



ANCIENT INDIAN VEDIC (HINDU) WOMEN SCHOLARS: INTELLECTUAL AGENCY AND SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IN EARLY INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

The Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE) of ancient India presents a remarkable chapter in world intellectual history, distinguished by the presence of women scholars known as rishikas and brahmavadinis (Hindupedia, n.d.; Creative Flight, 2025). Unlike many ancient civilizations where women's scholarly voices were marginal or undocumented, the Vedic corpus—particularly the Rigveda and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad—explicitly attributes hymns and philosophical discourses to women seers (Rigveda, n.d.). This research paper, prepared for presentation at a national university-level conference, examines the textual and archaeological evidence of Vedic women scholars, highlighting their intellectual contributions, ritual authority, and philosophical depth. It argues that early Vedic society recognized women as equal participants in spiritual and intellectual life, and that recovering their legacy is essential for a balanced understanding of Indian intellectual history.

Introduction

The Vedic age, foundational to Hindu civilization, is primarily known through its shruti (revealed) literature. Among these sacred texts, the Rigveda stands as the oldest extant Indo-Aryan text (Rigveda, n.d.). What makes this scripture unique among ancient religious texts is that it credits more than thirty women seers with composing hymns (Hindupedia, n.d.; Creative Flight, 2025). These women, called rishikas, were not merely passive transmitters but original composers and philosophers. Primary textual sources, including the Rigveda and Upanishads, supplemented by later anukramanis (indices), provide the names and contributions of these scholars (Prepp, n.d.). Although archaeological corroboration is limited due to the oral nature of Vedic culture, material remains from late Harappan sites offer indirect support for women's ritual prominence (Girl Museum, n.d.).

Prominent Rishikas in the Rigveda

The Rigveda attributes hymns to several distinguished women seers, demonstrating their recognized spiritual authority (Hindupedia, n.d.).

Lopamudra, traditionally the wife of sage Agastya, composed Rigveda 1.179 (Creative Flight, 2025). Her hymn is structured as a dialogue between husband and wife, exploring the balance between asceticism and marital life. Far from being confined to domestic concerns, her composition reflects theological insight and philosophical subtlety.

Ghoshha, granddaughter of Dirghatamas, authored hymns 10.39 and 10.40, invoking the Ashvins for healing and fulfillment (Prepp, n.d.). Despite suffering from a debilitating skin disease, she attained scholarly recognition, demonstrating that intellectual merit transcended physical adversity.

Apala, associated with hymn 8.91, narrates her own healing through devotion to Indra (Creative Flight, 2025). Her hymn blends personal experience with theological expression, revealing both spiritual resilience and poetic creativity.

Other notable contributors include Aditi and Vishwavara (Hindupedia, n.d.). The celebrated hymn 10.125, attributed to VakAmbhrini, presents the voice of cosmic speech (Vak) declaring, "I am the queen, I hold together this earth and sky" (Creative Flight, 2025).

These rishikas underwent upanayana initiation and were trained in gurukuls, participating in yajnas and transmitting knowledge orally (IJELS, 2023; IJSRED, 2023; VHU, n.d.). The absence of gender qualifiers in Vedic indices further suggests that intellectual status was not defined by sex but by spiritual attainment.

Women Philosophers in the Upanishadic Age

The Upanishadic period deepened metaphysical inquiry, and women continued to participate in philosophical debates (Evolution of Female Authority in Upanishads, n.d.).

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, GargiVachaknavi emerges as a formidable philosopher (Evolution of Female Authority in Upanishads, n.d.). In chapters 3.6–3.8, she challenges the sage Yajnavalkya with probing questions about the ultimate substratum of reality. Her inquiries into the "imperishable" (akshara) reveal advanced metaphysical reasoning. Gargi is explicitly acknowledged as a brahmavadini, one who speaks of Brahman.

Similarly, Maitreyi, also featured in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4 and 4.5), engages in profound dialogue with Yajnavalkya (Evolution of Female Authority in Upanishads, n.d.). When offered wealth, she rejects it in favor of knowledge of the Atman (Self), asserting that material prosperity cannot grant immortality. Her philosophical clarity underscores the spiritual equality accorded to women seekers.

The distinction between brahmavadinis (women dedicated to lifelong Vedic study) and sadyovadhvas (women who married after study) indicates structured educational pathways for women (IJELS, 2023; IJSRED, 2023). Brahmanical texts even mention women officiating rituals, affirming their ritual legitimacy (VHU, n.d.).

Archaeological Corroboration and Cultural Context

Direct archaeological evidence of Vedic women scholars is limited due to the oral and nomadic character of early Vedic society. However, material remains from the late Harappan phase provide contextual support.

Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have uncovered numerous terracotta female figurines adorned with elaborate jewelry and headdresses (Girl Museum, n.d.). Some scholars interpret these as representing ritual specialists or priestesses, possibly reflecting cultural continuity into early Vedic traditions.

At Kalibangan in Rajasthan, fire altars consistent with Vedic yajna practices have been discovered (Girl Museum, n.d.). While no inscriptions name specific rishikas, the prevalence of ritual spaces supports textual claims of women's participation in sacrificial rites.

The absence of inscriptions directly naming Vedic women is not surprising, given that Vedic knowledge was preserved orally until approximately the third century BCE, when texts began to be recorded on birch bark and palm leaves (Rigveda, n.d.). The extraordinary precision of oral transmission itself testifies to the mnemonic expertise of both male and female scholars.

Decline and Historiographical Challenges

Despite early inclusivity, post-Rigvedic and later Smriti traditions gradually imposed restrictions on women's access to Vedic learning (IJSRED, 2023). Patriarchal interpolations and evolving social norms diminished the visibility of women scholars.

Modern historiography must therefore critically examine later textual layers while foregrounding early evidence of gender parity. The relative scarcity of artifacts should not overshadow the strong textual testimony embedded in shruti literature.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The intellectual agency of Vedic women scholars has enduring significance (VHU, n.d.). Their participation in metaphysical debate, ritual performance, and hymn composition challenges assumptions about women's exclusion from ancient intellectual life.

For contemporary academia, particularly at the university level, rediscovering these scholars serves multiple purposes:

1. It corrects gender-skewed narratives of Indian history (Hindupedia, n.d.).
2. It situates Hindu philosophy within a tradition of inclusivity (Evolution of Female Authority in Upanishads, n.d.).
3. It offers indigenous precedents for modern feminist thought (IJELS, 2023).

By presenting the voices of Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, VakAmbhrini, and others, we recognize a lineage of scholarship that affirms knowledge as a universal pursuit beyond gender.

Conclusion

The Vedic period of ancient India provides compelling evidence of women's intellectual prominence. Through hymns in the Rigveda and philosophical debates in the Upanishads, rishikas and brahmavadinis articulated theological, cosmological, and metaphysical insights of lasting significance. Archaeological findings, though indirect, complement textual sources by indicating ritual prominence for women.

This research underscores that early Vedic society acknowledged women as composers, philosophers, ritual officiants, and teachers. Their legacy not only enriches the study of ancient Indian civilization but also contributes to contemporary discussions on gender and knowledge. Reviving their memory in academic forums ensures that the narrative of Indian intellectual history remains inclusive, balanced, and historically grounded.

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