

# GARGI VACHAKNAVI: EARLIEST SYMBOLS OF FEMINISM IN WORLD

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## Abstract

*In ancient times, the women were considered with respect and dignity. During this period, there were women rishis, and they were held in high esteem. The Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures give numerous examples of women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators and saints. There is this false notion in many of us that women from our past were powerless, living in regressive societies. Even today, when philosophers and religious teachers are positions usually secured for men, Gargi was among the first few women to shatter this belief. The main areas that have been taken into account in this research paper include, women's position in ancient India, position of women in the Hindu dharma with special reference to Gargi Vachaknavi. This paper seeks to shed light on the life and work of Gargi Vachaknavi an extraordinary woman philosopher whose contributions continue to resonate in the realms of Philosophy.*

**Keywords:** Ancient India, Women, Society, Vedas, Upanishad, Philosophy

## INTRODUCTION

Women are the gift to the society. No doubt the Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. They had an Opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard in Ancient Vedic period. There is this false notion in many of us that women from our past were powerless, living in regressive societies. Even today, when philosophers and religious teachers are positions usually secured for men, Gargi was among the first few women to shatter this belief. Rishi Gargi was bestowed the title of Bramhavadini ( one who has realised Bramha- the super consciousness).

Females who wished to pursue higher studies were referred to as Brahmadivinis". This title was conferred upon those women who were highly knowledgeable and intelligent. The Rig Veda contains hymns written by 27 women scholars which proves the large numbers of gurukuls and female scholars during the Vedic era. Gargi Vachaknavi was a renowned woman scholar of the ancient times born around 700 BC. The Vedic literature praises her as a highly knowledgeable natural philosopher and an expounder of the Vedas. One of the most coveted titles given to her by the Vedic literature is Brahmadivinini meaning a person possessing the highest knowledge of Brahman. References about her occur in the eighth Brahmana of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that talks of her participation in a philosophical debate organized in the court of king Janaka.

### Early life

Gargi was born in the lineage of the renowned sage Garga and her period is attributed to somewhere between 800 and 500BC. Her father was Vachaknu and therefore she inherited the name Gargi Vachaknavi. Right from here early age, she demonstrated a deep interest in the Vedic scriptures and spared a great amount of time and effort to master as much knowledge as she could. At an early age, it is also stated that she awakened her kundalini. From a young age, she was interested in Vedic literature and Vedic philosophy.

### Later life

In the Upanishadic literature, Gargi appears with other well learned scholars including Vadava Pratitheyi and Sulabha Maitreyi. She was one of the famous participants in debates and intellectual discussions of her times. In the Vedic lore, her name is mentioned in the Grihy Sutras of Asvalayana. It is said that she was one who could awaken her Kundalini powers. Rishi Gargi as she is known is even mentioned in the Rigveda; in its Griha Sutra. Through her deep meditation, she revealed some of the mantras in the Rigveda. Her views on philosophy are considered so exalted that they find mention in the Chandogya Upanishads. She was greatly honored and respected for her mastery of the science and the philosophies of the Vedas. She participated and gave lectures in Brahma Yagyas and was bestowed with the title of Brahma Vadini. It was a testimony to her greatness that she was recognized as one of the Navaratnas( Nine Jewels ) in the court of King Janak of Mithila.

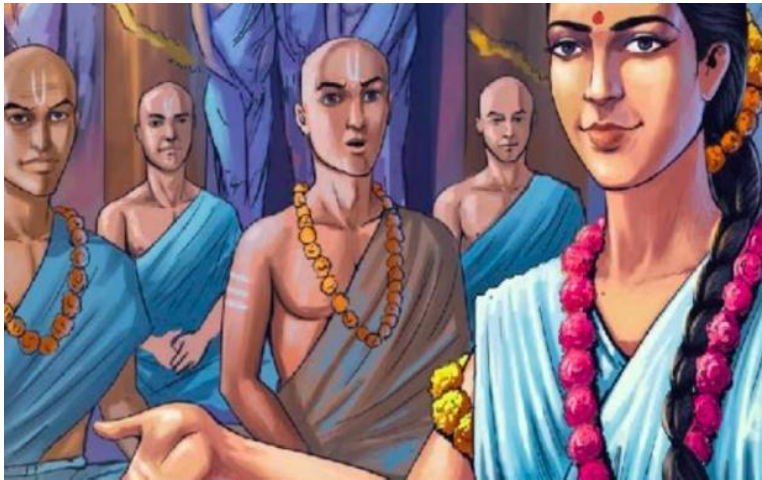
She is well known to have been in intellectual debates with other philosophers (primarily males) and is believed to have been celibate her entire life. She was a woman in a male-dominated field back in 800 BCE. You can even call her the earliest known evidence of a “woman in STEM,” for the underlying nature of the Vedas is science and math.

