

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN ANCIENT INDIAN RELIGIOUS TEXTS AND EPICS

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Abstract:

The evolution of women's roles in ancient Indian religious texts and epics showcases a dynamic shift from early spiritual equality to increasing social and legal constraints. In the Vedic period, women were active participants in intellectual, spiritual, and ritual spheres, exemplified by figures like Gargi and Maitreyi, who engaged in philosophical discourse. However, with the rise of the epics and Smritis, particularly the *Manusmriti*, women's roles became more defined by ideals of devotion, sacrifice, and subordination to male authority. The Ramayana and Mahabharata depict women as symbols of moral strength, with characters like Sita and Draupadi embodying both virtue and resistance. Yet, these epics also highlight the increasing confinement of women to roles defined by patriarchal norms. Over time, sacred texts and dharma shastras codified women's dependence on male guardians, diminishing their intellectual, spiritual, and legal autonomy. This paper explores the dual nature of women's representation: their empowerment through intellectual engagement and their marginalization through religious and legal frameworks. The impact of these shifts is explored across various traditions, including the Bhakti movement, where women like Andal and Mirabai found spiritual agency outside institutional boundaries. Despite institutional constraints, women in ancient India found ways to reshape their spiritual and social worlds, contributing to a complex legacy of resistance and adaptation.

Keywords:

Women in Ancient India, Vedic Texts, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Manusmriti, Gender Roles, Bhakti Movement, Feminist Interpretation.

Introduction

The representation of women in ancient Indian religious texts and epics provides an insightful lens through which to understand the dynamic roles women played in early Indian society. From the Vedic period through the later epics and Smritis, women were initially portrayed as active intellectual, spiritual, and ritual participants, with a significant presence in the religious and philosophical discourse of the time. In the Vedic texts, such as the *Rigveda* and *Upanishads*, women like Gargi and Maitreyi were celebrated for their intellectual contributions, engaging in philosophical debates and questioning the nature of existence and the cosmos. Women were not only revered as wives and mothers but were also seen as rishikas (female sages), composers of hymns, and spiritual equals to men. This early period reflects a sense of gender equality, where women were active co-creators of religious knowledge and intellectual inquiry. The idealized roles of women in the Vedic texts were grounded in a partnership with men, both in the home and in the religious sphere, where shared rituals and intellectual debates were central to the cultural fabric.

WOMEN IN SACRED TEXTS AND EPICS

The representation of women in ancient Indian sacred texts and epics offers profound insight into both the idealization and the evolving subjugation of women in the Vedic and post-Vedic imagination. While the early Vedic literature features empowered female voices—philosophers, poets, and ritual participants—the later epics and Smriti texts increasingly reflect a normative shift toward defining women's roles in terms of morality, devotion, sacrifice, and duty to male guardians. The Vedas, Upanishads, and epic narratives do not merely record historical events; they project idealized roles that deeply influenced social attitudes toward gender, forming the mythological and ethical frameworks that governed women's lives across centuries.

Role of Women in the Vedas and Upanishads

In the Vedic corpus, particularly the *Rigveda*, women are portrayed as intellectual, spiritual, and social participants. They appear not only as wives and mothers but also as *rishikas* (female sages) and composers of hymns. Figures like **Lopamudra**, **Apala**, **Ghosha**, and **Visvavara** are credited with contributions to Vedic verses, highlighting their spiritual and poetic authority (Ghosh, 2018). These women voiced philosophical questions and expressed devotional sentiments, indicating that female intellect and emotional expression were both culturally valued.

The Upanishads, foundational texts of Indian metaphysics, further extend this respect for female intellect. Two prominent women—Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi—are central to these dialogues. Gargi debates the sage Yajnavalkya on the nature of *Brahman* (cosmic consciousness), asking complex cosmological questions that position

her as an intellectual equal. Maitreyi, on the other hand, rejects material wealth in pursuit of spiritual knowledge, questioning the meaning of immortality and the limitations of worldly possessions (Mohanty, 2013; Das, 2021). These narratives emphasize that women were not only participants in philosophical discourse but were capable of challenging dominant ideas and offering their own interpretations of dharma, truth, and liberation.

Female Figures in the Ramayana and Mahabharata

The two great Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, composed between 500 BCE and 200 CE, reflect a changing socio-political order where female characters are both idealized and constrained. In the *Ramayana*, **Sita** is the central female figure—praised for her virtue, loyalty, and strength of character. Her decision to accompany Rama into exile and her enduring moral strength during her captivity in Lanka are often cited as exemplars of *pativrata dharma* (devotion to husband). However, her later rejection by Rama due to societal suspicion marks a pivotal shift toward a more rigid moral code, one that prioritizes public image and male authority over personal loyalty and justice (Doniger, 2013).

