



# “EMPOWERED WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN VEDIC INDIA” - A CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*At a time when India is grappling with increase in incidents of crime and harassment against women coupled with glass ceiling effect at the workplace, one is left wondering if this was existing in earlier times too. The answer is a big no as women of Vedic India were immensely empowered and far ahead of their times. Though we highlight the role of various men who have made a purposeful impact very little is known about the contribution of lesser known women from ancient times whose stories are poignant and inspirational. There is mention of many women who hold positions of power and influence. Some of these revered women who are mentioned in the ancient texts, are still unknown to the outside world. The purpose of this study is to highlight the lesser known empowered women of Vedic era who were independent and far ahead of their times in every field ranging from art, literature, poetry and related fields. Renowned among this tribe but forgotten in the present times their lives serve as a beacon light for the common masses. There is a saying in Manu Smriti which states that where women are worshipped, there deities will dwell and there will be prosperity. Throughout the Vedic culture, women have not only been given the highest level of respect and freedom, but also protection and safety. This paper tries to highlight the impeccable personality and characteristic traits of not so popular women from this period and how the present generation can learn and get inspired from their lives.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Vedic Women, scriptures, ancient, Indian civilisation, women leaders, entrepreneurs, visionary women ,family, knowledge, rights.*

## INTRODUCTION

Being one of the oldest civilisations in the world, India is the origin of many religions and philosophies which are followed all over the world today. When we trace the history of different periods it is observed that the Vedic period in ancient India is known for its religious and cultural development. It has been seen that many breakthroughs and developments took place during this time related to education, empowerment of women, and culture among others. India known for its rich cultural heritage and ancient spiritual wisdom has lately become a trend setter as the western world is fervently imbibing it. If someone wants to see how developed a community is then one has to see the education women possess. India is uniquely juxtaposed when the culture is studied. Women were regarded as caretakers of society with caring ideals. What's more noteworthy is that they are shown as people with enormous potential for realising the deepest truths. Woman is a creator of institutions. The subject of women's position and status is broad and extensive, and important at the same time. By virtue of their creativeness, intellect, and spirit of sacrifice, they played an admirable role in family and social life and made a humungous contribution to society. Status of a woman refers to her place in a network of social roles, advantages, rights, and responsibilities. In India, women's status has been in a state of flux. It has undergone huge transformation. Women in India have historically gone through a state of dominance to a state of 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 undergone many changes.

## Scriptural evidences to support Avenues Provided to Vedic Women

The position of women in India during the Vedic Period we observe and analyse multiple factors. The ancient body of laws known as **Smritis**, enumerated a legal system that served as the framework of society and governance. Women in Vedic times which refer to the period between 1500 BCE to 500 BCE played a significant role in society. **Dharmashastras** included life-cycle rites, daily rituals, specific responsibilities, and proper behaviour for all four varnas. **Taitriya Samhita**, compared man and woman to two wheels of a cart. It is believed that women, are the pivot in their families. It was believed that, Brahma (the Creator) had a man arise from his right side and a woman emerge from his left side. The lesson delivered by the Vedas through this symbolic account is that there is equality between men and women and that humanity should be mindful of it in all their dealings. Women were considered equal to men in terms of their potential and were allowed to participate in rituals and ceremonies. They were free to choose their husbands and also remarry in case of their husband's demise. As women were educated, they were involved in many creative and intellectual



