

Reconstructing Social History of Women in Ancient India: Reading of Select Texts

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Abstract

Individuals, regardless of gender, acquire knowledge about their personal histories through different means of communication. The sources of transmission encompass a broad spectrum, from widely held beliefs to ancient myths and popular folklore. The use of oral history as a form of widespread and casual communication has allowed individuals to incorporate historical knowledge to some extent. Likewise, the transmission of historical concepts in a structured manner occurs through academic journals, scholarly debates, and various forms of publication. Critically analyzing historical results systematically and comprehensively has sparked intellectual discussions on the role and status of women in the field of Indian history. A significant shift occurred in Indian historiography throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as women emerged as the central subject of study.

Additionally, it is necessary to reexamine the past to identify unexplored areas. Scholars investigating early India have devoted considerable attention to the examination and understanding of the position of women within the Vedic tradition. To conclude, the contemporary Indian perspective on women can be traced back to the time of Rigvedic traditions, if not earlier. This study attempts to examine the tendencies in Indian historiography concerning the position of women and analyze the significance of an ancient text such as the Rigveda and Dharmasutras regarding the topic of women throughout the annals of Indian history. The proposed study endeavors to analyze the societal attributes attributed to femininity to investigate the position of women within Vedic and Dharmashastra traditions.

Keywords: feminine, feminism, society, Rigveda, tradition, historiography, gender studies.

Introduction

The dressing of formal historical findings above generalized impressions sowed womanhood thinking in Indian history. History as a topic of dates and dynasties is continually changing, constructed, and rebuilt, focusing on new groups of people and reflecting their desire for a distinct self-image. Women were the focus of Indian history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is crucial to understand how we got this vast amount of axiomatically accurate knowledge and to revisit the past to see what is left to discover. Scholars researching early Indian communities have focused on women's role in the Vedic tradition. The modern Indian view of women has roots in the R̥igvedic era and before (Thapar, 2002, p. 118; Singh, 2008, p. 333). This study examines the link between the Rigveda and the issue of women in Indian history after analyzing patterns in Indian historiography. This research then examines Vedic culture's 'feminine' characteristics to determine women's roles. These feminine components include gendered language, symbolism, women's concerns and power, and female deities' social status. The study examines societal attitudes towards women in Rigvedic and Dharmashastra traditions.

Colonialism and nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries altered Indian identity and established new assumptions about the nation's past. By the mid-nineteenth century, orientalists, anglicists, evangelists, and indologists represented new Indian identity ideals in historical writing. According to Chakravarti (Chakravarti, 1999, p. 27, 29), "a succeeding group of Orientalists, namely Max Muller and two more women who extended his romantic reconstruction of the Aryan past to women, as well as the emergence of cultural nationalism in 1850-1880" followed these groups. Later, R.C. Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Dayananda, and others wrote about this distortion. This prompted new paradigms for Indian feminine identity rebuilding. Britain had two very different views of India's history. The Orientalists wanted to restore India's historical greatness, whereas the utilitarians and evangelists labeled Indian civilizations retrograde and degraded Indian women. Sir William Jones, an Orientalist who researched India's history, founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 (Sharma, 2010, p. 6). James Mill's *History of British India* finely reflects the utilitarian view.

Reinterpreting gender in Indian history in light of its social and political context indicates gender studies. This motivates researchers to consider placing issues related to women in the

context of social history, which allows them to pose many questions. Interestingly, colonial encounters prompted gender history research in India. Besides believing that Indian civilizations had no manner of collecting histories and proofs, the British colonial masters called the colony's males effeminate while writing about India. As the colonial study of India's ancient past intensified, the idea that Indians might have recorded history and memory differently was abandoned. Indian civilizations were dubbed *ahistorical* as a result (Thapar, 2002, p. 2). Thus, prejudice regarding India's historical awareness shaped the utilitarian search for Indian womanhood. A passage from James Mill's *History of British India* demonstrates this. According to Mill, Hindu women experienced more stringent and humiliating reliance as the weaker sex, and the Hindus had a persistent disrespect for their women, as they were degraded, barred from holy texts, denied education, and considered paternal property (Mill, 1840, pp. 312-13).