In the *Mahabharata*, a more complex and politically nuanced text, women like **Draupadi**, **Kunti**, **Gandhari**, and **Subhadra** play significant roles in both the moral and dynastic conflicts. Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court—after being gambled away by her husband—has been the subject of extensive feminist critique. While she fiercely asserts her rights and questions the morality of the elders, her voice is ultimately overpowered by political expediency. Kunti, as the mother of the Pandavas, wields considerable influence through counsel and decision-making, yet she too is shaped by the constraints of duty and family honor (Das, 2021). These epics often highlight women's emotional strength, moral authority, and strategic intelligence, but simultaneously reinforce their roles as protectors of familial integrity and dynastic legacy, frequently at great personal cost.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND SYMBOLIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Beyond individual characters, the sacred texts and epics frame women symbolically as carriers of moral order and cosmic balance. In many narratives, the honor of women represents the moral health of society itself. The violation or protection of women often serves as the turning point in the cosmic or dynastic storyline. For instance, Draupadi's dishonor directly leads to the Kurukshetra war in the *Mahabharata*, signifying the consequences of injustice toward women. Sita's abduction catalyzes the war in *Ramayana*, positioning her purity and patience as both the cause of conflict and the symbol of righteousness.

Philosophically, these women reflect different dimensions of *dharma*—Sita represents submission to social duty; Draupadi symbolizes resistance against injustice; Maitreyi and Gargi embody the pursuit of knowledge and liberation. These women were not passive figures but embodied various modes of agency—whether through questioning, suffering, sacrifice, or strategic action. Yet, the broader narrative structures often limited them to roles defined in relation to male authority—father, husband, or son—reflecting the gradual but deepening entrenchment of patriarchal ideals.

Women in sacred texts and epics were portrayed with immense moral strength, intellectual depth, and emotional complexity. Figures like Sita, Draupadi, Gargi, and Maitreyi left a lasting imprint on Indian cultural consciousness, shaping ideals of femininity, duty, and virtue. However, their stories also reveal a society in transition—from spiritual partnership and intellectual equality in the Vedic age to moral idealism and social containment in the epic and post-Vedic period. These texts simultaneously preserved women's voices and constrained them, reflecting both empowerment and the beginning of their marginalization in the evolving Indian worldview.

IMPACT OF SMRITIS AND DHARMA SHASTRAS

The Smritis and Dharma Shastras played a pivotal role in reshaping the legal and moral framework of ancient Indian society. While the early Vedic period allowed for flexibility in gender roles, the later period, especially through texts like the *Manusmriti*, codified and institutionalized patriarchal norms. These texts constructed a prescriptive vision of ideal womanhood—obedient, chaste, devoted—and severely curtailed the autonomy women had previously enjoyed.

Manusmriti and Gender Codes

The *Manusmriti*, composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, became the most influential legal and moral authority in Hindu society, particularly regarding gender roles. This text systematically positioned women as subordinate to men throughout all stages of life. According to Manusmriti verse 5.148, “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent” (Yogi, 2022). This explicit denial of autonomy was a radical departure from earlier Vedic ideals where women participated freely in rituals and intellectual discourse.

The *Manusmriti* did not merely reflect the social attitudes of its time—it shaped them. By framing female dependence as a religious and social necessity, it justified placing women under constant male supervision. The text presented women as inherently weak, emotionally unstable, and intellectually inferior, thus requiring regulation. This view not only diminished women's status but reinforced the idea that their spiritual merit could be attained only through obedience to male relatives. Even their access to religious practices became dependent on their roles within the family,

further reducing their independent spiritual identity. Moreover, this gender ideology was not limited to a few elite groups. As the *Manusmriti* and other Dharma texts were taught and cited across generations, their influence permeated legal customs, social expectations, and moral instruction throughout ancient and medieval India. The result was a systematic weakening of the empowered female archetype that had flourished during the Vedic age.

Legal and Moral Duties of Women

The Dharma Shastras redefined a woman's role in society through a carefully constructed set of legal and moral obligations. Central to these texts was the ideal of the *pativrata*—a woman entirely devoted to her husband in mind, body, and duty. Her virtue was measured not by individual accomplishments but by her obedience, sexual purity, and willingness to serve. Education, independence, and public roles were discouraged or explicitly forbidden. This marked a significant contraction of the moral and legal agency that women held during the Vedic period (Devika, 2022).

