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Empowered Women in Ancient Indian Tradition

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Swami Vivekananda, an Indian Hindu monk, who was a great philosopher, author and religious teacher as well, once said: “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them, who are you?” (Vivekvani, 2022, sec. 3). In fact, he related women’s education to the growth of an entire nation when he said: “The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women” (Vivekvani, 2022, sec. 2).

While it has been lately propagated that Indian females got access to education and a higher status in society only because of those nationalist reformers who were working to stabilise the political ground of the newly independent India, the rich ancient Indian civilization that flourished under a differently working heteronormative order seems to be lost under the layers of past. Thus, it becomes imperative to retrieve those empowered women from the age-old Indian texts which proudly mention these ladies and those traditions which emphasised upon freedom, education and social status of women.

An insight into the early Vedic period, the specific dates of which cannot be calculated but is believed to have existed before or alongside Harappan Civilization, allows us to understand that girl education

around that time was given much more importance than it had been in the past few centuries in India or in the western countries. At that time, a child got enrolled into a school, or a „Gurukul“, at the age of seven. A sacred thread called „Janeau“ was conferred upon all the children, irrespective of their gender and caste, which marked the beginning of their student life. This ceremony was called „Upanayana“ (Chatterjee, 1951, p. 130).

As education was accessible to everyone at that time, the gurukuls promoted a co-ed system. In fact, female teachers called „Upadhyayi“ or „Acharyini“ also instructed the students and imparted them the Vedic knowledge. After the completion of their Brahmacharya, or student life, they were free to live their lives as an ascetic or marry and become a householder. Females who wished to pursue higher studies were referred to as „Brahmavadinis“. This title was conferred upon those women who were highly knowledgeable and intelligent. “The Rig Veda contains hymns written by 27 women scholars” (2022a, para. 5) which proves the large numbers of gurukuls and female scholars during the Vedic era.

Brahmavadinis, yet, are generally confused with Rishikas, or female sages, who renounced the worldly and marital pleasures to attain spiritual enlightenment. Unlike them, Brahmavadinis only refers to highly educated women who were allowed to marry if they desired so. This implies that all Rishikas were Brahmavadinis but not all Brahmavadinis were Rishikas.

Special provisions were made for Rishikas and they were exempted from some rules that male hermits had to follow. This allowed them to study throughout their lives while living at their parents' house, Rishis, on the other hand, had to leave their parental home and go to the forests or the mountains. They even had to ask for alms from strangers but the Rishikas could get this „bhiksha“ from their families.

As H. V. Narasimha Murthy mentions in his Ph.D Thesis titled *A Critical Study of Upanayana Samskar*, “[Rishikas] were [also] excluded from wearing the deer skin or bark garments and were not to have the matted hair” (87). These extra measures taken for women education during that period only laid emphasis on their status which was equivalent to that of men.

Having discussed much about the ancient educational systems, it now becomes essential to name a few women from the Vedic era who were remarkable Rishikas, who participated in philosophical and intellectual debates with males, performed yajnas, taught at gurukuls as Upadhyayis, and most of all, contributed to the Vedas.

Beginning with the most renowned Rishika who has been prominently mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* is sage Vachaknu's daughter, Gargi Vachaknavi. She was born around the seventh century BCE ^[1] in India and had been keenly interested in the study of the Vedas since an early age and thus became a proficient philosopher. It is believed that she had written many hymns in the *Rig*

Veda. Her solemn challenge to sage Yajnavalkya at a philosophic debate brings our attention to her.

The debate was organised by king Janaka of Videha kingdom who invited all the learned sages, kings and princes of India to join. “This time he summoned the assembly for a special reason. He had collected a herd of one thousand cows and nuggets of gold were tied to the horns of each. When all had gathered and taken their places he announced that whoever considered himself the best knower of Brahman (Brahmishtha) might come forward and take away the cows” (*The Incarnate Word*, n.d., sec. 1). No one, other than Yajnavalkya, was confident enough to take away the prize even before the debate had started.

When Yajnavalkya was questioned by sages like Asvala, Uddalaka and Ushasta, he replied convincingly and thus won over them. When it was Gargi’s turn, she said, “Yajnavalkya, I shall put two questions to you like two arrows directed at you, even as a king shoots his arrows at his enemies; if you can meet and parry them, yours the victory” (ibid.).

