
Women in the Vedic Intellectual Heritage: A Feminist Reappraisal of Indian Knowledge Tradition

Suneeta Asati¹Research Scholar ,School of Studies in English & Research Centre ,Maharaja Chhatrasal
Bundelkhand University ,Chhatarpur (MP)**Dr. K.B. Ahirwar²**Asstt. Professor ,School of Studies in English & Research Centre ,Maharaja Chhatrasal
Bundelkhand University ,Chhatarpur (MP)

Article Received: 16/09/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/10/2025**Published Online:** 16/10/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.325

Abstract:

The 21st century women in India resemble of the ancient heritage of intellectuality and empowerment. In the Vedic period, women were free from all types of gender-based discrimination and were allowed to share their contributions in every field, as they possessed all kinds of skills that men had. They apprehended equal and respected status, and significantly contributed to Indian knowledge traditions by enriching education, philosophy, literature, and spiritual traditions in ancient India. Women like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, and Ghosha are some examples who are considered the symbol of intellectuality and social empowerment. This paper investigates the Vedic principles that supported women to enjoy equal rights and responsibilities as one of the important contributors to a family and society. It also explores the contribution of the Vedic era's women to the Indian knowledge System. It highlights how women were integral to education, philosophy, and literature, enjoying a respected status and actively shaping intellectual discourse. This study also attempts to assess the structural framework of gender relations in ancient Indian civilization.

Key words: Vedic era, women's status, women's scholarship, Indian knowledge system, intellectual heritage

Introduction

In the 21st century, the age of science, technology, and globalization, Indian women have stretched their impact and advancement in every sphere of life; they are contributing in every possible way and are being rewarded with honour and the representation they deserve for it. They have become the backbone of the mainstream of development. "The women in modern times are entering into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman's sphere of role-sets. The modern woman keenly desires to enter into a work career because of the pressing economic needs of the

Asati and Ahirwar 2 family”(Patel 14). India is a country of rich cultural heritage; women have been given a very respectable position in society since the times of the Vedas. In the Vedic period, women were contributing in every field- education, spirituality, economics, politics, and the creation and promotion of new knowledge. But their journey in the Later Vedic and the medieval periods narrates a different kind of story as they started to be humiliated and discriminated on gender grounds; the evil practices that downgraded the women’s status socially and culturally also came into existence in this period. “In the medieval period, the status of women deteriorated considerably. Women were gradually denied their freedom to participate in the family or social matters. Evil practices like sati, polygamy, child marriage were in vogue and women were subjected to face the evil effects of these social practices”(Singh 172). The impact of literature and texts written in the Later Vedic period is clearly visible in the cultural life of medieval time, as women were generally treated as inferior and docile to men, they were forced to a humiliating life where they had to face various kinds of injustice and subjugation, such as child marriage, Sati, Jauhar, purdah, ban on widow remarriage, and lack of education. These systems pushed women into the inferior side of society. The practice of ‘Sati Pratha’ proves that women did have their own existence as human beings; their life and socio-cultural reputation were dependent on a male husband. When they became widow, they were considered unlucky as they had lost their husband the protector and shielded male companion.

Because of the 19th century social reformist movements and the provisions made in the Indian Constitution, once again, women have started stretching their approach towards the new horizons; they have started skilling themselves to compete in the present-day race in all spheres of life, and no doubt, they have become the prominent contributors in the creation of knowledge as were in the Vedic era. Moreover, the status of women has started reflecting their influence in diverse societal conquests with the inclusion in culture, aesthetics, morality, and spirituality. In the last two decades, women have become more powerful to breaking unnecessary boundaries, such as evil cultural practices, which were responsible for their humiliating status in against the male - dominant society. Indian women have achieved commendable progress in literacy, education, and employment. Due to the development in terms of science, technology and globalization, an influence can be traced easily in women’s lives. They have started contributing in the modern and globalized form of development in the field of economics, education, politics, technology, defense services and agriculture etc. “Women who were restricted to only house hold activities previously have now joined hands with men and are working in every field.” (Joglekar). “In fact, there is no sphere of activity in which women are unsuitable or incompetent” (Madhubhai 48).