"...a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than which is ordained for the weaker sex...Nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women...They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education and in the paternal property...That remarkable barbarity, the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is prevalent in Hindustan."

He also wrote,

"The wildness and inconsistency of the Hindu statements evidently place them beyond the sober limits of truth and history; yet it has been imagined, if their literal acceptance must of necessity be renounced, that they at least contain a poetical or figurative delineation of real events, which ought to be studied for the truths which it may disclose (Mill, 1826, p. 142)."

On the projection of the Indian men as effeminate, Macaulay wrote,

"...his physical organization is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid (Macaulay, 1840)."

As the authorities grew more interested in Indian artifacts and antiquities and the oriental and occidental concepts diverged, nationalist historiography emerged. From Altekar to Ranade, intellectuals developed arguments about women in Indian history. Modern Indian socio-religious reformers and nationalist historians claim that the Vedic era was the finest age for women. As Altekar noted,

"We have now finished the task of describing the history and vicissitudes of the status and condition of women in the course of the long history of Hindu civilization. We saw how the

position, powers, status and disabilities of the daughter, the wife, and the widow changed over time. Women once enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion, and public life, but as centuries passed, the situation changed adversely (Altekar, 1938, p. 403)."

Scholars like A.S. Altekar, J. B. Chaudhary, Shakuntala Rao Shastri, and others sought to regain women's rightful status in history. They wrote separate histories of men and women to establish a unique picture of the two genders. A.S. Altekar's study on women in India has fascinated researchers from many fields. However, his work is criticized for not critically examining evidence and texts. Nationalists examined allusions to women, their position, involvement, and female deities. In reaction to the colonial construct of Indian women, they were established in 'high regard' in ancient Hindu society. Women's standing may have been conveyed in such earliest interpretations, but academics had yet to differentiate between their domestic and political domains (Singh, 2008, p. 333). One must distinguish the legendary feminine cosmos from the household or political world, where women fulfilled roles. The two realms influenced each other, yet they were not a monolith. These realms were only blocks of a more immense, intricate social pyramid.

Early Indian communities retained historical consciousness in the Sanskrit epics and Puranas. These are not histories as such, but they provide partial narratives of what was thought to have occurred (Thapar, 2013, p. 144). It would have been easy to create India's ancient history from these two types of literature. However, the marking and historical consideration of the Vedas as the first and earliest of all texts affected narration and reconstruction terrain. The Rigveda, the oldest Veda, is challenging to analyze historically because of the text's association and intermingling of norms with images. However, it shows historians the broad social features of society. In addition to rituals and ceremonies, the Rigveda addresses different groups and social standards at the time of the text's inception and dissemination. This study primarily examines the Vedic literature, with a particular emphasis on the Rigveda, which has the distinction of being the first text in Sanskrit literature. An essence of courage and idealism characterized the Sanskrit epics. The inclusion of sectarian ideas that emerged in later eras expanded the Puranas. However, subsequent books make mention of the Vedas, and it is the Rigveda that established the fundamental principles of Brahmanical norms. A literary artifact, such as a tale, undergoes several retellings, each time being

redefined. However, a historian might see this recurrence as a prism to observe the moments of historical transformation (Thapar, 2011, p. 1). When we refer to the Rigveda as the earliest, it is essential to note that we are discussing a chronological period that spanned from 1800 BCE to 1000 BCE. However, there is a widespread debate on the chronology of the Rigveda.