As Yajnavalkya was proudly aware of his wits he agreed to answer her following which Gargi asked him, as quoted from *Brihadranyaka Upanishad* in Brian Black’s *The Character of the Self in Ancient India*, “Since all this is woven together on water, then on what is water woven together?” (2012, p. 150). This initiated a verbal exchange between them and she further questioned him, “That which is above the sky, that which is below the earth, that which is between sky and earth, that which

people call past, present and future. On what are these woven together?” (ibid, p. 152). When Yajnavalkya replied to it by saying that all of it is built upon space (Aakash), she repeated her question with more solemnity. Patrick Olivelle remarks that she asked him the same question a second time because she had not been satisfied with his answer.

Her last question was, “On what are the worlds of brahman woven together?” At this point, probably Yajnavalkya felt threatened by her and forbiddingly said, “Now, Gargi, your questioning goes too far, beyond the limits. If you question farther, your head will fall off. You are questioning about a thing that does not bear questioning” (*The Incarnate Word*, n.d., sec. 1). Although she finally lost the debate, her debating technique displays her knowledge and claims her superiority over other participants whom Yajnavalkya answered succinctly and convincingly.

Another well-known female seer and philosopher was Ghosha, or Mantradika. She was the daughter of Kakshivan and the granddaughter of Dirghatamas. Both of them were great seers and then Ghosha followed in their footprints. It is said that she suffered from a skin ailment, maybe leprosy, since childhood. She could not attain a good husband due to her disease, hence, she remained confined at her parents’ house. Nevertheless, she dutifully served her parents and continuously prayed to the divine physicians called Ashwini Kumars to cure her.

This led her to compose two hymns, each containing fourteen verses. These hymns have been mentioned in the Tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda* and are the largest contribution among the female seers. While the first one is an invocation of the two divine physicians, she expresses her desire for a blissful married life in the second one. She says, “Where are you, Asvins, in the evening, where at morn? Where is your halting place, where rest ye for the night? O Heroes, this I beg of you. 'Be near me in the day, be near me in the night” (*Wikiwand - Ghosha*, n.d.)

The Ashvini Kumars were moved with her sincere prayers and they taught her „Madhu Vidya“ which is the secret science of rejuvenation. This helped her overcome her illness and to regain her youthly charm. Endowed with such mystical knowledge and physical beauty, she finally got married (Brahmavadini ref).

Another noteworthy Rishika is Vak Ambrihini. She was the daughter of the famous seer Ambhrina. She composed one of the most remarkable hymns of the *Rig Veda* known as „*Devi Sukta*“. In the hymn, she presents herself as a female seer and as a female deity. As quoted from the *Rig Veda* in Dr Uday Dokras“ *Women in Ancient India*, “Thence I pervade all existing creatures, as their Inner Supreme Self, and manifest them with my body. I created all worlds at my will, without any higher being, and permeate and dwell within them. The eternal and infinite consciousness is I, it is my greatness dwelling in everything” (32).

Here Vak Ambhrini presents herself as the universal energy that is at the core of all creation, whether it's matter or consciousness, eternal or infinite, metaphysical or empirical reality, all formed by the Absolute. This Absolute can occur in the gendered form, androgynous form, or remain formless. Some divine Indian duos, like „Gauri-shankar“, „Radhe-Krishna“, or „Laxmi-Narayan“ – where the feminine form is generally addressed first – pair up together to show that the masculine power alone cannot run the entire universe.

The Hindu androgynous deities such as „Ardhanarishvara“ are a further extension of the same concept and claim that the feminine and masculine exist within a single person. This is a combination of three words: “ardha” meaning half, “nari” meaning female, and “ishwara” meaning lord. „Ardhanarishvara“ is half Shiva (male) and half Parvati (female) which symbolises the inseparability of the male and female principles of the universe. As said by Raveesh (2013):

“It conveys the unity of opposites in the universe. The male half stands for Purusha and [the] female half is Prakriti. [xArdhanareeshvara] harmonizes the two conflicting ways of life: The spiritual way of the ascetic as represented by Shiva, and the materialistic way of the householder symbolized by Parvati. It conveys that Shiva and Shakti are one and the same” (p. 1).

