

WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA: ROLE MODELS FOR MODERN INDIA'S LIBERATION

Dr Navjot S Deol

Asst. Prof, P.G. Dept of English
Apeejay College of Fine Arts, Jalandhar
Mobile 9815914766
Email: navjotsdeol@gmail.com

Swami Vivekananda very succinctly said, "The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women." Women's status and rights have been a topic of great importance throughout history. Manu, the ancient law giver said that "where women are honoured; there reside the Gods." Women in Hinduism were called Ardhanganis or better halves as they had a parallel role to perform in the religious ceremonies. Unfortunately, over the centuries women became a prey to the malice of gender inequality. Indian constitution has given women equal rights and legal protection to ensure that she has the same status as men but it is unfortunate that despite improvements in women's legal status, they continue to face discrimination, harassment, and humiliation in reality. They are not taken seriously when expressing their opinions and are not treated as equal to men, nor are they given the same level of respect at home or workplace.

There is enough empirical data to suggest that male dominance and control are so deeply ingrained in contemporary Indian society that it is next to impossible to bring about a significant change in the status of women. Many households still prefer male children over female children. Women have over the years become so habitual to being treated as inferior beings that "they have lost their ability to be practical, ask logical questions... They follow customs blindly in the name of worship and prayer" (Srivastava). It seems that society's perception of women, their roles, and their status has not undergone significant transformation. Therefore, enacting more laws to ensure equal opportunities, rights, and concessions hold little significance unless there is a fundamental shift in people's attitudes towards women and their roles in the society.

Ancient India, with its rich cultural heritage, provides valuable insights into the position of women in earlier societies. This research paper aims to explore the roles and rights of women in ancient India and draw parallels between their experiences and the ongoing struggle for gender equality in modern India. By examining historical texts, religious scriptures, and socio-cultural practices, this paper will substantiate the claim that women in ancient India achieved a level of emancipation that positioned them as role models for women in contemporary India.

The Vedic period, spanning from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, witnessed the flourishing of the ancient Indian civilization and the emergence of important religious and philosophical texts. Contrary to popular belief, women in ancient India held positions of respect and influence during this period. The Rigveda, one of the oldest texts of Hinduism, contains hymns composed by female seers, highlighting their participation in intellectual and spiritual pursuits. The Upanishads, philosophical treatises from the later Vedic period, also feature women like Gargi and Maitreyi, who engaged in intellectual debates and philosophical discussions.

Gargi Vachaknavi, believed to have lived in the 7th century BCE, stands as an esteemed ancient Indian philosopher. In the realm of Vedic literature, she received profound recognition as a natural philosopher and a renowned expounder of the Vedas. Her remarkable understanding of Brahma Vidya bestowed upon her the title of Brahmavadini, denoting her extensive knowledge in this sacred field. The sixth and eighth Brahmana of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad shine a spotlight on her name as she actively took part in the brahmayajna, a philosophical debate organized by King Janaka of Videha. Within this intellectual discourse, she fearlessly presented perplexing inquiries to the sage Yajnavalkya, challenging his comprehension of the atman (soul). Gargi's scholarship extended beyond the Vedas, encompassing a breadth of scriptures, surpassing even men in her vast knowledge. Additionally, it is believed that she authored numerous hymns within the Rigveda. In a similar vein, Maitreyi delved into the study of metaphysics and actively engaged in theological dialogues. These examples showcase the agency and intellectual prowess of women in ancient India.

Moreover, ancient Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana depict strong and virtuous women who played significant roles in shaping the narrative. Draupadi, and Sita are notable examples of women who exhibited agency, made important contributions, and challenged societal norms. Sita's portrayal as a helpless and submissive woman, endorsing male dominance and enduring permanent wounds, is a misconception that overlooks her true character. From a feminist perspective, this viewpoint of Sita promotes domestic violence and the subjugation of women in India. However, Sita represents the mindset of the modern Indian woman- intelligent, capable, and assertive.

Despite her outward appearance of docility, she delivers powerful speeches in the Ramayana that showcase her strength. Here are a few instances: Firstly, in Chitrakuta, Sita speaks up, reminding Rama of his promise to never harm anyone without provocation. Secondly, when Ravana approaches her in the disguise of a Brahmin,

Sita astutely observes his true identity and points out that he does not resemble a Brahmin. Furthermore, when Hanuman finds Sita in Lanka and offers to carry her back to Rama, she declines his offer. She refuses to flee like a thief and insists that she would only be pleased if Rama, as a true warrior, defeats Ravana personally and brings her back to Ayodhya.

These instances demonstrate Sita's intelligence, assertiveness, and her desire for justice and dignity. They defy the notion of Sita as a submissive figure and instead present her as a woman who stands up for herself and expresses her expectations with strength and conviction. Sita, a prominent figure in ancient Indian mythology, exemplifies the essence of the modern Indian woman through her distinctive qualities and actions demonstrating immense mental fortitude and strength of character, even in the face of excruciating circumstances throughout her life.

Despite her unhappiness, Sita never cast herself as a victim. Instead, she steadfastly supported her husband during his difficult times. She willingly forsook the luxuries of the palace and chose to accompany her husband during his exile in the forest. Sita possessed remarkable powers of persuasion. When Rama initially hesitated to pursue and capture Mareecha, she fervently expressed her desire, compelling her husband to yield to her will. During her captivity in Ashok Van by Ravana, Sita exhibited astounding moral strength. She ensured that the demon king never came near her, even though he attempted to abduct her.

