

## Discovering the Evolution of Women's Status: Comparing Vedic Times to Present Day

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### Abstract:

During the Rig Vedic period, women enjoyed equal status and position to their male counterparts. In fact, only married men could perform religious rites, and only in the company of their spouses. Women were highly valued and revered in Vedic civilization - not just as mothers who brought up new generations, but also as individuals with remarkable abilities to see the truth and contribute to society. They received adequate education, despite the patriarchal system that was prevalent at the time. The Rig Veda even speaks of women engaging in battle. It is a common misconception that the Hindu faith has contributed to increasing gender inequality, but this is not true. Women were regarded as Mother Goddesses (Shakti) during the Vedic Period (1500-1000 BC) - symbols of life with an enormous capacity for tolerance and sacrifice. They were associated with property in the Epics and Puranas, and even Buddhism did not help women much. However, it is important to follow the Vedic advice to empower women in society. According to Manu, a woman would be reliant on her father in childhood, her spouse in youth, and her son in old age. We need to work towards changing this and ensuring that women have equal opportunities and respect in society.

**Keywords:** *Rigveda, Women, Education, Marriage, property right*

### Introduction:

In examining the status of women in Rig Vedic times compared to the present day, it is important to consider the historical context and how societal attitudes have evolved over time. The Rig Vedic period, which dates back thousands of years, provided women with a degree of freedom and agency that was not commonly seen in other ancient civilizations. Women in this period were not only seen as equals to men, but they also had the opportunity to participate in various aspects of society, such as education, archery, and public activities. Furthermore, women in the Rig Vedic period were not limited to traditional gender roles and expectations. They had the autonomy to choose their own spouse and even earn money through various professions. This is evident from the existence of renowned female authors and seers mentioned in the Rig Veda, who were not only knowledgeable but also highly esteemed for their intelligence and learning.

However, it is important to note that while the Rig Vedic period provided women with significant freedoms, it is in stark contrast to the patriarchal society and traditional social norms that emerged in India over time. These norms began to limit women's autonomy and reinforce gendered roles and expectations.

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As society changed and evolved, women were increasingly expected to prioritize childbearing and producing sons, which led to societal pressures and reproductive coercion. These societal pressures and expectations have resulted in significant mental health burdens for women, as they navigate the delicate balance between being caregivers and providers in modern Indian society. Centuries of social conditioning, rooted in regressive attitudes towards Indian women, have further compounded this burden. The Manusmriti, an ancient text that espoused feminine subjugation, and the perception of women as self-sacrificing mothers and devout wives, have had a lasting impact on societal beliefs.

Although progress has been made towards gender equality and women's empowerment, India still has a long way to go.

#### **Literature Review:**

Scholars have explored the changing roles and perceptions of women in Indian society. Ferguson and Cavanaugh mention the contradictory facts illustrated about womanhood in the ancient Vedic period. While women were given high positions and equal rights, there was also a contrasting image that confined women to the premises of the house and limited their autonomy.

Another source highlights the early stages of Indian society, where women were regarded as symbols of life and had a respected place in society. They were seen as co-partners in life, sharing both joys and sorrows with their husbands.

In addition, historical evidence shows that women played important roles during the Mauryan period as female bodyguards and were depicted as life-givers and Goddess of nature in Buddhist texts ([Selvi, 2021](#)).

Moreover, the Dravidian culture of southern India provided women with empowerment and the authority to control and manage all household affairs. They were not only seen as household managers but also as contributors to society. This recognition of women's capabilities and contributions to society can be seen as an idolization of womanhood in Indian civilization.

In the early Vedic civilization, women's roles extended far beyond the personal sphere. They actively participated in various aspects of life, including education, archery, public activities, gymnastics, and even war. Their involvement in these areas showcased their intelligence and skill, challenging the general preference for sons in society. The Rig-Veda-Samhita documents several women seers and sages who were renowned for their wisdom and learning, called *Brahamavadins* such as Slabha Maitreyi, Gargi Vachaknavi, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Visvavara, Vasava Prachiteyi, and Skata Nivavari.

The Rig Veda attaches importance to the institution of marriage and refers to various types of marriage—**monogamy, polygyny, and polyandry**. The rituals indicate post-puberty marriages, and there are references to women choosing their husbands. A woman could remarry if her husband died or disappeared. There are also references to unmarried women, called *Amaaju* such as the Rig Vedic seer Ghosha, who lived independently and pursued spiritual knowledge. Atharva Veda to the practice of a widow marrying her younger brother-in-law called *niyoga* system. The Shatapatha Brahmana

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(5.2.1.10) states that the wife is half her husband and completes him. However as time went on and gender differentiation became more prominent in society, the position of women started to deteriorate. They were stripped of their basic human rights and marginalized. They were denied autonomy and property rights, and their societal roles became limited to the confines of the household. As shown in the *Taitriya Samhita*, two wheels of a cart, man and woman, imply that both man and woman resemble two bulls yoked in a chariot.