### Oldest icon of feminism

Rishi Gargi was the oldest icon of feminism found in the ancient Hindu texts. She has been extensively quoted in the Vedas and Upanishads. It is a reflection of the glorious and progressive Old Vedic Age, where women could uplift themselves and achieve great heights. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Gargi holds the entire debate together. By asking questions – by probing and sometimes provoking – she helps navigate complex metaphysical concepts. In Yoga Yajnavalkya Samhita, Gargi’s questions help lay out the entire path of yoga – all the practical aspects and associated practices.

Bramhavadini Gargi is indeed an icon for every woman of all eras. Her story gives us a glimpse of how modern India was by means of thoughts and zero fanaticism, respecting the independence of every individual irrespective of gender or creed. Her name appears in the Grihya-Sutras of Asvalayana. She was a leading scholar, who also made rich contributions to propagate education. Gargi, along with Vadava Pratitheyi and Sulabha Maitreyi are among the prominent females who figure in the Upanishads.

### Gargi and Yajnavalkya debate



Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions that once King Janaka of Vaidehi decided to hold a Rajsuya Yagna. In this Yagna, he invited all the wise and learned kings, princes, and sages to participate in religious debates. A large number of respected sages participated. An aroma of spirituality permeated the atmosphere with the burning of vast quantities of sandalwood, ghee, and barley. The stage was set for spiritual debates of exalted quality. The King decided to hold a debate competition to select the sage who was most knowledgeable about the Brahman. The grand prize was 1000 cows, with their horns dangling with 10 gms of gold each.

Five brahmins test Yajnavalkya by questioning him about the sacred fire ritual, what happens after death, and the nature of Brahman, the absolute. Then Gargi the daughter of Vachaknu began to question him. Yajnavalkya, she said, tell me since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth?

On air, Gargi.

On what is air woven, back and forth?

On the sky, Gargi.

On what is the sky woven, back and forth?

On the world of the Gandharvas, Gargi.

On what is the world of the Gandharvas woven, back and forth?

On the sun, Gargi.

On what is the sun woven, back and forth?

On the moon, Gargi.

On what is the moon woven, back and forth?

On the stars, Gargi.

On what are the stars woven, back and forth?

On the world of the gods, Gargi.

On what is the world of the gods woven, back and forth?

On the world of Indra, Gargi.

On what is the world of Indra woven, back and forth?

On the world of Prajapati, Gargi.

On what is the world of Prajapati woven, back and forth?

On the world of Brahman, Gargi.

On what is the world of Brahman woven, back and forth?

He said, Don't ask too many questions, Gargi, or your head will shatter apart! You are asking too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions. So don't ask too many questions! Thereupon Gargi fell silent.

Another Brahmin questions Yajnavalkya. Then (Gargi) the daughter of Vachaknu said, Distinguished Brahmins! I am going to ask this man two questions. If he can give me the answers to them, none of you will be able to defeat him in a theological debate.

### Dialogue between Gargi and Yajnavalkya

#### Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:8

##### Verse 3.8.1:

अथ ह वाचकनव्युवाच, ब्राह्मणा भगवन्तो हन्ताहमिमं द्वौ प्रश्नौ प्रकश्यामि, तौ चेन्मे वकश्यति, न वै जातु युष्माकमिमं कश्चिद्ब्रह्मोद्यं जेतेति; पृच्छ गार्गीति ॥ १ ॥

Then the daughter of Vacaknu said, 'Revered Brahmanas, I shall ask him two questions. Should he answer me those, none of you can ever beat him in describing Brahman.' 'Ask, O Gārgī.'