Whatever the Indian women have gained is a reflection of the rich Vedic heritage that was enriched with fair laws for both men and women. Though, at present, women are successful in registering their influence in societal construction, economic progress, education, science, and spirituality, they need more space so that they can spread their wings to the infinite possibilities. In this regard, the Vedic practices can play a vital role in shaping the future of Indian women. Therefore, the Vedic period needs to be re-explored to know

what social and cultural norms were in support of an equality-based society with no space for gender discrimination, and how Indian

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Women were enjoying taking part in contributing to making and promoting the tradition of creating new knowledge. Do the Vedic traditions need to be re-established in the time of science, technology, and globalization? For this, the study has following objectives-

- (i) To explore the concept of Indian Knowledge Tradition and its relationship with the Vedas.
- (ii) To re-investigate the socio-cultural status of women in the Vedic era.
- (iii) To study the active role of women in creation of new knowledge and their contribution in the field of education, literature, philosophy and spirituality.
- (iv) To assess the role of Indian women in preservation and transmission of Indian Knowledge Traditions

2. Review of literature

Several research scholars and global thinkers have explored and analyzed the status of women in the Vedic era; only a few have investigated their contribution in the intellectual heritage of Vedic era which initiated and developed the Indian Knowledge tradition. Most of the investigations encompass the role and representation of women in the Vedic times and they lack the real exploration of women's contribution in the creation and development of knowledge. But the research reports which have been recorded and published, are good academic source to develop insights about the great Vedic traditions. The research articles suggest that women were given equal status in society and were contributing in every field like men. In the research article "Power, opportunity And Status of Women in The Golden Vedic Era", the researcher discovers how women had enjoyed their power, opportunity in ancient India and advocates for a reappearance to Vedic principles to support women's standing in modern society to make them prominent creature as they were in the Rig Vedic age (Rao 4046-4055). The academic article, "Position of Women in the Rig Vedic Period," discovers the preeminent position and significant roles of women like Usha and Aditi, who enjoyed religious liberty to accomplish rituals and sacrifices together with men, and attained high intellectual and spiritual standards, with many recognized as Rishis or "Mantra perceivers." This paper also examines how women could be involved in public assemblies and debates (Kumar). The academic paper, "The Position and Status of Women in Vedic Culture: A Critical Analysis," studies the developing roles and societal standing of women who were participating enthusiastically in education, religious rituals, and even financial activities in ancient India. (Yadav 300-306). The research paper "The Status of Women's Rights and Importance in the Vedic Period," delves into the historical context of women's involvement during ancient Vedic times. The paper "Vedic Aged Women Empowerment" shows the clear condition of empowered women of the Vedic era. In this paper, the researcher challenges the fallacy that women in ancient Vedic India were subservient, proclaiming instead that they enjoyed equivalent or even greater status to men. The writer highlights abundant examples from Vedic literature, including the Vedas themselves and the Mahabharata, showcasing women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Sati Anusuiya, who established profound wisdom, strength, and leadership, even in intellectual debates and spiritual

practices(Kumari 148-152). The research article “The Vedic Era: Indian Women and Spirituality” analyzes the spiritual state and socio-religious status of women during the Vedic Era in India(Rana et al., 1-7).

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The research article entitled "An Analysis upon Contribution and Status of Women in Ancient India: A Review" synthesizes and critically assesses existing scholarship on the subject, rather than presenting new primary research. (Singh, 10-19). The paper, "Women in Indian Knowledge Systems: Contributions and Representations," critically examines the status of women in Vedic times compared to the present day, challenging common misconceptions about gender inequality in ancient India. It argues that women in the Rig Vedic period enjoyed equal status, considerable freedom, and active participation in various societal aspects, including education, religious rituals, and even warfare, often being revered as "Mother Goddesses" (Shakti). While acknowledging that patriarchal norms later emerged, leading to a decline in women's rights and autonomy, the text emphasizes the contradictory narratives found throughout Indian history, highlighting instances where women held powerful positions and contributed significantly to society(Nikam, 557-573).

Although many scholars have explored the Vedic age to investigate women's contribution in the creation and development of knowledge, most of them are limited only to the socio-cultural status of the Indian women. The representation of the Indian women in the knowledge tradition still needs to be investigated, so that the rich cultural heritage of the Vedic period can be used to make the modern women more empowered and self-reliant, and to enable them to stretch their wings more effectively in the globalized world equipped with science and technology.