Coming back to Brahmavadinis, the next one in line is Surya. She has been credited for a hymn in the Xth book of the *Rig Veda*. This

hymn is also referred to as the ‘*Wedding Hymn*’ because it describes Surya as a typical Aryan bride and the various rites performed at a wedding ceremony. It goes on as:

“I take thy hand in mine for happy fortune that thou mayst reach old age with me thy husband.

Gods, Aryaman, Bhaga, Savitar, Purandhi, have given thee to be my household's mistress.

O Pūṣan, send her on as most auspicious, her who shall be the sharer of my pleasures;

Her who shall twine her loving arms about me, and welcome all my love and mine embraces” (*Rig Veda: Rig-Veda, Book 10: HYMN LXXXV. Sūrya’s Bridal.*, n.d.-b).

The beautiful hymn written in forty-seven verses confirms Surya’s knowledge of all the marital processions and her creative mind.

Another noteworthy Brahmavadini is Lopamudra. It is said that she was created by sage Agastya from the most graceful parts of various animals possessing beauty who would eventually beget a son for him. She was born as a daughter to a childless King. When she grew up to be a gorgeous maiden, her parents wanted to get her married, thus, the king approached Agastya to seek advice for his daughter’s marriage. Agastya, however, had created Lopamudra to beget a son for himself so he asked for her hand in marriage.

Despite having clear reasons for marrying Lopamudra, Agastya continued to live his life as an ascetic. He was not charmed by her youth or flattered by the renouncement of her lavish princessly lifestyle. Lopamudra, on the other hand, yearned for her husband's love. Thus, she composed a hymn in six verses titled „*Rati Love*’ which centers upon the importance of sexual gratification as a means to attain immortality and spiritual enlightenment. Moreover, she has been accredited for visualising the „Panchadasi Mantra“ and for being a teacher of the „*Lalita Sahasranama*“: hymns which list the thousand names of the Divine feminine (Chronicle, 2020, sec. 2).

Some of the aforementioned well renowned Brahmavadinis show us that the women at that time could freely talk of their sexuality and carnal desires, which were embedded in their wish for a fulfilling domestic life. As we have come to believe that the Indian society has never allowed women to speak up about their desires, such women from our ancient past thus become indispensable figures of female empowerment. They boldly stood up for what they believed in, they prayed for it, wrote about it and eventually received it too.

After having talked of these Brahmavadinis in sufficient detail, it seems safe to now know about those Brahmavadinis who chose to get married. Such girls were known as „Sadyovadhus“. These Brahmavadinis were highly educated but they entered Grihastha (household stage) after completion of their Brahmachari phase. These

Brahmavadini householders were unlike those women whose Upanayana was performed right before their marriage, were trained at domestic skills and were taught only the important vedic mantras for the regular household prayers. Nonetheless, the women were free to choose whatever way of life they wanted to adopt - studies or marriage. (2022a)

Interestingly, such educated young Brahmavadinis were preferred over less educated girls for marriage, just like in the contemporary times, as they could support their husbands in performing religious rites due to their knowledge of the mantras. The name „Brahmavadini“ also seems to have derived from the combination of two words – „Brahma“ (which means Veda) and „vad“ (which means to speak or recite). As they were well versed in the Vedas themselves, a competent groom was found for them who could match the girl’s intellectual level. This marital protocol, as quoted by B S Nihaar, has been mentioned in the *Rig Veda* as, “An unmarried young learned daughter should be married to a bridegroom who like her is learned. Never think of giving in marriage a daughter of very young age,” in the *Yajur Veda* as, “A young daughter who has observed Brahmacharya should be married to a bridegroom who like her is learned,” and in the *Atharva Veda* as, “The mantra of Brahmcharya Sukta, it is emphasised that girls too should train themselves as students and only then enter into married life. The Sukta specifically emphasizes that girls should receive the same level of training as boys” (B S Siddhanta, 2020).

This implies that the outlook of ancient Hindu society has been highly respect worthy towards women. Rather than succumbing to the notion that woman was created by a primordial man, they believed that a man's wife was his „ardhangini“, or a half of his being. This conception most probably derived from the belief in male-female divine duos or androgynous deities.

