

Women in Vedic and later Vedic Civilization

RAVI KANT¹ AND BAJINDER SINGH^{*2}

¹Research Scholar and ²Assistant Professor

¹Department of AIHC and Archaeology, Panjab University, Chandigarh (U.T.) India

²Guru Nanak College, Ferozpur (Punjab) India

Key Words : Vedic, Civilization, Societies

INTRODUCTION

There are many civilizations in the world where respect for women and their role in society are prominent and others where regard for them and their status should be improved. Yet the level of civility along with moral and spiritual standards in a society can often be perceived by the respect and regard it gives for its women. Not that it glorifies them for their sexuality and then gives them all the freedom men want so they can be exploited and taken advantage of, but that they are regarded in a way that allows them to live in honor for their importance in society with respect and protection, and given the opportunity to reach their real potential in life.

Among the many societies that can be found in the world, we have seen that some of the most venerating regard for women has been found in Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of women, and has retained the greatest respect within its tradition as seen in the honor it gives for the Goddess, who is portrayed as the feminine embodiment of important qualities and powers. These forms include those of Lakshmi (the goddess of fortune and queen of Lord Vishnu), Sarasvati (the goddess of learning), Subhadra (Krishna's sister and auspiciousness personified), Durga (the goddess of strength and power), Kali (the power of time), and other Vedic goddesses that exemplify inner strength and divine attributes. Even divine power in the form of *shakti* is considered feminine.

Throughout the many years of Vedic culture, women have always been given the highest level of respect and

freedom, but also protection and safety. There is a Vedic saying, "Where women are worshiped, there the gods dwell." Or where the women are happy, there will be prosperity. In fact the direct quotes from the *Manu-samhita* explains as follows:

"Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare. Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The houses on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honor women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes and (dainty) food" (*Manu Smriti* III.55-59).

In a similar way that would foretell the future if women are no longer honored, Grandfather Bhishma explained: "O ruler of the earth (Yuddhisthira) the lineage in which daughters and the daughters-in-law are saddened by ill treatment, that lineage is destroyed. When out of their grief these women curse these households, such households lose their charm, prosperity and happiness" (*Mahabharata*, Anushashanparva, 12.14).

Furthermore, in the *Vedas*, when a woman is invited into the family through marriage, she enters "as a river enters the sea" and "to rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family." (*Atharva-Veda* 14.1.43-44) This kind of equality is rarely

found in any other religious scripture. Plus, a woman who is devoted to God is more highly regarded than a man who has no such devotion, as found in the *Rig-Veda*: "Yea, many a woman is more firm and better than the man who turns away from Gods, and offers not" (*Rig-Veda*, 5.61.6).

Additional quotes can be found in other portions of the Vedic literature. This is the proper Vedic standard. If this standard is not being followed, then it represents a diversion of the genuine Vedic tradition. Due to this tradition, India's history includes many women who have risen to great heights in spirituality, government, writing, education, science, or even as warriors on the battlefield.

In the matter of *dharma*, in the days of Vedic culture, women stood as a decisive force in spirituality and the foundation of moral development. There were also women *rishis* who revealed the Vedic knowledge to others. For example, the 126th hymn of the first book of the *Rig-Veda* was revealed by a Vedic woman whose name was Romasha; the 179 hymn of the same book was by Lopamudra, another inspired Vedic woman. There are a dozen names of women revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Visvavara, Shashvati, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, and Aditi who instructed Indra, one of the Devas, in the higher knowledge of Brahman. Every one of them lived the ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the things of the world. They are called in Sanskrit Brahmavidinis, the speakers and revealers of Brahman.

In fact, in early Vedic civilization women were always encouraged to pursue spiritual advancement without hindrance: "O bride! May the knowledge of the Vedas be in front of you and behind you, in your centre and in your ends. May you conduct your life after attaining the knowledge of the *Vedas*. May you be benevolent, the harbinger of good fortune and health, and live in great dignity and indeed be illumined in your husband's home" (*Atharva Veda*, 14.1.64)

Throughout the history of India and the traditions of Vedic society, women were also examples for maintaining the basic principles in *Sanatana-dharma*. This honor toward women should be maintained today by the preservation of genuine Vedic culture, either in the country or in the institutions, which has always been a part of India.