3. Research Methodology

The study follows qualitative and textual-hermeneutical analytical methods to investigate the Vedic intellectual Heritage to understand and investigate the Indian Knowledge System. The methodology involves socio-cultural perspective to explore the role of women in creation, promotion, preservation and transmission of new and existing knowledge. It also follows the descriptive study of primary and secondary sources to have a feminist reappraisal of the Vedic era.

4. Theoretical Framework

The term “Veda” itself means “Knowledge” in Sanskrit; the Vedic Indian Heritage that consists of the cultural, societal tradition, spiritual, and philosophical norms that originate from the Vedas, is the oldest holy and knowledgeable scriptures of India. The Vedas are built on the groundwork for Hinduism, Ayurveda (traditional medicine), Jyotish (Vedic astrology), and classical Indian philosophy (Darshanas). They are the bases of the basic and scientific knowledge created at that time. “The Vedas, considered the oldest scriptures in the world, encapsulate a wealth of knowledge in areas such as metaphysics, linguistics, astronomy, and medicine, demonstrating the advanced understanding of the world held by Vedic thinkers”(Pandey 41). Additionally, Vedic Indian Heritage is the ancient spiritual and cultural tradition that is rooted in the Vedas. It contains the development of early Indian religion, philosophy, society, and knowledge systems, forming the bedrock

of much of classical Indian philosophy. In this context, there are several social and cultural systems in which music, dance, astronomy, and mathematics began developing during the later Vedic age that contributed Vedic Indian heritage. Vedic heritage shaped India's later civilization.

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The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) includes the traditional, native, and earliest system of knowledge developed in India's intellectual and cultural development. This is the system of transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. The Indian Knowledge system is created on the generally Vedic literature, the Upanishads, the Vedas, and the Upvedas. Jnan, Vignan, and Jeevan Darshan are the most important components of the Indian Knowledge system that have progressed out of experimentation, observation, and rigorous investigation. Pavan Mandavkar remarks about the Indian Knowledge System that "This tradition of validating and putting into practice has impacted our education, arts, administration, law, justice, health, manufacturing, and commerce(Mandavkar). It means that IKS has broad area of knowledge that covering a wide array of topics such as philosophy, linguistics, cosmology, mathematics, and medicine. The Corpus of Vedic is based on the Indian Knowledge system (IKS), which constitutes the period of written Vedas between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE. The Vedas- Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda- are not only the texts of religion; however, these are knowledge repositories. Sangeeta Sharma highlights that Vedas "have impacted numerous intellectual traditions in India and elsewhere. These works, together with their attendant commentaries, contain deep reflections on epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics that determine the intellectual and spiritual worldview of Indian civilization"(Sharma 52).It derives that Indian Knowledge system origin form the Vedas and other associated texts such as Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. These texts are the intermingling of spiritual knowledge and scientific investigation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Indian knowledge encompasses a vast and diverse array of philosophies, traditions, practices, and systems of thought developed over millennia in the Indian subcontinent. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is the systematic transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. It is a structured system and a process of knowledge transfer rather than a tradition. The Indian Knowledge System is basically associated with the Vedic literature, the Upanishads, the Vedas, and the Upvedas. It has influenced India's education, arts, manufacturing, and commerce and have several aspects such as philosophy, Spiritual Practices, literature, Science and Mathematics, Arts and crafts, and cultural Practices. The rich heritage of ancient knowledge is the outcome of scholarly contributions of the Indian intellectuals; women contributed and performed in every sphere like men and enjoyed a respectable status in the society. They were often seen in the Vedic period as very passionate to take part in ritual participation and proved their leadership in spirituality, education, philosophy, literature, and other contemporary fields of human advancement.

(i) Education and Scholarship

The Vedic period is considered as the noticeable foundation of ancient Indian civilization, where education was considered as one of the most sacred and essential aspects

of life. The main purpose of education was self-realization (Atma gyan) and understanding the universal truth (Brahma Vidya). This was the time when education included all - round development- intellectual, moral, spiritual, and physical, and emphasized liberation (mosksha), it was not just material

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success. The access to education was open for women as it was for men. "It can be rightly said that the education of women was not being neglected. They never showed prejudice against women's education and were concerned about the righteousness of the social order of the women"(Roy 358). During the Vedic era, women enjoyed the position of teachers who contributed to education and shaped society. "The Vedas referred to female teachers as upadhyayas (unmarried female teachers) or upadhyayanis (married female teachers) within Vedic society. The early Vedic period was therefore characterized by women's magnificent role in education"(Yadav 301-302).