After marriage, two people come together to make a home where the husband is the „Samrat“ (king) while the wife is the „Samrajini“ (queen). This concept of „ardhangini“ allowed women to have an equal share in everything including the religious rites. As mentioned on Dharmawiki (2022a, sec. 4), “Taittiriya Brahmana (3.3.3.1) and Shatapata Brahmana (5.1.6.10) lay down that one who does not have a patni or wife cannot perform yajnas.”

In fact, under special circumstances the wife was allowed to perform the rites on her husband's behalf. The couple also prepared some special offerings and did yajnas to attain sons who would become Vedic scholars or a daughter who would become a Brahmavadini, thus implying that the society at that time was not averse to girl child.

Even the roles of Sadyovadhus then were not only confined to performing regular household religious rites or doing daily domestic chores but they also had the chance to engage in philosophical debates with their husbands. The most well known example of this is the dialogue between sage Yajnavalkya and his first wife Maitreyi.

Maitreyi appears twice in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, having a dialogue with Yajnavalkya. Before entering into the fourth ashrama of his life i.e., the Sannyasa phase (in which the person renounces everything), Yajnavalkya wanted to make a settlement of his material possessions between both of his wives. Maitreyi was not interested in any such worldly things so she asked her husband if all that would make her immortal. When Yajnavalkya replied negatively, Maitreyi too discarded all the materialistic wealth and said, “What then am I to do with that which cannot make me immortal?” (*Upanishads*, n.d.). With this she earns preference in his eyes as he says, “You have always been dear to me, now you have become dearer still.”

Hereafter, ensued a philosophical dialogue between them where Yajnavalkya went on to describe the nature of the „Atman“ (Self) to Maitreyi and he told her:

“...a wife loves her husband not for his sake but for her own sake, for the sake of the Self. In loving him she loves the One who is both in her as well as in him. It is really this One whom she loves. Similarly it is so for the husband, and indeed, for all love relationships - father and son, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and daughter, friend and friend, and so on” (ibid).

Yajnavalkya’s second wife, Katyayani, is not talked of much. Unlike Brahmavadini Maitreyi, she had the knowledge of „Striprajna“. This means she was well aware not only of her household duties as a

wife, but also knew everything that a priest's wife should know: what food and clothes her husband would need at a ritual and so on. Although she was not much inclined towards the spiritual demeanor of her husband, she understood worldly affairs well. Therefore, she might not have had the ability to hold a spiritually enlightening conversation with her husband but her silence helped her to attain Yajnavalkya's material wealth. (Black, 2012, p. 167)

The story of Ubhaya Bharati also deserves a special mention here. The tale dates around 1200 years ago. Ubhaya Bharati, with her husband, Mandana Mishra, lived in present day Mithila, in Bihar. They both were highly educated householders and lived in accord with the vedic way of life. They followed the Mimamsa school of thought which focused on the enquiry of soul. A great Keralan philosopher named Adi Shankaracharya once visited them on the instructions of Kumaril Bhatt to check if they were actually an exceptional couple. Shankaracharya supposedly challenged Mandana Mishra to prove his wisdom and thus began a debate between them that lasted for several days. Mishra's wife, Bharati, was chosen to be the moderator for that debate.

The debate started off well with both the contestants eloquently making assertions, quoting from the vedas to justify themselves and raising objections to the other. As days went by, the debate kept on getting more complex and intricate. When Mandana could no longer provide proper replies to Shankara's objections, he started attacking the

Advaita doctrine which was propounded by Shankara. On hearing both of them, Ubhaya Bharati accepted the cogent arguments of Shankara and let him win over her husband.

The challenge, however, did not end here. Despite accepting her husband's defeat, she did not claim Shankara to be the winner. Being a prudent woman, Bharati asked Shanakara:

“You do know that the sacred texts enjoin that a wife forms one-half of a husband's body (*ardhangini*: *ardha* - half; *angini* - body). Therefore, by defeating my lord, you have but won over only half of him. Your victory can be complete only when you engage in debate with me also, and manage to prove yourself better” (*The Classic Debate Between Mandana Misra and Adi Shankara*, n.d.).

The question was a sensible one as he was a celibate and had no knowledge of Kamashastra. To answer Bharati's question, Shankara entered the body of a dead king named Amaru. Through his body Shankara experienced erotic pleasures and then returned to Bharati to answer her question. Ubhaya was impressed with Shankara's knowledge and declared him to be the greatest Vedic scholar. Thereafter, they both became staunch followers of Adi Shankaracharya; yet, Shankara himself is said to have established Sharda Devi as his personal deity who was most probably Ubhaya Bharati herself.