Gender relations are assessed by examining the culturally prescribed roles assigned to different genders within a community. The formerly clear distinction between the household and political spheres is no longer present in the field of gender relations. There are significant connections between domestic matters, matrimony, familial relationships, women's autonomy over their bodies, male authority, and other gender-related issues. Indeed, the classification of women may be further fragmented into many strata of women. There are broadly three concepts being used in this study to encapsulate the fundamental notion of 'feminine' that resides inside the realm of imagination in the Rigveda (Gaurh & Parashar, 2022, pp. 47-67). Firstly, 'inorganic or insentient beings' refers to inanimate objects associated with feminine qualities. This is measured by assessing how language has been influenced or shaped. It is thought-provoking to question the reasons behind categorizing some objects in the environment and everyday life as masculine or feminine. Next, there is the second group of women who are considered organic creatures. The group was comprised of regular females in the community. Nevertheless, it has been shown that this group of women was heterogeneous. Various types of women were active participants in society. Women of varying social positions in diverse fields displayed distinct responsibilities that should be addressed individually. The third category pertains to the domain of celestial entities, namely the goddesses. Examining the relative positions of goddesses compared to their male counterparts would provide a more accurate and thorough understanding of the topic. The feminine element that existed throughout the Rigveda era comprised inorganic, organic, and mythological cosmic entities.

The Vedic culture recognized and appreciated the importance of women, not just as homemakers but also as persons with significant capabilities to contribute to society (Gaurh & Parashar, 2022, pp. 47-67). The research on women's status has focused only on their relationship with women and goddesses (Thapar, 2002; Singh, 2008; Chaudhary, 1956). However, the Rigveda also provides an understanding of the feminine qualities through language that embodies a distinct sense of gender. The language used in the Rigveda has been

proposed to represent an ancient Sanskrit variant, the Indo-Aryan language (Thapar, 2002, p. 104). The language of Rigveda finally underwent a process of reduction and modification, resulting in a unified linguistic level (Chalise, 2020, p. 1). Hence, the demeanor shown in the language used in Rigveda serves as a means for us to perceive the overall disposition towards the concept of 'female' (Rigveda). It is intriguing that the text strongly focuses on language when examining the books using their language. The writers regarded the concept of speech with great respect (Staal, 2009, p. xv). The speech served as the intermediary link that united the individuals with their divine beings, referred to as Vani, Vac, etc. (Rigveda 1.2.3). The depiction of the method via which the Veda is spread is significant because of the belief that the Veda is *apauruseya*, meaning it is not authored by humans (Staal, 2009, p. xvi). Even when the lack of masculinity is considered, the feminine medium is still seen as the bringer of knowledge.

Similarly, feminine adjectives are used to allude to masculine deities. This has been done to enhance the magnificence of the visual representation of a male god that has been summoned. When calling the deity of fire Agni, he is associated with the qualities of being an energy provider. Regarding this matter, the term used to refer to energy is 'suci,' which is grammatically classified as feminine (Rigveda 2.1.14). A further instance where the primary characteristics of the significant male deities were seen in a feminine form may be seen in the setting of Visvadevas. Visvadevas has been likened not to the Sun deity but to his attribute of radiance. The term 'user' refers to luminosity in this context. It is noteworthy that the sun is admired for its radiance. The wording portrays that characteristic as a feminine entity (Rigveda 1.3.8). Knowledge is another crucial factor in this context. The phrases used to refer to knowledge are *dhiya* and *medha*, which are associated with feminine imagery and gender (Rigveda 1.2.6, 1.18.6). The hymns of Rigveda are notable for the vivid imagery they use. These images depict women's societal reception and veneration, particularly by males, and represent their societal status. The cow that produced milk has been highly respected in the Rigveda. The gender associated with cows is female (Rigveda 1.4.1). Likewise, the representation of the land has been associated with femininity and the role of a nurturer (Rigveda 1.22.13). On several occasions, two visual representations have been combined romantically to comprehend the profound emotional components of femininity—the representation of femininity as the provider has been a recurring theme in Rigveda. At one time, it was postulated that rivers served as a source of nourishment for the ocean (Rigveda

2.13.2). Therefore, analyzing the allusions in Rigveda that pertain to the feminine component is important by considering non-anthropomorphic aspects. This allows us to determine Rigveda's attitude towards women. The current linguistic gender bias is a manifestation of the prevailing patriarchal standards in modern society. Similarly, to analyze the gender relations of a distant past, it is necessary to examine the gender of the many elements that comprised the language at that time.