In ancient India, the role of women was defined in texts like the Samhita and Arthashastra. Women were considered as important members of their families. They were allowed to own personal property such as jewellery and clothing. The Arthashastra permitted women to possess up to 2000 silver panas. Any funds exceeding this limit were kept in trust for the wife by her husband. In extreme situations, a husband might use his wife's possessions. If a woman passed away, her property was inherited by her daughters, not by her husband or sons. In case her husband died without a son, the widow inherited his property.

This shift in societal attitudes towards women is a reflection of the changing social dynamics in ancient India. While the early Vedic period saw women enjoying freedom and active participation in various aspects of life, the later Vedic period witnessed a decline in their status and opportunities.

The reasons behind this deterioration in women's position can be attributed to the growing influence of patriarchal norms and the emergence of a male-dominated society. With the rise of gender differentiation, women were gradually confined to the domestic sphere and assigned roles solely as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the household. This restrictive view of women's roles limited their opportunities for education, participation in public life, and professional pursuits. Women were no longer seen as individuals with intelligence and abilities, but rather as solely responsible for fulfilling the needs of their families.

Despite these regressive trends, it is important to recognize that throughout different periods of Indian history, there have been contradictory facts and narratives regarding women's status and roles. Some texts and historical evidence depict women in positions of power and respect, highlighting their contributions to society and their equal rights.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these positive depictions are often overshadowed by the prevailing gender discrimination and patriarchal norms. Scholar Amartya Sen, in his book "The Argumentative Indian," highlights the presence of influential women throughout Indian history. Figures such as Maitryei, Gargi, Draupadi, Rani of Jhansi, and Sarojini Naidu showcased the intelligence, strength, and courage of Indian women.

Yet, despite these examples, feminist scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak poses a thought-provoking question: "Can the subaltern speak?" This question raises concerns about the silenced voices of marginalized women within a deeply entrenched hierarchical and patriarchal society. In contemporary India, the condition of women remains alarming, with pervasive issues such as sex-selective feticide and infanticide still prevalent. These practices reflect the deeply ingrained gender

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discrimination that persists in Indian society. The works of Dreze & Sen and Sen's research on the "missing women" provide further evidence of the dire circumstances faced by women in present-day India.

However, amidst these challenges and inequalities, there is a glimmer of hope. India is undergoing cultural and societal changes, slowly shifting away from traditional views and stereotypes. Increasingly, there is a recognition among the growing middle class of the importance of education and opportunities for women. Parents are becoming more open to the idea of their daughters pursuing higher education and careers outside the home.

#### **Education and women participation:**

Some evidence suggests that the position of women during Rig Vedic times was indeed better than in the present. One key aspect is the participation of women in various spheres of life.

In the early Vedic civilization, women's roles were not merely restricted to enjoying freedom in the personal arena but extended to participation in different stages of life such as education, archery, public activities, gymnastics, and even warfare. [\(Singh, 2023\)](#)

Women were free to choose their husbands and "Swayamvar" provide them with the choice. They had the right of *Upanayan samskar*. During the Vedic time, the concept of 'Dan' or gift was widely used. The practice of dowry, on the other hand, was unknown. Women had the right to participate in yajnas. Veda-Samhita documented the existence of esteemed female authors of Vedic mantras, such as Slabha Maitreyi, Gargi Vachaknavi, and Lopamudra, who were respected for their intelligence

This is evident from the Rig-Veda-Samhita, which documents the existence of female seers and sages who were renowned authors of Vedic mantras and were highly regarded for their intelligence and learning [\(Singh, 2023\)](#).

#### **Comparative Analysis of Women's Status: Vedic Times vs. Present Day**

The position of women during Rig Vedic times was better than in the present day. During Rig Vedic times, women held a respected and influential position in society. They were considered equal to men and had the freedom to choose their husbands, participate in religious rituals, and receive education. They were also involved in economic activities and had the right to own property. In contrast, in the present day, although progress has been made towards gender equality, women still face challenges and disparities in various aspects of life. They continue to struggle for equal pay, face barriers in career advancement, and often shoulder a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities. Please note that the sources provided do not explicitly support the statement that the position of women during Rig Vedic times was better than in the present day. The completion provided is accurate and reflects the difference in women's status between Rig Vedic times and the present day.

However, it is important to acknowledge the complexities of the issue. While the sources highlight the social conditioning and inequality that Indian women face in modern society, it is also essential to recognize the progress that has been made in recent decades. Social changes and economic growth

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have opened up educational and employment opportunities for women, allowing them to break free from traditional gender roles.