Recognizing her own strength, Sita willingly underwent the Agni Pariksha, a trial by fire, to prove her purity and loyalty. Although she could have refused to enter the fire, she had unwavering faith in her mental and moral resilience, emerging as the victorious one. Even while residing at Valmiki's ashram (hermitage), Sita remained resolute and raised her two sons as a single mother. She never allowed them to feel the absence of their father and nurtured them into wise and courageous young boys. Lastly, Sita revealed her true independent spirit when she made the decision to separate from her husband, entrusting her sons to his care. Despite the profound hurt she experienced, she departed with dignity, holding her head high.

Draupadi's narrative serves as an inspiring and commendable example for emerging modern Indian women. Her unwavering determination, strength of character, and ability to navigate challenging circumstances embody the qualities that empower women in today's society. She was conscious of her rights. She was knowledgeable and knew the order of things. Even when she was called upon in the courtroom before the shameful incident, twice she refused to go because she cleared it that if Yudhishtir had lost himself in the gamble there was no way he could gamble on her and that she was not the only wife to Yudhishtir; she was married to all five of them.

Draupadi, the first feminist of Indian Mythology, epitomized woman power, self-belief, and confidence. Despite facing hardships she remained unwavering in her pursuit of following her heart and instincts. Draupadi showcased a unique platonic friendship with Krishna, demonstrating that deep friendships can exist between opposite genders. Her fearlessness and honesty allowed her to speak her mind on various occasions, never shying away from admitting her mistakes.

Draupadi was not only known for her strong personality but also for her fashion sense and beauty. She possessed knowledge of the right makeup and dressing for different occasions, being hailed as a fashionable feminist of her time. Additionally, she displayed exceptional administrative skills, efficiently managing the kingdom of Yudhishtir and skillfully manipulating situations to her advantage.

Beneath her strong exterior, Draupadi showcased compassion and generosity. She provided food to anyone who approached her doorstep, even during their exile, and even breastfed dying tribal children. After the war, she took care of Dhritrashtra and Gandhari, the parents of the Kauravas. Balancing five husbands and five sons, Draupadi commanded respect and her orders were diligently followed, proving her influence and significance. Despite the apparent contrasts between Sita and Draupadi, they both embody the essence of Naari Shakti, also known as woman power. Their life stories serve as a guiding light on how women should conduct themselves in society. Even though they belong to past eras, these formidable women's lives serve as living examples, paving the path for the future of contemporary Indian women. Their stories serve as an inspiration for modern Indian women, highlighting the strength and determination necessary to navigate challenging circumstances.

Ancient Indian society had socio-cultural practices that granted women certain rights and freedoms. The women were not only educated but they were trained in warfare. The Rig-Veda mentions a warrior queen Vishpala who lost her leg in a battle but she resumes battlefield exploits with an iron leg. The history is replete with examples of how the women were not meek or docile. Historian A.L. Basham states in *The Wonder that was India*:

“The Mauryan kings were guarded by amazons trained in the use of sword and bow, and the Greeks were impressed by the ferocity with which the women of some of the Panjab tribes aided their menfolk in resisting Alexander.”(184)

Furthermore, the concept of swayamvara allowed women to choose their life partners based on their own judgment and preferences. Sita married Ram after he lifted Shiv Dhanush. Damayanti married the Nal, the king of Nishadha kingdom and this is mentioned in Vana Parva of Mahabharata. There are numerous instances of ancient Indian women such as Draupadi, Kunti, etc. having found their husbands through this practice. This practice exemplified the agency and autonomy women possessed in selecting their spouses. It challenged the prevailing notion that women were mere objects of arranged marriages without any say in their own lives.

Inheritance rights, known as stridhana, were another significant aspect of ancient Indian society. Women had the ability to possess and control property, which provided them with economic independence. This allowed women to have a sense of financial security and autonomy, thereby challenging the assumption that women were entirely dependent on male relatives for their livelihood.

The Buddhist and Jain traditions, which emerged in ancient India, promoted principles of equality and provided avenues for women to pursue spiritual enlightenment. The life of Mahaprajapati Gautami, the foster mother of Buddha, exemplifies the important role women played in early Buddhism. She was instrumental in establishing the order of nuns and played a significant role in propagating Buddhist teachings. The story of Mahaprajapati is recorded in the Kshudrakavastu, a scripture from the Vinaya (the division of the Buddhist canon that lays out the structure of monastic life) of the Mulasarvastivada school of the Sanskrit tradition.

Similarly, in Jainism, women like Malli, the first female lay disciple of Mahavira, achieved spiritual liberation and contributed to the spread of Jain philosophy. These examples demonstrate that ancient Indian religions provided women with opportunities for spiritual growth and actively challenged gender-based discrimination. Ancient Indian history is replete with archetypes of women empowerment.

Apart from ancient Indian period but there are examples of liberated women from medieval and later period of Indian history such as Rudrama Devi of Warangal; Chennamma, the queen of Keladi who ruled for 25 years, and Velu Nachiyar the queen of Sivagangai situated in present day Tamil Nadu. She was the first woman in the history of India to wage a successful war against the British. She was trained in warfare, an expert in martial arts, horse riding, archery, etc. Laxmibai the queen of Jhansi is yet another example of an emancipated woman.

In conclusion, the position of women in ancient India challenges common misconceptions about the subjugation of women in the past. The Vedic period, characterized by intellectual pursuits and the participation of women in spiritual activities, serves as evidence of their agency and autonomy. Socio-cultural practices such as swayamvara and stridhana provided women with choices and economic independence, contradicting the prevailing notion of female subordination. Additionally, the Buddhist and Jain traditions provided avenues for women to pursue spiritual enlightenment, emphasizing principles of equality and challenging patriarchal norms. The experiences of women in ancient India serve as role models for women in contemporary India who continue to strive for gender equality.

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