The organic or conscious dimension of femininity pertains to women in many realms of society, such as family and politics. The Rigveda places great importance on the institution of family to the extent that it designates a woman as the focal point of a household, known as *jaye dasyam*, where the wife represents the essence of the home (Rigveda 3.53.4). Within the confines of the household, women have been shown as daughters, wives, and mothers. Proponents of nationalist perspectives have sought to advocate for the era of Rigveda as a time of great prosperity and empowerment for women (Chaudhury, 1956, p. 2). The daughter was occupied with domestic tasks like tending to the livestock and was referred to as 'duhitri' (Rigveda 3.31.1; 3.31.2; Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 34). The girls rely on their parents for sustenance throughout their early years (Rigveda 2.17.7). However, Upadhyaya observes a vital note to highlight that a daughter can remain unmarried and reside in her parental house even during her later years (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 34). Acknowledging that a daughter was also expected to have close connections with her brother is essential. Upadhyaya refers to this as the brother's influence on her (Rigveda 4.5.5; Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 36).

Regarding the legal rights of a daughter, Upadhyaya refers to the cash provided to her as *streedhana*, which is considered a woman's wealth. However, he acknowledges that it may be seen as dowry. Additionally, the immovable property was not transferred to daughters, probably because the family did not want to part with the landed property. The joint ownership of husband and wife, however, existed in the Vedic age (Altekar, 1938, p. 255-56). Nevertheless, a grandchild is entitled to inherit his mother's property.

The institution of marriage has significant importance in the Rigveda. It seems that women could make decisions on matters related to marriage. For instance, women would join marital unions only after reaching a significant age. The song of Surya's nuptials signifies that the bride can reproduce at the time of her marriage (Rigveda 10.85.27; Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 36). Her position as the main figure in the house demonstrated how important she was. She is

associated with happiness and described with elevated words such as *Kalyani* and *Shivatma* (Rigveda 3.53.4, 10.85.37). She is widely recognized as a loving partner, and the affectionate activities between married couples are highly valued (Rigveda 10.86.6). It is worth mentioning that the character of a woman was highly valued, as a lady with an unquestionable character was deemed worthy of her husband's affection (Rigveda 1.73.3). The ladies of Rigveda were required to give sacrifices along with their husbands since it was of utmost importance (Rigveda 8.31.9). The marital practices were promoted spiritually as the husband and wife made sacrifices together, and even the deities arrived in couples to receive the gifts (Rigveda 3.6.9). According to Upadhyaya, the significance of procreation for spouses was so great that it bestowed upon them political power (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 137). The depiction of a mother in the Rigveda was very potent. A prominent recurring theme in the literature is fecundity. Wood has been designated as the progenitor of Agni, for instance (Rigveda 5.9.3, 5.2.1). The goddesses' significant characteristics, including fertility and motherhood, were associated with feminine genders, attributing their existence to these qualities. Deities such as Agni did not emerge spontaneously but were begotten by feminine deities. As an example, Usha delivered Agni (Rigveda 2.38.5). Upadhyaya has extensively cited comparable situations and referenced the amplification of women's character (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 145).

The realm of the goddesses is the third category that delves into the feminine. The Rigveda contains hymns that are dedicated to goddesses. Among the goddesses mentioned are Aditi, Urvasi, Yami, Sarama Devasuni, Sarparajni, and Savitri (Witzel, 2002, p. 3). The female deities were linked to particular powers and religious followings. Upadhyaya provides an etymology connection to Aditi, which signifies 'unbinding' or 'boundlessness' (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 5). According to him, several gods are invoked to seek forgiveness for misdeeds, but only the mother goddess, Aditi, has the ultimate authority to grant amnesty. Max Muller has also said that Aditi was the first representation of infinity (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 5). Several researchers have posited that Aditi signifies Mother Earth, as it potentially symbolizes space. However, the term earth has previously been used many times throughout the text. It has been associated with both maternal qualities and fertility, in addition to being linked to the sky deity (Upadhyaya, 1941, p. 6). Prithvi is often recognized as the maternal figure of Agni, a significant masculine deity in the Rigveda. This implies that femininity has equal significance in the context of creation. Other goddesses include Usa, Sita, Surya, Ila, Sarasvati, Bharati,