Gargi Vachaknai is one of the most admired figures in ancient Indian. She was a teacher and a philosopher; her primary contributions were in the fields of metaphysics, cosmology, and spirituality. Her works are closely associated with the principles discussed in the Upanishads. "Her intellectual prowess was recognized by many, and she is often considered one of the greatest female philosophers in ancient India. (Nikam 566). Her intellectual ability was so advanced that even male scholars, including the great Yajnavalkya, admired her for wisdom by saying, "You are truly a great scholar, Gargi. Only a few have the wisdom to ask such questions" (Nikam 566).

Maitreyi is another name of the same reputed; she was the most intelligent and virtuous woman in ancient India. She was the wife of Yājñavalkya. "She was a renowned academic who generously contributed to the spread of education. In addition to being a "brahmavadini," Maitreyi had an extensive knowledge in Hindu scripture"(Rana et al.3). Maitreyi was the prominent teacher mentioned in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, one of the oldest and most admired texts in the Upanishadic tradition.

(ii) Philosophy and Debates

Philosophy is the main component of the Vedic era. It includes the metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic, aesthetics, and political philosophy. During the Vedic times, there were several women who had a broad philosophical perspective. Maitreyi was a renowned philosopher. She was a woman with intellectual prominence in Vedic philosophy and known as a philosophical interlocutor. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad is attributed as the primary epistemological text of this period, in which Maitreyi and Gargi were two women of excellent intellect, involved in profound scholarly dialogues with Yajnavalkya. "Maitreyi is portrayed as a wise philosopher who engages in deep intellectual discussions with her husband Yajnavalkya. This is a testament to the recognition of women as thinkers in the ancient Vedic tradition, providing a more inclusive view of spiritual wisdom." (Nikam 567). Maitreyi's deep philosophical ideas about immortality, Atma gyan, and the connection between material affluence and spiritual wisdom. Another Vedic era female philosopher was Gargi who remains a towering figure in the history of Indian philosophy. "Gārgī is

recognized as one of the foremost natural philosophers of her time.”(Prahasan 100). She challenged Sage Yajnavalkya with reflective and philosophical questions about the nature of existence and the universe in the excerpt

गागी शाकल्यपुत्रा यज्ञवल् ्यं पृष्टवाचां।

गवचायापयां यज्ञमूलो ब्रह्म गवश्चम् अननतां॥

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यत्सवं यत्सवं यत्सवं यत्सवं यत्सवं।

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.6.1

Paraphrase: Here, Gargi is debating profoundly and asking questions about the nature of the universe, pushing to explain the nature of Brahman (the ultimate reality) and the connection between the individual self (Atman) and the universe(Nikam 566).

(iii)Active Ritual Participation

“The participation of women in Vedic rituals was not merely symbolic; it was deeply tied to the cosmological and spiritual beliefs of the time. The presence of women in rituals was seen as vital for several reasons” (Chandrashekhar). The balance of male (Purusha) and female (Prakriti) vim is accentuated frequently. Women’s participation in rituals was believed to create a balance of energies, which was essential for the harmony of the cosmos and the accomplishment of the ritual. In this context, the Vedic rituals often had the dual purpose of safeguarding the favor of the gods and ensuring the continuation of family lineage. The women were considered as mothers, nurturers, and revered as the continuers of the heredity. Women’s role in rituals was got crucial to this process. The Vedic era’s women also contributed to ensuring the purity and sanctity of the rites, reflecting their role as the upholders of dharma (moral order) within the family and society.