Unfortunately, these standards have declined primarily due to the outside influences that have crept in because of foreign invaders, either militarily or culturally.

These foreign invaders who dominated India mostly looked at women as objects of sexual enjoyment and exploitation, and as the spoils of war to be taken like a prize. The oppression of women increased in India because of Moghul rule. As such foreigners gained influence and converts, decay of the spiritual standards also crept into Indian and Vedic culture. The educational criteria of Vedic culture also changed and the teaching of the divinity of motherhood was almost lost. The teaching changed from emphasis on the development of individual self-reliance to dependence on and service to others. Thus, competition replaced the pursuit for truth, and selfishness and possessiveness replaced the spirit of renunciation and detachment. And gradually women were viewed as less divine and more as objects of gratification or property to be possessed and controlled, or even exploited.

This is the result of a *rakshasic* or demoniac cultural influence, which still continues to grow as materialism expands in society. Money and sensual gratification have become major goals in life, though they alone cannot give us peace or contentment. Instead they cause us to develop more desires in the hopes of finding fulfillment while leaving us feeling hollow and ever-more restless without knowing why.

Mahatma Gandhi once wrote that the way we treat our women is an indicator of our barbarism. Whereas men may have greater physical energy than women, the latter clearly have more internal and emotional energy. It is not without reason then that women are identified with *shakti* in Vedic civilization. If women are kept suppressed, this *shakti* will be denied to the family and the society, thus weakening all of them.

In real Vedic culture it is taught that every man should view and respect every woman, except his own wife, as his mother, and every girl with the same concern and care as his own daughter. It is only because of the lack of such training and the social distancing from the high morals as this that this teaching is being forgotten, and the respect that society should have for women has been reduced.

In this way, the change in the attitude toward women in India (and across the globe) was due to a loss of culture and of the true Vedic standards and a lack of understanding true Vedic spiritual knowledge. Thus, it should be easy to see the need for organizations that will keep and teach the proper views, which were once a basic part of the genuine Vedic traditions.

When the position of women declines, then that society loses its equilibrium and harmony. In the spiritual domain, men and women have an equal position. Men and women are equal as sons and daughters of the same Supreme Father. However, you cannot bring the spiritual domain to this Earth or enter the spiritual strata if your consciousness is focused on the differences of the sexes, and thus treat women poorly. One is not superior to the other, spiritually speaking, but each has particular ways or talents to contribute to society and to the service of God. So men should not try to control women by force, but neither should women forcefully try to seize the role of men or try to adopt the masculine nature of men. Otherwise, imbalance results in society, just as a car will not move properly when the tires on one side are too low or out of balance. Of course there are exceptions in which some men are naturally good at feminine roles and some women are talented in masculine occupations. But the point is that women and men must work cooperatively like the twin wings of a bird, together which will raise the whole society. If there is a lack of respect and cooperation, how can society be progressive? After all, how can there be a spirit of cooperation and appreciation between men and women when instead there is a mood of competition, or of disrespect for one towards the other? It is this mood in materialistic society that is increasing in both family and corporate life which contributes to social imbalance and not to a smooth and peaceful society.

Motherhood and family:

The nature of motherhood of women was always stressed in Vedic India. After all, we often find them to be the foundation of family life and of raising the children properly. They usually provide the love and understanding and nurturing for the development of our children in a way that is unlikely from most men.

Bhishma Pitamaha also said: “The teacher who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such teachers of true knowledge and the mother is more important than ten such fathers. There is no greater guru than mother” (*Mahabharata*, Shantiparva, 30.9).