##### Verse 3.8.2:

सा होवाच, अहं वै त्वा याज्ञवल्क्य यथा काश्यो वा वैदेहो वोप्रपुत्र उज्यं धनुरधिज्यं कृत्वा द्वौ वाणवन्तौ सपत्नितिव्याधिनौ हस्ते कृत्वोपोत्तिष्ठेत्, एवमेवाहं त्वा द्वाभ्यां प्रश्नाभ्यामुपोदस्थाम्, तौ मे ब्रूहीति; पृच्छ गार्गीति ॥ २ ॥

She said, 'I (shall ask) you (two questions). As a man of Benares or the King of Videha, scion of a warlike dynasty, might string his unstrung bow and appear close by, carrying in his hand two bamboo-tipped arrows highly painful to the enemy, even so, O Yājñavalkya, do I confront you with two questions. Answer me those.' 'Ask, O Gārgī.'

##### Verse 3.8.3:

सा होवाच, यदूर्ध्वं याज्ञवल्क्य दिवः, यदवाक् पृथिव्याः, यदन्तरा द्यावापृथिवी इमे, यद्भूतं च भवच्च भविष्यच्चेत्याचक्षते, कस्मिंस्तदोतं च प्रोतं चेति ॥ ३ ॥

She said, 'By what, O Yājñavalkya, is that pervaded which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be?'

##### Verse 3.8.4:

स होवाच, यदूर्ध्वं गार्गी दिवः, यदवाक् पृथिव्याः, यदन्तरा द्यावापृथिवी इमे, यद्भूतं च भवच्च भविष्यच्चेत्याचक्षते, आकाशे तदोतं च प्रोतं चेति ॥ ४ ॥

He said, 'That, O Gārgī, which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be, is pervaded by the unmanifested ether.'

##### Verse 3.8.5:

सा होवाच, नमस्तेऽस्तु याज्ञवल्क्य यो म एतं व्यवोचः, अपरस्मै धारयस्वेति; पृच्छ गार्गीति ॥ ५ ॥

She said, 'I bow to you, Yājñavalkya, who have fully answered this question of mine. Now be ready for the other question.' 'Ask, O Gārgī.'

##### Verse 3.8.6:

सा होवाच, यदूर्ध्वं याज्ञवल्क्य दिवः, यदवाक् पृथिव्याः, यदन्तरा द्यावापृथिवी इमे, यद्भूतं च भवच्च भविष्यच्चेत्याचक्षते, कस्मिंस्तदोतं च प्रोतं चेति ॥ ६ ॥

She said, 'By what, O Yājñavalkya, is that pervaded which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be?'

##### Verse 3.8.7:

स होवाच, यदूर्ध्वं गार्गी दिवः, यदवाक् पृथिव्याः, यदन्तरा द्यावापृथिवी इमे, यद्भूतं च भवच्च भविष्यच्चेत्याचक्षते, आकाश एव तदोतं च प्रोतं चेति, कस्मिन्नु खल्वाकाश ओतश्च प्रोतश्चेति ॥ ७ ॥

He said, 'That, O Gārgī, which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be, is pervaded by the unmanifested ether.' 'By what is the unmanifested ether pervaded?'

##### Verse 3.8.8:

स होवाच, एतद्वै तदकशरः, गार्गी ब्राह्मणा अभिवदन्ति, अस्थूलमनण्वहस्वमदीर्घमलोहितमस्नेहमच्छायमतमोऽ-

वाय्वनाकाशमसङ्गमचक्षुष्कमश्रोत्रमवागमनोऽ-

तेजस्कमप्राणममुखममात्रमनन्तरमबाह्वम्, न तदश्राति किंचन, न तदश्राति कश्चन ॥ ८ ॥

He said: O Gārgī, the knowers of Brahman say, this Immutable (Brahman) is that. It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, neither red colour nor oiliness, neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor ether, unattached, neither savour nor odour, without eyes or ears, without the vocal organ or mind, non-luminous,

without the vital force or mouth, not a measure, and without interior or exterior. It does not eat anything, nor is it eaten by anybody.