In legal terms, women were often considered “property” of the male household, unable to initiate divorce, claim equal inheritance, or act as independent legal agents. Their testimonies were often considered unreliable in courts, and they were excluded from formal legal councils or assemblies. The law also regulated their mobility—women were discouraged from appearing in public or attending religious ceremonies without male accompaniment.

Moral texts also placed heavy emphasis on female chastity (*stri dharma*), often linking a woman's behavior to the honor and karma of the entire family. In many cases, transgressions—real or perceived—by women were seen as violations of cosmic and social order, punishable by ritual exclusion or worse. These strict moral expectations were not equally enforced on men, highlighting the double standards entrenched in ancient legal codes. Consequently, women became the carriers of moral burden without equivalent access to moral authority.

Effects on Rights and Social Positioning

The long-term effect of these gendered legal codes was the systematic erosion of women's rights, visibility, and status in society. Once regarded as intellectual companions and ritual participants, women were gradually pushed into roles centered on service, reproduction, and household maintenance. Their exclusion from Vedic learning and sacrificial rituals eliminated their public religious presence, while their legal disenfranchisement made them economically and socially dependent on male guardians (Das, 2021).

Inheritance laws began to favor sons exclusively, leaving daughters and widows with limited or no claim to ancestral property. Even *stridhan*—wealth given to women at the time of marriage—was often controlled or confiscated by in-laws. Widows, in particular, faced severe social restrictions. Many were denied the right to remarry, expected to live in austerity, and, in some cases, coerced into performing *sati*—self-immolation on their husband's pyre—though this practice became more widespread in later centuries.

These legal and ritual frameworks had deep socio-cultural implications. By confining women to domesticity and denying them access to education, land, and law, the Dharma Shastras institutionalized a patriarchal social order that would persist for centuries. While regional customs and certain non-Brahmanical communities continued to grant women more flexibility, the mainstream Hindu legal tradition largely marginalized female agency during and after the period when these texts gained authority.

The Smritis and Dharma Shastras, particularly the *Manusmriti*, marked a turning point in the legal and moral positioning of women in ancient India. By formally codifying dependency, obedience, and chastity as core female virtues, these texts curtailed women's public, educational, and legal roles. The cumulative effect was a systemic transformation of gender relations, from earlier models of partnership and participation to a patriarchal structure built on control and containment.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

The spiritual fabric of ancient India was diverse, dynamic, and deeply intertwined with social structure. Women's place within this spiritual landscape was not static—it evolved with shifts in religious ideology, philosophical reform movements, and changing societal priorities. While early traditions granted women space as equal spiritual partners, later orthodoxies increasingly limited their participation. Still, women continued to shape religious life—sometimes within institutional roles, and at other times through personal devotion and resistance to social constraints. Their presence can be traced in scriptures, rituals, renunciant paths, and devotional literature—each telling a different story of faith, agency, and gender.

Participation in Rituals

In the Vedic era, the ritual role of women was central and respected. Vedic religion placed heavy emphasis on household rituals (*grhya yajnas*), which required the presence of both husband and wife to be considered complete. A woman was not merely an observer but a co-performer, chanting mantras, offering oblations, and maintaining sacred fires. The spiritual status of a wife (*patni*) was so essential that certain rites, including *Agnihotra*, could not be performed without her. Women were regarded as *yajmanapatnis*—equal ritual patrons in household ceremonies, affirming their integral role in spiritual life (Mohanty, 2013).

This ritual involvement, however, began to erode over time. As Vedic religion evolved into a more complex system

governed by priestly authority and caste regulations, sacred knowledge and ritual access became increasingly gender-exclusive. Brahmanical texts like the Smritis eventually replaced this earlier inclusiveness with strict gender rules that barred women from studying the Vedas, reciting sacred hymns, or officiating rites. The shift was not just theological but symbolic—it reflected the broader social exclusion of women from public religious space. Rituals became tools of male spiritual authority, while women were redirected toward domestic observance—fasts, household worship, and service to male practitioners.

Women in Buddhism and Jainism

As orthodox Brahmanism tightened its grip over religious life, Buddhism and Jainism emerged as radical alternatives that offered new opportunities for spiritual participation, including for women. Buddhism, in particular, introduced a monastic path (*Bhikkhuni Sangha*) that allowed women to renounce worldly life and pursue enlightenment. Early nuns like **Mahapajapati Gotami** and **Khema** are notable for their wisdom, ethical leadership, and teaching roles. Unlike in Vedic tradition, where spiritual attainment for women was often mediated through male relatives, Buddhism emphasized individual discipline and personal liberation (Iyer, 2018).