areas. Though the status of women varied depending on their social and economic backgrounds, It was seen that women from high castes had more freedom and opportunities than those from lower castes. Higher caste women were trained in sacred texts and were respected for their knowledge and wisdom.e.g. kshatriya women were trained in warfare as they were expected to protect their families and kingdoms. Social and cultural norms had an immense influence on women. Women held positions of leadership and had the basic right to education. They were trained in various fields like music, dance, poetry, philosophy and politics. They were also active in religious rituals and were regarded as equal partners with men in performing them. There are evidences which reflect that women during those times were empowered and enjoyed high status. There is scriptural evidence which suggests that women played important role in religious rituals and were often praised for their intelligence and wisdom. For example the Rigveda contains hymns written by women. It was noticed that some women were acting as seers and teachers of the Vedas. Women also had property rights and were allowed to inherit wealth from their parents. On the contrary, women in Vedic society were subject to strict social norms and restrictions such as modesty in dress and behaviour. Works by ancient. Rigvedic verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were hence free to choose their own husbands in a practice called Swayamvar or could marry and live together after undergoing "Gandharva Vivah". Women were regarded as mother goddess (Shakti) in the Vedic Period, a symbol of life with enormous ability for tolerance and sacrifice, and therefore they held a respectable place in society. Women, who so desired, could undergo the sacred thread ceremony or 'Upanayana' (a ritual to pursue Vedic studies), which is only meant for males even to this day. Many women were regarded as Rishis or seers as they had written hymns and some of the hymns mention women. Twenty such hymns written about women are given in Sarvanukramanika. The names of sages of the Vedic age like Vac, Ambhrni, Romasa, Gargi, Khona in the texts further supports this view. This group of intellectual and knowledgeable women, who chose the path of Vedic studies, were called 'brahmavadinis', and women who opted out of education for married life were called 'sadyovadhus'. Co-education seems to have existed in this period and both the sexes got equal attention from the teacher. Kshatriya women received martial arts courses and were also trained to use many arms. It was also noticed that women had the access to property as it is mentioned in the Epics and Puranas. This undoubtedly reflects their entrepreneurial spirit and strength of character. The freedom to think and take decisions as an important member of the household talks a lot about their forward looking attitude and broad outlook towards life. As womenfolk commanded the same respect as men in all aspects of life, they were not confined to the domestic sphere only but also actively participated in religious and cultural practices. Interestingly women were free to choose their husbands and were free to even reject a marriage proposal if they desired to remain single throughout their life. They had the right to education and were allowed to study the Vedas and other religious texts. Women were also allowed to perform religious rituals and ceremonies

and some of the hymns in the Rig Veda were composed by women. However it is important to note that Vedic society was patriarchal and men held most positions of power. Women's roles were primarily defined by their relationship with men as wives, daughters, sisters or mothers. Despite some limitations, women enjoyed freedom and respect that was uncommon in many other ancient societies. Their contributions to religion, literature and culture were recognised and celebrated and their voices were heard in public arenas. Although we do not find much historical records on women entrepreneurs in ancient India there are some examples of women who were successful in business and commerce during that time. Unlike later eras, the Vedic age did allow women a considerable amount of freedom and respect and they weren't looked down upon. Firstly, girls could be educated, by means of Brahmacharya or Upanayana, which suggests a sense of equality. There is mention of women sages that contributed to the composition of the Vedas, but also of goddesses and their worship and women taking part in sacrifices and rituals. Hymns of the Rig Veda speak of the honour and love a man must have for his wife, while comparing the purity of the relationship to that of God. Also widow remarriage was not uncommon as the system of Gandharva Vivaha where a man and a woman may both choose their own spouses, unravelling decent amount of equality between the two sexes. Within Ancient times, women have been held in equal honour as men. The Manusmriti states that the society that provides respect and dignity to women flourishes with nobility and prosperity whereas if it does not then it has to face miseries and failures.(Manusmriti Chapter 3 Verse 56).Within the Vedas women were given the highest possible respect and equality. During marriage ceremonies, grooms recited shlokas which highlighted their equal contribution as a wife as the woman leads and the man follows. Women were considered to be the embodiment of great virtue and wisdom. Atharva Veda 14-1-64 states that women were free to do yagna, sandhya and all other daily rituals. If, for some reason, her husband is not present, the woman alone has full rights to do yagna. Rigveda Samhita, (part 1, sukta 79, sloka 872). There is no single set of qualities that define all Vedic women as women in ancient India were diverse and had different personalities, talents and interests like women today.

#### **Striking features which make them stand Apart:**

**Education:** Women in the Vedic period were educated and had access to knowledge and learning. They were trained in multifaceted fields like music, dance, poetry, philosophy and politics.

**Wisdom:** Women were regarded as wise and knowledgeable and their opinions were respected. Their opinions were valued on insightful matters.

**Strength and Courage:** As women in the Vedic period were courageous they spoke their minds and stood up for what they believed in. They were strong and courageous and were not afraid to challenge authority or question the status quo.



**Creativity:** Women were valued for their creativity and artistic abilities. They were skilled in music, dance, poetry, philosophy and politics.

**Piety:** Women in the Vedic period were highly spiritual and devoted. They were active participants in religious rituals and were regarded as equal partners with men in performing them.

The reasons for such high accolades were attributed to a strong foundation right from childhood. The girls too like boys, underwent Upanayana ceremony (sacred initiation) at an early age. It was the usual practice, and continued even in later ages. It is mentioned in the Atharva Samhita, 11-5-18, that 'by Vedic studentship a girl wins a young husband'. This shows that high education was instrumental for being well placed in life. Patanjali and Katyayana reiterate this view. In later Vedic age we hear of two classes of educated women namely:

1. **Sadyowadhush**, who continued their studies till their marriage,
2. **Brahmavaadinis**, who did not marry and pursued their studies throughout life.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the list of great Vedic teachers to whom tribute of respect had to be paid at the time of Brahmajajna, includes the names of some ladies, viz. Gaargi Vaachaknavi, Vadavaa Praatitheyi, Sulabhaa Maitreyi (see Ashwalaayana Grihya Sutra 3-4-4). These evidences to which others may be added, show that the highest education, including Vedic studies was open equally to men and women, and many ladies distinguished themselves not only as Vedic scholars but also as great philosophers, debaters and teachers.