**Verse 3.8.9:**

एतस्य वा अक्षरस्य प्रशासने गार्गी सूर्याचन्द्रमसौ विधृतौ तिष्ठतः, एतस्य वा अक्षरस्य प्रशासने गार्गी द्यावापृथिव्यौ विधृते तिष्ठतः, एतस्य वा अक्षरस्य प्रशासने गार्गी निमेषा मुहूर्ता अहोरात्राण्यर्धमासा मासा ऋतवः संवत्सरा इति विधृतास्तिष्ठन्ति; एतस्य वा अक्षरस्य प्रशासने गार्गी प्राच्योऽन्या नद्यः स्यन्दन्ते श्वेतेभ्यः पर्वतेभ्यः, प्रतीच्योऽन्याः, यां यां च दिशमनुः; एतस्य वा अक्षरस्य प्रशासने गार्गी ददतो मनुष्याः प्रशंसन्ति, यजमानं देवाः, दर्वी पितरोऽन्वायत्ताः ॥ ९ ॥

Under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, the sun and moon are held in their positions; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, heaven and earth maintain their positions; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, moments, Muhūrtas,[2] days and nights, fortnights, months, seasons and years are held in their respective places; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, some rivers flow eastward from the White Mountains, others flowing westward continue in that direction, and still others keep to their respective courses; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, men praise those that give, the gods depend on the sacrificer, and the Manes on independent offerings.

**Verse 3.8.10:**

यो वा एतदक्षरं गार्ग्यविदित्वास्मिंल्लोके जुहोति यजते तपस्तप्यते बहूनि वर्षसहस्राणि, अन्तवदेवास्य तद्भवति; यो वा एतदक्षरं गार्ग्यविदित्वास्माल्लोकात्प्रैति स कृपणः; अथ य एतदक्षरं गार्ग्यं विदित्वास्माल्लोकात्प्रैति स ब्राह्मणः ॥ १० ॥

He, O Gārgī, who in this world, without knowing this Immutable, offers oblations in the fire, performs sacrifices and undergoes austerities even for many thousand years, finds all such acts but perishable; he, O Gārgī, who departs from this world without knowing this Immutable, is miserable. But he, O Gārgī, who departs from this world after knowing this Immutable, is a knower of Brahman.

**Verse 3.8.11:**

तद्वा एतदक्षरं गार्ग्यदृष्टं द्रष्टुं, अश्रुतं श्रोतुं, अमतं मन्तुं, अविज्ञातं विज्ञातुं; नान्यदतोऽस्ति द्रष्टुं, नान्यदतोऽस्ति श्रोतुं, नान्यदतोऽस्ति मन्तुं, नान्यदतोऽस्ति विज्ञातुं; एतस्मिन्नु खल्वक्षरे गार्ग्याकाशे ओतश्च प्रोतश्चेति ॥ ११ ॥

This Immutable, O Gārgī, is never seen but is the Witness; It is never heard, but is the Hearer; It is never thought, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other witness but This, no other hearer but This, no other thinker but This, no other knower but This. By this Immutable, O Gārgī, is the (unmanifested) ether pervaded.

**Verse 3.8.12:**

सा होवाच, ब्राह्मणा भगवन्तस्तदेव बहु मन्येध्वं यदस्मान्मस्कारेण मुच्येध्वम्; न वै जातु युष्माकमिमं कश्चिद्ब्रह्मोद्यं जेतेति; ततो ह वाचकनव्युपरराम ॥ १२ ॥ इत्यष्टमं ब्राह्मणम् ॥

She said, 'Revered Brahmana's, you should consider yourselves fortunate if you can get off from him through salutations. Never shall any of you beat him in describing Brahman.' Then the daughter of Vacaknu kept silent. Gargi gracefully conceded defeat to the superior knowledge of Yajnavalkya. She addressed the gathering to consider themselves honored to bow before the great sage and declared that nobody had greater knowledge about the Brahman than him.

Sages like Asvala, the priest in Janaka's court, Artabhaga, Bhujyu, Ushasta, and Uddalaka debated with him and asked questions on philosophical subjects to which Yajnavalkya provided convincing replies.

This unpretentious acceptance of her defeat indicates one thing about the nature of philosophers. They are genuinely pursuing the truth. They wouldn't be bothered if their egos were impacted by this defeat or insult in any manner. They serenely embrace your words if they resonate with the truth, a practice that we all need, to be capable of transcending Maya (illusion) as we seek the ultimate truth.

## CONCLUSION

It may thus be concluded that in Vedic India, women did not enjoy an inferior status rather they occupied an honorable place. They had ample rights in the social and the religious fields. The dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Gargi has attained immortal fame highlighting the stature of Gargi who was an awesome personality. She had a deep inquisitiveness to unravel the mystery of Brahman (the supreme principle) and had tried to expound the nature of atman (individual soul), Brahman (supreme or universal soul) and the relationship between atman and Brahman. She has also contributed a good number of verses to the Vedic lore. She was a champion of women education and social equality for women.

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