Sharda Devi holds a pot, a book, and a parrot in her hands thus seeming to be an amalgamation of Goddesses Laxmi, Saraswati and Gauri. Parrot, is also known to be a symbol of Kamadeva, the God of love, desire and sexuality. This explains well how much value Shankaracharya placed on his interaction with Ubhaya Bharati and, on women in general, because of which he worshiped Sharda Devi (Pattanaik, 2018).

As we talk of Sadyovadhus, the tales of Satyakama's wife and his mother become cardinal. Satyakama wanted to be a Vedic student so he approached his mother Jabala to enquire about his lineage. As quoted by Black from *Chandogya Upanishad*, his mother responds, "My son, I do not know what your lineage (gotra) is. I became pregnant in my youth when I was a servant and moved around a lot. Because of this I do not know your lineage. But my name is Jabala and your name is Satyakama. You should merely say you are Satyakama Jabala" (Black, 2012, p. 159).

When Satyakama reaches his teacher Haridrumata, he offers the explanation provided by his mother. Rather than being condescended and demeaned for the sexual liberty that Satyakama's mother had indulged in, he is praised by Haridrumata for being honest. He says, "Only a brahmin is able to explain like that. Bring firewood, my boy. I will initiate you. You have not abandoned the truth (satya)" (ibid). Here, Satyakama is called a Brahmin for his honesty, however, it was his

mother who had revealed the entire truth to him. Doesn't that imply that she was a Brahmin too?

Haridrumata's reply confirms that pedagogical lineage was preferred over family lineage and breaks down those misconceptions about Hinduism which claim that only the upper caste males had access to education. Education was meant for all irrespective of their caste or gender.

Another Sadyovadhu who is not much discussed but deserves to be, is Satyakama's wife. It is said that once Satyakama was going on a journey, leaving his student, Upakosala, behind. The student had completed all his austerities and if Satyakama would not teach him at that point, the fires would do so. Satyakama paid no heed to her and went away. However, on returning, he saw that Upakosala had been taught by the fires, just as his wife had anticipated. This reveals that Satyakama's wife had some understanding of the Vedic learnings because of which she anticipated the inevitable and warned her husband.

In the absence of her husband, she also encouraged Upakosala to eat something as she knew that one cannot learn without proper nourishment. Her provision of food to Upakosala culminates his austerities, after which the fires teach him. This incident signifies that Satyakama's wife can be regarded as Upakosala's real teacher. And that would not have happened without her own possession of Vedic knowledge.

All the educational traditions and the notable women that have been discussed in this paper existed during the early vedic times. The gradual decline in the rate of their education occurred when the vedic studies became extensive, difficult to read due to the changing dialect and started demanding a lot of time. The following invasions over India only contributed heavily to this cause as the women who were not trained in martial arts or self-defence skills had to be protected from foreign men. With this in mind, women had to be confined to homes; practices like Sati, Jauhar, Purdah and child marriage also became common.

As education was no longer a birth right for women, they did not get the chance to intellectually develop themselves as a man. This resulted in their deteriorated status in society. Yet, just like some revolutionary figures shaped up the feminist movement in the West, some notable people in India also played a crucial role in helping females achieve their rights.

From Savitribai Phule to Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati to Debendranath Tagore to the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. B R Ambedkar, and many others whom it will be tough to name at once, stood up against the devalued status of women and did their best to abolish age-old practices like Sati. They set up institutions and committees which helped women re-establish their firm individuality and regain their power in society.

Conclusion:

As had already been discussed in this paper, the concepts of Atman, Ardhanarishvara, and Hinduism as a henotheistic religion as whole, only promote the idea of equality among Man and Woman. Hence, during Vedic era women were privileged enough to receive quality education and enjoyed a fair amount of liberty to choose their path of life as a Brahmavadini or Sadyovadhu. Nevertheless, they were respected as much as the males, in their homes as well as in society. Hence, it can be concluded that the women discussed in this paper were empowered in their own sense and present themselves as an epitome of intellect, creativity and boldness.

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