Sraddha, and Sinivali. While examining the mythical cosmic realm of the Rigvedic culture, it is crucial to recognize that gender is not seen as a binary concept. They show proficiency in creating vivid and expressive visual representations, even when depicting deities. For example, the Asvini kumaras were likened to exquisite females (Rigveda 3.1.7). Likewise, although masculine deities have traditionally symbolized power and authority, it is undeniable that their authority is ultimately derived from the feminine side of existence. For example, Indra was nursed before commencing the act of vanquishing demons (Rigveda 3.47.3). Thus, it may be said that although the Rigveda has more hymns dedicated to male gods than female gods, it is essential to acknowledge that the male deities acquired their strength from the power of the feminine.

We can also attempt to look at gender through the Dharmashastras. Another issue with the modern study of gender is that it looks at the situation of women in relation to the condition of the world around them. It perceives them as 'inactive vessels' of the actions carried out by other entities in history (Roy, 1999, p. 3). Uma Chakravarti has tried to highlight the fundamental concerns within the context of gender history in India. According to Chakravarti, the higher caste Hindus initiated social changes in Bengal throughout the nineteenth century, such as the creation of the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj. These organizations created models with the intention of uplifting women, which drew inspiration from Sanskrit culture and came with myths that influenced how women behaved. Furthermore, she highlights that the advocates of the changes referred to the ancient scriptures, particularly the Hindu traditions. Furthermore, these discussions addressed crucial matters such as *niyoga*, property rights, the right to remarry, the advancement of the *streedhana* institution, and women's entitlement to engage in public assemblies and receive education (Chakravarti, 1999, p. 73).

Regarding Altekar's research, scholars like Kumkum Roy (1999) argue that the material supporting the decrease in women's social standing is more substantial than the evidence supporting their property rights. Furthermore, she proposes that despite the increased status of women in society, the function of the family should be seen as something other than uniform and unvarying. Bhattacharyya has refuted the notion of *streedhana* by asserting that it is mostly comprised of mobile assets that are not suitable for use in the process of production. This approach again prioritizes the economy and focuses on property rights, seeing

possessions as commodities with monetary worth. Roy and Marxist academics analyze the communal undertones in Buddhist literature while examining women's condition, a socio-political problem she addresses. These studies are founded on the assumption that the position of women in Buddhism is superior to that in the Brahmanical socio-religious world.

Roy (1999) bases her conclusions on the scarcity of hymns ascribed to female sages in the Rigveda. However, it has already been argued that it is equally crucial to consider the presence of feminine energy within the Rigveda. In addition, Roy disagrees with the research on the position of women in ancient India that relies on indicators such as education, since she contends that there may have been many methods of imparting knowledge. The complete undermining of women's status fascinates her. For instance, she identifies situations when prayers have been specifically offered for the birth of male offspring, and she proposes that women have been objectified as sexual beings. Nevertheless, the Rigveda does not discourage the birth of female offspring. Furthermore, it is impossible to minimize women's capacity for procreation, even when done so under the guise of a superficial debate.

The Dharmashastras, written concisely, symbolize the highest point of a lengthy scholarly tradition. They showcase profound knowledge and record heated debates and differing perspectives on various issues, including the concept of dharma. According to one's social position and in accordance with one's social identity based on age, gender, caste, marital status, and stage of life, dharma encompasses all aspects of appropriate personal and societal conduct. The word dharma may be interpreted as 'law' if we broaden its meaning beyond the current understanding of civil and criminal legislation, including all the standards of conduct, including moral and religious behavior, that society acknowledges as obligatory for its members (Olivelle, 1999, p. xxi). Bhattacharyya asserts that it is not an overstatement to claim that the majority of renowned contemporary writings on Hindu law aim to create numerous strategies to strip women of their property rights. This is achieved by limiting the scope of *streedhana* as much as possible. The dharmashastras provide a contrasting narrative on gender roles and inheritance. They highlight the importance of males being able to inherit and present a compelling argument for women's right to inherit. Concerning the inheritance by sons, the Apastamba dharmasutra suggests the following,

"...all the sons who are virtuous, inherit (Apastamba 2.6.14)."