### **Learned Women-Far Ahead of Their Times**

It may be stated without any hesitation that the general position and status of Indian women in the Vedic age was much higher than in any other ancient society that we know of, those of Greece and Rome not excluded. It is necessary to point out that the picture is an ideal one, and cannot be regarded as applicable to all women. Though sons were preferred to daughters as they had the eligibility to lit the pyre in case of death of their parents. The Women Rishis though very few contributed a lot for the cause of society and Vedas.

### **Empowered and Multitalented Women**

Overall women in the Vedic period were highly respected and admired for their many talents and virtues. They were seen as equal partners with men in all aspects of life including education, politics, religion and culture. Vedic period was a time of great spiritual and intellectual exploration and while the vast majority of texts from this period were written by men, there are a few stories that mention women and their roles in Vedic society. The role of women during Rig-Veda society was that of a homemaker and a wife. However there are a few references to women in the Rig-Veda that suggest that they played an important role in the society. Rigveda contains hymns that are attributed to women. These women were known as Rishikas (female seers) and they composed slokas, hymns in praise of the Gods. In the Rigveda a number of women Rishis are mentioned and popular ones are Ghosha, Godha, Gargi,

Vishwawra, Apala, Brahmajaya, Aditi, Indrani, Sarma, Romasha, Maitreyi, Kathyayini, Urvashi, Lopamudra, Yami, Shashwati, Sri, Laksha and many others. Women during these times were free to enter into brahmacharya just like men, and attain salvation. Women had all rights to study Vedas and wore sacred thread. Wearing of the sacred thread is itself a case of women empowerment. We are proud of the accomplishments of all these women. 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 possessing the ultimate knowledge of the Absolute, they were fully equal to men. They chanted mantras; they undertook huge penances and did what only men could do. The society imposed no restrictions of any kind as such. They possessed great wealth, land, and were the only guardians of their offsprings. They were viewed as embodiments of the Divine. The Rig-Veda, is filled with hymns on natural events. Women's status is depicted with reverence in the Rig-Veda. Usha (the goddess of Dawn) and Aditi, the mother of many Gods such as Mitra, Varun, Rudra, and Aryaman, are mentioned in the Rig-Veda. The goddess Usha brings in the new day by removing the darkness. Rati, (Night), is Usha's sister, and it is because of her that all creatures rest after a day's work, hence Usha and Rati are daughters of Heaven.

### **Family-A strong unit which instilled qualities of an entrepreneur in women**

Family was a significant institution in the Rig-Vedic era. In Vedic times, a parent seldom differentiated between his son and daughter. He treated them all the same. Duhitri was the name given to the family's daughter. Women were provided education so that they may live their social and personal lives to the fullest. There are hymns which describe the contribution of twenty seven such women seers. Gosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Saci, and Vishvavara, find mention in the texts as they penned hymns and rose to prominence as intellectuals. Marriage was viewed as a sacred institution. Daughters were given the opportunity to choose their husbands in this manner. It is said that matured girls used to attend numerous festivals and public gatherings to meet with potential husbands. Unmarried daughters, stayed at their father's house. As 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 in the family.

### **Entrepreneurial Traits of some Vedic Women Ghosha**

Ghosha, was the grand daughter of Dirghatamas and daughter of Kakshivat, both composers of hymns in praise of Ashwins, Ghosha has written two entire hymns of the tenth book, each containing 14 verses. The first hymn praised the Ashwins, the second hymn narrated her personal feelings and desires for married life. However, Ghosha suffered from an incurable disfiguring disease, and did not marry. Her faith towards Ashwins, and the devotion of her forefathers towards them made them cure her disease and allow her to experience wedded bliss again.





**Brahmavadini Apala** was a notable woman of substance. When she was affected by leprosy her husband abandoned her. Instead of feeling sad and isolated she went to her father's home and educated herself in the field of ayurveda and started research in medicinal herbs. It is said that she discovered "Som Ras" and once Lord Indra came and got the knowledge of making it from Apala. She also gathered huge knowledge of Vedas and was given the title "Brahmavadini" and she also composed some hymns.