(iv)Literature and Scripture

The Vedic age was the time when the scriptures begun to be composed in Vedic language. The women in the Vedic era were not just passive figures; they made an active contribution to Indian literature and enriched their voices in Vedas and Upanishads to make them an integral part of the Indian knowledge System. “This is evident from the Rig-Veda-Samhita, which documents the existence of female seers and sages who were renowned authors of Vedic mantras and were highly regarded for their intelligence and learning”(Nogia 314). The participation of women in Indian metaphysics (Brahma Vidya), Ethical and moral philosophy (Dharma), is a great source the Indian knowledge tradition that helps to lay down the foundation of composing hymns, philosophical discussions, and ritual practices. Lopamudra- wife of Sage Agastya, one of the female preachers of the Vedic period, it is believed to have preached as many as 179 hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda along with Sage Agastya. She justified her contribution, life and name Lopamudra as “The phrase ‘Lopamudhra’ means ‘one who is completely immersed in herself’(Rana et al.3). The most prominent hymns in which Lopamudra made her involvement in shaping Vedic philosophy are of immense important to show her literary skills and contribution to the Vedic knowledge

आ नो भ ं यथा पूर्व यथा शानतां समां प्रगत।

यथा तुवं शागनतरस्तु यथा पुरीणां तपोमयम्॥

"May we experience the same joy and peace as in the past,
May we continue our spiritual journey with equanimity,
May the fire of devotion (tapas) that burns within us,
Help us reach the divine, living in unity with the world."

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(Rigveda 1.179), which is attributed to Lopamudra: 1.179.1 (Nikam565))

Ghosha, another contributor to scriptures, was an extremely skilled and knowledgeable Rishika of the Rig Veda. She composed two complete hymns from the tenth book. "She was the granddaughter of Dirghatamas and the daughter of Kakshivat, both of whom wrote songs honoring Ashwins"(Rana et al, 3). The second hymn, composed by Ghosha, shows her spiritual intellect and literary skills

आ वामग्नं सुमतिर्वातिनीवसूनयतिना हर्तुं कामायंसि ।

अभूत् गोपा तमथुना शुभस पी परिायाम्णो दुर्यानाशीमतह ॥ (Rigveda 10.40.12)

ā vāmaghan sumatirvājīnīvasū nyaśvinā hr̥tsu kāmāyamsata |

abhūtaṁ ghopā mithunā śubhas patī priyāaryamṇo duryānaśīmahī ||

Paraphrase: O Ashwinikumar as, full of wealth and food. Be pleased with us, be helpful to us in fulfilling our desires, be graceful to us. Let us decorate the home of the husband by becoming his beloved (Pushkar).

This verse represents the spirituality and position of women in the Vedic time and their contribution to literature and philosophy. Here, in this verse, Ghosha desires for the qualities of her future husband as she was a proclaimer of Brahmana who led a purposeful spiritual life. Possibly, she desires an educated man whom she could have philosophical debates (Mody).

(v) Persevere and Transmitter of Knowledge

Women in the Vedic period were not only the pupils and learners but also preservers and transmitters of knowledge. They were the prominent contributor to ensure the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural tradition. However, they were sustained and passed on to the next generation. Oral tradition was abundant during the Vedic period, and because of this, the Vedas were transmitted orally; that's why women learned hymns and chants by heart and helped preserving them for future generations. "Women were subject to earn knowledge and practice them and also women were considered to be the embodiment of great virtue and wisdom."(Kumari 151).

6. Conclusion:

The foundation of the Indian knowledge system and endorsement of its potency are the consequences of prolonged women's endeavors. The history of superiority and confinement includes a clear picture of Indian knowledge traditions in human civilization, where the Indian societal structure has provided an important and active role for women. The society, in ancient India, was based on equality and harmony where women played a vital role by sharing their skills and knowledge, as a result, the Indian knowledge tradition has a great contribution from extremely skilled and knowledgeable women like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudhra and Ghosha. They contributed in education and proved their

scholarship, they learned philosophy and proved their skills in debates, they developed their skills and contributed in literature, they gained spirituality and participated actively in rituals and finally they contributed in its preservation and transmission even in oral form of transmission. As the oral tradition was affluent during the ancient time, it is quite possibility that there might be many more women whose contribution could not be recorded.

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The Vedic era emphasized the enduring value of the Vedic tradition and sociocultural norms for fostering knowledge, self-reliance, and just social order. The Vedic norms can work as a stimulator to motivate contemporary women; hence, it is required to re-explore and establish the Vedic norms in the 21st century, so that the active contribution women in generating and preserving of knowledge could become a kind of motivation. Highlighting the Vedic norms, it is suggested that they are still considered as the backbone of the Indian society and are beneficial in the present time to provide more empowerment to women so that they can spread their wings with more liberty and to make them more competent and skilled so that they can face the challenges in a better way.

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