Our own life is a gift from our mother’s life. We were nourished by her, we spent nine months in her womb, and her love sustained us. Even now we are loved by our mother. This includes Mother Nature and Mother Earth, which is called Bhumi in the Vedic tradition. The Earth planet is also like a mother because everything we

need to live, all our resources, come from her. As we would protect our own mother, we must also protect Mother Earth. Women in motherhood, after giving birth to a child that they have carried for nine months, is the first guru and guide of the child and, thus, of humanity. Through this means, before any child learns hatred or aggression, they first know the love of a mother who can instill the ways of forgiveness and kindness in the child. In this way, we can recognize that there is often a strong woman, either as a mother or as a wife, behind most successful men.

In exhibiting the qualities of motherhood, women must be warm and tender, strong and protective, yet also lay the foundation of discipline and the discrimination of right from wrong. Furthermore, in the home it is usually the woman who lends to providing beauty in decorating the house and facility for an inspirational atmosphere. Also, she must usually provide the nutritious and tasty dishes that give pleasure and strength for the fitness and health of the body.

By their innate sense of motherhood and compassion, women also make natural healers, care givers, and nurturers. Those women who have this intrinsic disposition for caring will also be natural upholders of moral standards and spiritual principles. By their own emotional tendencies and expressions, they are also natural devotees of God.

In ancient India the Sanskrit words used by the husband for the wife were *Pathni* (the one who leads the husband through life), *Dharmapathni* (the one who guides the husband in dharma) and *Sahadharmacharini* (one who moves with the husband on the path of dharma—righteousness and duty). This is how ancient Vedic culture viewed the partnership of husband and wife.

When a husband and wife are willing to be flexible to each other’s needs and move forward in love and mutual understanding, the relationship can go beyond equality to one of spiritual union. This means that each one appreciates the talents of the other, and views the other as complimenting what each one already has. This also makes up for the weaknesses or deficiencies of the other. In this way, each can provide support, encouragement and inspiration to the other. This ideal can only be achieved when they properly understand the principles of spirituality. It is also said that where the husband and wife get along well, Lakshmi Devi (the goddess of fortune) Herself dwells in that house.

It is also considered that a wife who serves a

spiritually strong and qualified husband automatically shares in whatever spiritual merit he achieves because she assists him by her service.

The Feminine Divinities:

In the Vedic tradition it is common to see the pairing of the Vedic male Gods with a female counterpart, thus combining both sets of powers and qualities that each would have. We can easily see this in Radha-Krishna, Sita-Rama, Lakshmi-Vishnu, Durga-Shiva, Sarasvati-Brahma, Indrani-Indra, etc. Thus, we have the combination of male and female Divinities that make the complete balance in the divine spiritual powers.

Through the medium of pure affection, the feminine Divinities have been able to break down the most powerful citadels known to creation, especially those of evil. The divine mystery of life is that the most powerful forces of the universe are subjugated by love, and that love is most completely channeled through the feminine energy and personality.

For example, “Durga” means the one who is difficult to know. Yet, being considered the mother of the universe, or the personification of the material energy, we as her children can approach her through love. And she will respond with love.

Also, out of love the goddess took the form of Mahishasuramardini, or the one who destroyed the dark demon known as Mahishasura. She was generated out of the anger and potency of Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, and others, and was the combination of their powers. They could not defeat the demon, but the goddess could. Symbolically, Durga can destroy the demonic darkness of the mode of ignorance and the quality of laziness within each of us.

Another example is when Durga expressed her love and care to the Gods and humanity by manifesting herself from her side as Kaushika Durga, also called Ambika. By her beauty she attracted the demons Shumba and Nishumba to her. Thus, they would not disturb the rest of creation. Then from her forehead she manifested herself as the dark goddess Kali who killed all the disturbing demons in that episode. In this way, through love the Divine feminine potency takes on forms to alleviate powerful disturbances in the universe and within us.

