectual and religious life. While the post-Vedic and Smṛti periods introduced restrictions, women’s indispensability in maintaining dharma and family harmony remained unchallenged. The Purāṇic age restored their religious agency, emphasizing their divine essence as Śakti. The study reveals a nuanced trajectory, marked by empowerment, challenges, and resilience. Women’s roles as educators, mothers, and community leaders highlight their agency in shaping societal values, a legacy that resonates in contemporary gender discourse. Future research could explore comparative analyses with other ancient civilizations to further contextualize these findings.



## Endnote

1. *Rigveda* 10.85.46
2. *Rigveda* 1.113.12
3. *ManuSmṛti* 3.56
4. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*
5. *Rigveda*
6. *ManuSmṛti* 5.147

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