

The Changing Image of Womanhood: Comparative Study of Women's Depiction in Ancient Texts and Inscriptions

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Early Vedic depictions celebrated women as intellectual co-regents and ritual visionaries; However, the Post-Vedic era engineered a systematic retreat into domestic submissiveness. This ideological shift to "perpetual tutelage" sought to anchor social hierarchies through gendered dependency. Still, epigraphic records offer a defiant counter-narrative. The stone inscriptions reveal a material reality of female economic agency and patronage that literature attempted to erase.

This paper studies how depiction of women changed drastically from Vedic to post Vedic times and how inscriptions present a narrative which counters the submissive and domestic role imagined and imposed on women by Post- Vedic literature , specially Manusmriti.

Rituals agency and Spiritual sovereignty of Vedic times

The earlier Vedic period (1500-1000 BCE), portray women as vital pillars of spiritual knowledge and provided them with substantial socio-economic autonomy, contrasting their later submissive depiction of the Post Vedic period.

Education was institutionalized equally for both men and women. The Upanayan Sanskar (initiation into sacred knowledge) was customary for both genders. Women were either Sadyotsvahas (those who studied till marriage) or Brahmavaadini (who opted lifelong asceticism and philosophical pursuit). Marriage was allowed after sixteen, after Brahmacharya was completed. The system of svyambara provided women with the right to choose their own husbands.

Atharvaveda mentions "maidens should marry those bridegrooms who, like them, are also learned". Thus, entry into a marital Union was predicated on completion of education.

Although sons were preferred, the birth of a girl child was not a concern; fathers were often praised for having exemplary daughters. Women could offer sacrifices alone , so a son was not particularly necessary. The dread of widowhood was also not so horrifying as in post Vedic period as remarriage was allowed and even was a common practice.

Several hymns in Rigveda are attributed to around Twenty-seven female seers called "Rsikas" such as Ghosha, Apala , and Vishvavara. These women were denoted as "Mantra-drastas"(visionaries of divine World) , contributing verses on cosmology and authority which have same canonical weight as their male counter parts.

During the era of Chhandogya and Brihhadarankya Upanishads, women were represented as active participants in philosophical discussions. There are several examples of intellectual women.

The Brihhadarankya Upanishad reports of dialogue between Maitreyi and Yojanavalkavya , where she chose material wealth in favor of Amritatva (immortality through knowledge). This indicates that women enjoyed agency to pursue meta physical truth, independent of their domestic roles.

Bhuvana is mentioned in Vayu Purana for her contribution to Yoga and worldly exploration. Devibhagvata mentioned that Vedavati was well versed in vedantic lore from birth and practiced asceticism . Maitreyi, Sulabha, Gargi , Sannati find mention in Vishnu Purana for their expertise in philosophy and Yoga .

Such status was enjoyed by women in the Yagya (Sacrifice)as well, the central institution of Vedic life . Rituals were incomplete without the presence of a wife. The term Patni (wife) etymologically signifies "one who shares in the sacrifice." The wife was denoted as Saha-dharmini (partner in spiritual duty), exercising a form of "ritual sovereignty." She was required to chant specific mantras and perform the Agni-hotra (daily

fire sacrifice). If the husband was absent, the wife possessed the independent authority to conduct the rites, ensuring the continuity of the family's spiritual merit.

In the economic sphere as well women enjoyed an autonomous lifestyle. Women were expected to contribute in family, do outside work which was not too strenuous. They moved freely, even participating in events like Samana, a festival of chariot racing and intellectual contests. Rig bheja even mentions women as ruling over bipeds and Quadripeds (slaves and cattle).

Such freedom and egalitarian depiction of women was to be changed in the Post Vedic age. Post Vedic transition to a submissive position of women

The Post Vedic period saw a significant shift in socio-legal status of women. From relatively autonomous beings they were made completely dependent on males for identity and got confined to the domestic and reproductive roles. Dharmashastra texts often grouped them with Shudras, placing them at subordinate positions.

According to scholars including Uma Chakravarti, this shift was the result of evolution of lineage based society, agriculture, caste system, endogamy and arranged marriages. The image of women was reimagined through a Brahmanical-Patriarchal lens, which reached its pinnacle in Manusmriti.

This was a systematic exercise which included exclusion of women from intellectual spaces, controlling their sexuality and stripping them of any ownership over property, eventually eradicating agency.

Post Vedic literature, starting with Grihyasutras, began to remove Upanayan Sanskar for women. First it became just a formality and eventually got abolished. Upanayan Rituals now began to be equated with marriage ceremonies for women. With no education, even hymns of daily worships became illegible to her. The women from Saha-dharmini came to be seen as a domestic subject whose path to salvation was mediated entirely through her husband. Women were required to be Pativrata (a devoted wife), regardless of husband's character.