Out of love also the Divine feminine potency manifests as SrimatiRadharani, the consort of Lord Sri Krishna. One of her many names is Janagati, which means the goddess of all goddesses. She is the origin of the

divine feminine love and beauty, and the epitome of devotion to the Supreme Being. Thus, from the ideal spiritual world, we can see Her divine reflection mirrored here in this relative world in all that is feminine, beautiful and pure. By being conscious and aware of such qualities, we can perceive the spiritual dimension pervading and flowing throughout this temporary material universe. Thus, we recognize the very qualities of the Divine Persons from whom they originate in the spiritual world. We humans are but limited reflected forms of the Divine Couples who reside in original existence. This is why the Vedic tradition placed much value in honoring and worshiping the Divine feminine nature along with the masculine—one without the other is incomplete. This is one of the unique traits that distinguishes Vedic culture from others.

The future:

Examples in Vedic history have shown that all women should be respected and honored for the potential and talent they can provide to keep the family together, as well as bare and raise children, but also for the many women who have taken up the cause to preserve, protect and carry on the spiritual standards found in Vedic culture.

This shows that we should not diminish the potential that women have to be strong advocates of the Vedic principles. We should not discriminate and think that women have less to offer. It is not one’s sex that will determine one’s strength and character to help champion the Vedic cause.

In this world we need people to help in all areas and all levels of life to protect the Vedic knowledge and traditions, and women have a very important part to play. As we said, they are usually the first inspiration and first teachers of our children. So many of the great men who had become powerful proponents of *Sanatana-dharma* also had strong and inspiring mothers or wives.

So, you never know who among the women in society, or among our daughters we are raising that may become the next Savitri, Draupadi or Anasuya. Also, you never know who among the boys that the women may raise that may become a great Vedic saint or scholar or stalwart protector of our culture. We must look on everyone as if they have that potential, because somewhere and sometime it will happen. Another great person may appear, be it man or woman, who will emerge from among us. We need to arrange for that possibility to happen by giving all women and children the necessary

facility and training.

Every girl should have the opportunity to learn spirituality along with modern education to help her reach her full potential. Of course, this can also be said of boys. No one is born hating another, but this is learned in materialistic societies from wrong association. Only later in life does a person learn the ways of liking their own kind and disliking anyone who seems different. Genuine spiritual knowledge is the alternative to bring a change in such a society and stop the hating and quarrel that go on because of perceiving bodily and external differences between us.

It is the primitive customs as well as the sexist inventions in modern but materialistic society that force social trends to limit, subjugate or even exploit women in today's world. Such a society does not allow the strength or ingenuity of women to arise or be recognized, at least not without a struggle both inside the mind of women and outside in the field of activity and occupation. Women need to muster the strength to overcome such limitations. It is not that the world does not need nurturing and healing right now, which is a common and normal trait in women. After all, how many times do we hear of women being accused of rape, or child abuse and molestation, or kidnapping and murder? These are mostly the crimes of men, imbalanced men but men nonetheless. There is also a connection between the way men destroy the environment (Mother Nature) and their exploitative attitude toward women. This must be corrected.

A faulty beginning or childhood, as well as exposure to thoughts and ideas and indoctrinations of one's limitations rather than of one's superior potential is one of the reasons why women lose their ability, means or motivation for higher accomplishments in life. This often causes their spirit of achievement and contribution to be squelched. This only adds to the struggle of women which is often passed along from one generation to the next. Thus, all of society loses the capabilities that women could otherwise attain and provide. In this way, women often have a built in fear of stepping forward to help meet the needs that the world is crying for.

Harmony needs to be restored between the masculine and feminine natures, which are especially exhibited in the relations between men and women. This can be done most effectively through genuine spiritual development, when both masculine and feminine natures become balanced and complimentary rather than

competitive. This can harmonize not only the external relations between people, but also the feminine and masculine tendencies within each individual, both men and women. By genuine spiritual progress we can rise above our bodily material identities and work with and compliment the talents and abilities of others, regardless of whether they are men or women. We must know that within each body is a spirit soul that is no different than our own. By that I mean that we must recognize that on the platform of spiritual reality there is no difference between one soul and the next, no matter whether the external body is male or female. But while we are in this world and in different types of bodies, we can work cooperatively for our survival and for harmony among us, and use our naturally varied talents together. Women can do what they do best and men can do what they do best. This certainly makes it easier for all to live peacefully than in a mood of competition and aggression, or envy and prejudice. In such a mood of cooperation we can see that we all have something to offer or contribute, and we all have something for which we can be appreciated. We only need the right opportunity to bring that out of each and every one of us. The proper leaders of society or of organizations who promote such situations are those who can arrange for such a harmonious environment to exist.