#### Lopamudra

The Rig Veda has long conversations between sage Agastya and his wife Lopamudra that testifies to the great intelligence and goodness of the latter. Lopamudra was created by the powerful sage Agasthya and was given as a daughter to the King of Vidarbha. The royal couple gave her the best upbringing. When she attained puberty, Agastya, the sage got mesmerised by her beauty and wanted to make her his wife. Lopa agreed to marry him. However, after serving her husband faithfully for a long period, Lopa grew tired of his spiritual practices. She wrote a hymn where she made a request for his attention and love. Realising about his duties towards his wife the sage performed both his domestic and ascetic life with equal zeal, reaching a wholeness of spiritual and physical powers. In due course of time a son was born to them named Dridhasyu.

#### Jabala

Indian women were so intelligent that they could easily solve difficult problems. A boy wanted to study Vedas. But he knew only his mother Jabala. When he went to the teacher he asked what was his Kulam, Gotra (clan and sub sects), names of parents etc. He replied truthfully that his mother asked him to give the mother's name only as **Jabala**. The teacher was so impressed by his honesty, he took him immediately as his student. He gave the boy a new name— Satyakama (one who seeks truth) Jabala.

#### Maitreyi

One of the earliest known female philosophers and scholars in the world, Maitreyi was the wife of the sage Yajnavalkya. She is known for her profound philosophical debates with her husband. The Rig Veda contains about one thousand hymns, of which about 10 are accredited to Maitreyi. She played an important role in improving Yajnavalkya's personality and shaped his spiritual thoughts. She regularly discussed about the soul and the body of the human beings with Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Yajnavalkya had two wives Maitreyi and Katyayani. While Maitreyi was well versed in the scriptures and was a 'brahmavadini', Katyayani was an ordinary woman. One day the sage decided to divide his worldly possessions between his two wives so that he could renounce the world. He asked his wives what they desired. The learned Maitreyi asked her husband if all the wealth in the world would make her immortal. The sage replied that wealth could only make one rich, hearing this she asked for the wealth of immortality. Yajnavalkya happily granted this boon.

#### Gargi

**Gargi Vachaknavi** illustrious philosopher and daughter of sage Vachaknu, composed several hymns that questioned the origin of all existence. She was regarded as one of the navratnas (nine jewels) in the court of King Janak. When the king organized a 'Rajsuya Yagna' Gargi was the only woman present in that philosophical debate wherein she challenged the great sage Yajnavalkya with various questions on the soul or 'atman' that confounded the learned man who had till then silenced many eminent scholars. She is known for her intellectual contributions and is considered one of the earliest known female philosophers in the world. She was a scholar and a Vedic Seer who is regarded as the most learned women of her time. Out of eight scholars who finally entered into a debate with rishi Yajnavalkya she was the only woman scholar and she asked a lot of challenging questions which reflected her profound intelligence and knowledge of the Vedas. She is known for making breakthrough contributions to the development of Hindu Philosophy and is remembered as a pioneering figure in the field of meta physics. Gargi's teachings and ideas continue to inspire philosophy scholars and students. Gargi has made a mark in the area of women empowerment and is a role model for many women.

#### Romasha

Romasha was a seer and a poet who composed several hymns in the Rig-Veda. She was one of the respected Rishikas in Vedic culture. Rigveda contains hymns composed by various sages including Romasha. One of the hymns in the Rigveda 10.86 is associated with Romasha known as Romasha Mandalam. It praises the Gods and their divine qualities. The power and grandeur of the deities and their connection with the natural world is described in this hymn. Information about Romasha is limited but her inclusion as an important female sage in the Rigveda indicates that women played empowering roles and were respected for their wisdom and spiritual contributions.

#### CONCLUSION

In addition to gaining knowledge women were involved in various trades like textile production, pottery and jewellery making in Arthashastra and the Manusmriti. Women established themselves as successful entrepreneurs in ancient India though societal norms and customs were not conducive. In the family unit women held influential roles as mothers, wives and daughters. They were regarded as the foundation of the household and were held in high esteem for their contributions to maintaining the family structure. Women with their evolved intelligence participated in intellectual and philosophical discourses. They were given a choice in either remaining single or choosing their life partner. Rigveda contains verses which imply women's right to own and inherit property. This suggests that women had some legal rights in terms of property ownership. The concept of "Ardhangini" indicates the importance of partnership and mutual respect within marital relationships. Vedic period saw empowerment of women in multiple domains including education, religion, family and literature. Hence it can be said that women empowerment during this time was influenced by



societal norms and values of that era. The Generation Z is ignorant of such multi faceted personalities in the present times.

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