"But him who expends money unrighteously, he shall disinherit, though he be the eldest son (Apastamba 2.6.15)."

Additionally, it indicates the proportion of property that women own and their role within the household. It should be noted that it does not restrict the portion of property to be transferred to the daughter. As an example, the text states,

"He should, during his lifetime, divide his wealth equally amongst his sons, excepting the eunuch, the mad man, and the outcast (Apastamba 2.6.14.1)."

The text presents a cogent case for the daughter to get the inheritance,

"the daughter (may take the inheritance) (Apastamba 2.6.14.4)."

"No division takes place between husband and wife; for, from the time of marriage, they are united in religious ceremonies (Apastamba 2.6.14.16)."

Additionally, Mukunda makes an argument in the work that streedhana has no intrinsic value. The following statement contradicts this argument:

"According to some, the share of the wife consists of her ornaments, and the wealth (which she may have received) from her relations (Apastamba 2.6.14.9)."

Regarding female sexuality, it is noteworthy that the idea of levirate has considerable significance. The levirate practice is significant for researchers studying the perception of female sexuality. The Apastamba dharmasutra emphasizes a significant and often overlooked principle in advocating for levirate marriage. The statement asserts that a bride is bestowed onto her husband's whole family rather than alone to the husband himself. At that point, it proceeds to provide an argument favoring levirate.

"The reward (in the next world) resulting from observing the restrictions of the law is preferable to offspring obtained in this manner (by niyoga) (Apastamba 2.10.27.3)."

Nevertheless, this stance sharply contradicts the liberal viewpoint of *Vashistha*, who allows a lady whose husband has been absent for five years to engage in sexual intercourse with a relative of the spouse or even an unfamiliar individual (13). On monogamy, *Apastamba* says, *"So long as his wife participates in religious rites and bears children, a man may not take another wife. If she is wanting in either of these, he may take another prior to establishing his sacred fires, for a wife who participates in the ritual establishment of his sacred fires"*

becomes associated with the rites to which the establishment of the sacred fires is only supplementary (Apastamba 2.11.2)."

"...give her for bearing children, for companionship, and for carrying out rituals (Apastamba 2.11.18)."

Those who, driven by greed, sell their daughters for profit are committing a heinous crime. As a consequence, they will suffer in a horrifying hell, their families will be destroyed for seven generations, and they will experience repeated cycles of death and rebirth. These severe consequences result from engaging in such transactions (Baudhayana 21.3). Women are upholders of ancient wisdom, and *Apastamba* urges his audience to learn certain habits from women (Apastamba 2.15.9, 2.29.11).

"They should pour out water in such a way that the deceased recognizes it, then return to the village without looking back, and do whatever else the women ask them to do (Apastamba 2.15.9)."

"The knowledge found among women and Sudras forms the conclusion (Apastamba 2.29.11)."

Conclusion

This study reveals that an examination of gender relations provides valuable insights into the lives of women during the Rigvedic period. This period sheds light on the role of women in guiding life and the family. The texts show that women derive pleasure from their autonomy and ability to rely on themselves. In addition to their home responsibilities, women had complete access to education, giving them immense opportunities to attain profound knowledge and understand the ultimate truths. The Vedic culture acknowledged and valued the significance of women, viewing them not only as homemakers but also as individuals with notable capabilities to make meaningful contributions to society. A significant number of women could foresee events and had a profound level of intellectual and spiritual understanding. Women had a significant influence on the economic well-being of their families by their engagement in the occupations of spinning, weaving, and stitching. The Rigveda proves that a widow's remarriage was allowed, as seen in the funeral song. The caste structure in the society seemed to lack rigidity. Inter-caste marriages occurred in society during this period. Women acquired proficiency in several areas, including vocal and instrumental music and dance. Women were permitted to acquire skills in martial arts as well.

In this light, gender relations must be comprehensively examined by taking into account the gendered nature of language, imposed gender roles, and the interactions between male deities and their female counterparts.

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