The submissive role of women was codified by Manu, who declared women as essentially "perpetual minors", not capable of being independent due to their supposed "inherent weak and loose character". The women were always to be under control of a man - father, brother, husband and then son.

The birth of Girl children became unpopular. The importance of ancestral worship increased and now sons alone could offer oblations to the manes. Under strict rules of exogamy, finding a suitable son-in-law became too difficult. While the son was a hope for the family, the girls were just trouble. The age of marriage of women reduced significantly and widow remarriage was prohibited.

Controlling women's sexuality became an important theme of such texts. This was important to prevent Miscegeny or Varnasanhara (mix of castes). To ensure pure lineage, the literature teasingly emphasized Patriarchal notions of Modesty, Seclusion and eradication of women's choice in marriage and total suppression of desire. Children who were products of intercaste marriages were put under one of hierarchical positions of pollution. The most polluted ones were those who were born out of union between a High caste woman and a low caste man. Miscegeny was seen as a threat to the entire social order and was to be punished violently.

While the concept of Stridhana continued to exist, Post Vedic literature greatly limited its scope. Women were now only permitted to own movable wealth (like jewellery) and were denied rights to inheritance in favour of male succession. This made even noble women strategically submissive and completely dependent on men.

A different perspective from inscriptions

Though the texts of post Vedic position significantly changed the depiction and agency of women , inscriptions present a different view ,many times challenging the depiction put forward by texts .

Manu declared women as incapable of being independent and relegated them to the domestic sphere , however the cave paintings at Bhimbetka contradicts such a position. Here women are painted as gathering fruits with their children in baskets swung across their shoulders . This presents a view that in prehistoric times the women's productive and reproductive roles were equally important. There was no rigid sexual division of labour as postulated . The role of a woman in the economy was equal to a man.

In texts only kings are projected as generous givers without mentioning any grants from women. Whereas many inscriptions record generous grants from women towards ,temples or Buddhist Monasteries and otherwise . Buddhist Inscriptions are particularly exemplary evidence of Dana by female donors as laywoman, Bhikuni, Royal women and in some cases disciples of eminent woman masters .

Inscriptions from Sanchi and Bharut from 1st century AD ,record women granting offerings in just their names with no reference to their husbands . One of the oldest examples of such grants comes from Ashokan Pillar edicts ,where Charuvaki- Ashoka's second wife is recorded for offering Mango groves and gardens for the destitute . An inscription from Kanheri caves mentions a Satvahana queen as making a pious gift of water cistern. Amravati caves also present us with examples of women contributing to the construction of Stupas .The Buddhist Chetta inscription mentions an Upasika(female worshiper) gifting Chatta (Parasol) . Another inscription mentions an Upasika called Siva , donating Buddhist sculptures .

As we move south such offerings by women become more religious . Many Chola and Pandya inscriptions list names of women donating gold or money .For instance , Varada Devi , the Chief queen of Vijayanagar emperor Achutya Raja is recorded to give six villages to Tirumala's Shri Venkateswara temple .

Such generosity is not limited to noble women . Contributions of Ordinary women ,though rarely , are also recorded. In Ramnagar , UP a statue of Jila dated to the Saka era ,is remarkably noted to be donated by 10 carpenter women .

Under texts like Manu, the males are the heads of the family and women cannot be imagined to hold such authority . However, Amravati inscriptions included at least Nine inscriptions where women are represented as Gahapatis .

A few inscriptions also mention women as wage earners , contrasting their domestic image in the earlier texts . Six inscriptions at Amravati refer to female Vaniyas making generous donations .Here Vaniya could either mean wife of carpenters or women as carpenters themselves .

Many Inscriptions near the early medieval period even mention women as active participants in war and talk about their valour . An inscription from Hoshak Taluq of Karnataka mentions females who fought bravely , did not mind getting killed, and raided villages for cows .

Thus the inscriptions paint women as capable individuals who were wage earners or had their own property with intellectual powers, a complete contrast from women painted by Manu .

Conclusion

The story of womanhood in ancient India is not a simple linear decline, but a tension between what texts prescribed and what women actually lived. While early Vedic traditions allowed women a visible ritual and intellectual presence, the post-Vedic period increasingly recast them within a framework of dependence through the Dharmashastras. Yet, inscriptions tell a different story , one where women appear as donors, patrons, and even rulers, exercising economic and political agency. This contrast shows that prescriptive texts did not fully define social reality. Instead, women continued to negotiate space and authority in ways that often escaped or resisted textual control. Ultimately, their history lies as much in what they did as in what was written about them.

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