Yet, this equality was conditional. Despite his revolutionary inclusion of women, the Buddha imposed additional rules on nuns and made them subordinate to monks in the monastic hierarchy, regardless of seniority. These gendered structures, codified in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, highlighted an underlying ambivalence—even within progressive frameworks, complete parity was elusive. Similarly, Jainism opened ascetic life to women through the *sadhvi* tradition, where female renunciants followed strict vows of celibacy, non-possession, and detachment. Women in Jainism were revered for their austerity, yet debates persisted about their capacity for moksha—especially in the Digambara sect, which held that female liberation was only possible through rebirth as a man. Still, both traditions were significant in redefining spiritual merit. They allowed women to step outside domestic roles and claim independent spiritual identities, even if bounded by institutional hierarchy. Unlike the Brahmanical path, where women's dharma was tied to familial duty, these reform movements acknowledged women as seekers in their own right—a crucial ideological shift in the religious history of India.

Female Saints and the Bhakti Movement

If Buddhism and Jainism offered structured ascetic paths, the Bhakti movement broke all barriers—linguistic, caste-based, and gendered—through its insistence on direct, emotional devotion to the divine. Originating in Tamil Nadu and spreading across India between the 6th and 17th centuries, Bhakti created a powerful spiritual counterculture where love, surrender, and personal experience of God took precedence over birth, ritual, and institutional access.

Women found in Bhakti a spiritual language that embraced both intensity and intimacy. In Andal, the young Tamil poet-saint, we see an unapologetically expressive form of devotion. Her verses in the *Tiruppavai* reflect not only theological devotion but also personal longing, as she envisioned herself the bride of Lord Vishnu. Unlike the silent, obedient ideal of the Smriti-bound wife, Andal was bold, poetic, and spiritually sovereign. Her divine marriage was a rejection of social norms and an embrace of mystical union (Iyer, 2018).

Centuries later, in North India, Mirabai embodied defiance and devotion in equal measure. A Rajput princess who rejected courtly life, she wandered freely, singing songs to her beloved Krishna, declaring “I have found love, and the world disapproves.” Her songs—rich with emotion, rebellion, and spiritual ecstasy—challenged caste restrictions, gender hierarchies, and the expectations of widowhood. Mirabai, like many other Bhakti women, did not seek permission to be spiritual; she simply was. And in doing so, she inspired generations of women to see faith not as obligation, but as liberation (Bansal, 2019).

The Bhakti tradition's use of vernacular languages, folk forms, and emotional depth gave women a platform for spiritual authorship. They were no longer bound to male intermediaries or Sanskrit scholarship. Their poetry, music, and devotion made them not just participants, but leaders in religious discourse. In Bhakti, women reclaimed the sacred—not through law or lineage, but through love, voice, and divine intimacy.

From co-performers of Vedic rituals to excluded observers under Brahmanical orthodoxy; from renunciants in Jain and Buddhist orders to mystic poets in the Bhakti wave—women's spiritual journeys in ancient India were complex and evolving. While patriarchy attempted to restrict their access, women found ways to inhabit, reinterpret, and resist the religious space. Whether through ritual, asceticism, or ecstatic devotion, they continually reshaped the sacred according to their own truths.

Conclusion:

The evolution of women's roles in ancient Indian religious texts and epics reveals a complex interplay of empowerment and subjugation. In the early Vedic period, women were celebrated as intellectual equals, active spiritual participants, and co-creators of religious knowledge. Figures like Gargi and Maitreyi embodied this equality, contributing to philosophical discourse and questioning profound metaphysical ideas. However, as the epics and Smriti texts emerged, the portrayal of women began to shift towards more restrictive and patriarchal norms, with characters like Sita and

Draupadi embodying ideals of virtue, devotion, and sacrifice, yet often constrained by male authority. The *Manusmriti* and other Dharma Shastras institutionalized gender roles that placed women under the guardianship of male figures, significantly diminishing their autonomy in intellectual, spiritual, and legal domains. Despite these constraints, women continued to find ways to assert their agency, particularly through movements like the Bhakti tradition, where figures such as Andal and Mirabai reclaimed spiritual space and expressed their devotion outside institutional boundaries. Their contributions reshaped the sacred, allowing women to redefine their roles in spiritual life and challenge societal norms. The legacy of women's spiritual agency in ancient India is thus one of resistance and adaptation, reflecting both the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society and the ways in which women navigated, resisted, and ultimately reshaped the religious and cultural landscape.

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