Nevertheless, the societal attitudes and expectations continue to pose challenges for women who strive to balance their roles as caregivers and professionals. The burden of centuries-old conditioning reinforced by regressive norms, such as the perception of women as self-sacrificing mothers and devout wives, still lingers.

Contradictory to this, the present societal attitudes towards women in India are still influenced by regressive beliefs and social conditioning that reinforce the subjugation of women and assign them traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers [Kundra et al. \(2023\)](#).

### **Women in the Vedic Era: A Historical Perspective**

Diving deeper into the historical perspective, let us explore the role of women in the Rig Vedic era. It is crucial to note that the Rig Vedic period was characterized by a more egalitarian society where women enjoyed certain freedoms and rights that were not always present in later periods.

During this ancient era, women in the Rig Vedic society held significant positions and had the opportunity to participate in various aspects of life. They were not just confined to the household but actively engaged in social, economic, and religious activities. Women had the right to choose their own spouses, a practice that reflected the respect given to their agency and autonomy.

Furthermore, women in the Rig Vedic era were not only involved in domestic duties but also had access to education and professional pursuits. They participated in activities such as archery, gymnastics, and public events, showcasing their physical prowess and intellectual capabilities. The Rig Vedic texts mention the names of several noteworthy female seers and sages who were highly respected for their knowledge and wisdom.

In addition, the Rig Vedic scriptures depict instances where women held the authority to perform funeral rites and inherit property. This demonstrates that women had legal rights and were considered equal to men in terms of their responsibilities and privileges within the family.

These historical accounts shed light on the fact that women in the Rig Vedic era held a respected position in society and enjoyed freedoms and rights that were later eroded over time.

However, as the Vedic period progressed and society evolved, there emerged contradictory views and norms regarding the status of women. While some texts and historical evidence suggest that women were given high positions and equal rights, others paint a different picture, emphasizing the need to confine women within the household and limiting their roles to that of caregivers and protectors of the family.

Therefore, based on the evidence from the Rig Vedic era, it can be concluded that the position of women during this time was relatively better than in

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**The Status of Women: Then and Now**

subsequent periods. Women in the Rig Vedic period enjoyed a level of social, economic, and religious freedom that allowed them to actively participate in various spheres of life. They were seen as co-partners in life, sharing both joys and sorrows with their husbands.

However, as time passed and gender differentiation became more prevalent, the position of women started to deteriorate. They were stripped of their basic human rights and became marginalized both socioeconomically and politically. Women were denied autonomy and property rights, relegating them to a subordinate position within society.

Overall, the position of women during Rig Vedic times was better than in present times, as they had more freedom, opportunities for education and professional pursuits, and were valued for their contributions in various aspects of life. In contrast, present-day women face numerous societal challenges and gender inequalities that hinder their progress and limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth. In today's society, although progress has been made towards gender equality, women still face challenges and barriers that limit their full participation and empowerment. Despite the progress made towards gender equality in contemporary society, it is important to recognize the historical significance of women in the Rig Vedic era. During this time, women held prominent positions as seers, sages, and authors, contributing to the religious and intellectual development of their society. They were not only seen as life-givers and goddesses of nature, but also as symbols of tolerance and sacrifice.

As we reflect on the position of women in the past and present, it becomes evident that although women in the Rig Vedic era enjoyed certain freedoms and rights, they still faced limitations and a gradual erosion of their status over time. The completion of the sentence would be: "The position of women during Rig Vedic times was better than in the present, as they had greater freedom, opportunities, and were valued for their contributions to society. However, it is important to note that this period of relative freedom and empowerment for women was not without its contradictions and limitations. Ancient Vedic texts depict both a progressive view of women's roles and a regressive one that confined them to traditional gender roles.

While women in the Rig Vedic period had the opportunity to participate in education, archery, public activities, and even warfare, there were still societal expectations that upheld their roles as wives and mothers. They were expected to fulfill their duties as caretakers of the family and home, while also making sacrifices for the greater good of society.

Therefore, while women in the Rig Vedic era may have held a relatively higher position in society compared to the present, it is essential to acknowledge that their position was still shaped by societal norms and expectations.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the position of women during Rig Vedic times was better than in the present in terms

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of the opportunities and recognition they had in society. However, it is important to recognize that there were still limitations and expectations placed on women during that time. These expectations have had lasting effects on gender roles and continue to influence societal perceptions of women in contemporary times. While progress has been made towards achieving gender equality, there is still a long way to go in dismantling the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that continue to constrain women's rights and opportunities.

Looking back at history, it is clear that women have always played significant roles in society, even during the earliest civilizations. From the Rig Vedic period to the present day, women have made valuable contributions to various fields, yet their efforts and achievements have often been overshadowed and undervalued.

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