One difference that we often see between men and women is that there is often nothing harder to penetrate than the typical male ego, which often causes men to hesitate to show any weakness and to make a show of a tough exterior, while women often respond easily to love with love. However, love and compassion are not meant to be exhibited only by women or mothers. It is a state of being, a level of consciousness. It is an exhibition of one's spiritual development to have care and concern, compassion and love for each and every being. It should be a common interest that everyone should be able to live a life of opportunity, development and progress for their own material and spiritual well being. And this concern is natural for both men and women who have reached this level of spiritual awareness, recognizing in many ways the similarities between us all, regardless of our sex. This is what is needed to help bring more peace and cooperation in the world, and another reason for protecting and emphasizing the traditional standards of spiritual understanding as found in the teachings of *Santana-dharma*.

Examples of great women in vedic culture:

Some of the women that have helped make great strides in establishing the foundation of *Sanatana-dharma* and Vedic culture can be listed and described. They serve as fine examples of historical importance that have been the basis for inspiration to both men and women for centuries. From the early Vedic times these include such women as Sati, Sita, Anasuya, Arundhathee, Draupadi, Queen Kunti, Shakuntala, Maitreyi, Gargi, Madalasa, Savitri, Ahalya, and others. It is said simply reciting their names removes sins. There are additional women from the last few hundred years whose lives we can recollect as well. Such great women have contributed to the glories and splendor of Vedic culture. So let us briefly review the lives of some of these great women.

Madalasa was the daughter of Vishvasu, the Gandharva king. She was also a great inspiration to her sons. Riddhvaj, the son of the powerful king Shatrujit, was her husband. When Shatrujit died, Riddhvaj took the position of king and engaged in the royal duties. In due course, Madalasa gave birth to a son, Vikrant. When Vikrant would cry, Madalasa would sing words of wisdom to keep him quiet. She would sing that he was a pure soul, that he has no real name and his body is merely a vehicle made of the five elements. He is not really of the body, so why does he cry?

Thus, Madalasa would enlighten her son with spiritual knowledge in the songs she would sing to him. Because of this knowledge, little Vikrant grew up to be an ascetic, free from worldly attachments or kingly activities, and he eventually went to the forest to engage in austerities. The same thing happened to her second son, Subahu, and her third son, Shatrumardan. Her husband told her that she should not teach the same knowledge to their fourth son, Alark, so that at least one of them would be interested in worldly activities and take up the role of looking after the kingdom. So to Alark she sang a song of being a great king who would rule the world, and make it prosperous and free from villains for many years. By so doing he would enjoy the bounty of life and eventually join the Immortals. In this way, she trained her son Alark from the beginning of his life in the direction he would take. This is how a mother can influence her child in whatever potential may be possible, whether materially or spiritually, by imparting noble thoughts to open the avenues of activities for her children.

Sati. From the *Puranas* we learn how Sati would not tolerate the dishonor of her husband Lord Shiva. Sati

was the daughter of Prajapati Daksha, who was one of the sons of Brahma. Once Daksha arranged to hold a major religious ritual (*yajna*) in his capital, near present day Haridwar. Many kings, emperors and demigods were invited. However, Daksha did not respect Shiva, so Shiva was not invited. Nonetheless, Sati wanted to go to see her father and many sisters. Shiva tried to dissuade her from going, saying it was not good to go uninvited. But Sati went anyway to participate in the *yajna*. Unfortunately, she found that her father was greatly insulting her husband, Shiva. Not bearing the dishonor of her husband, she self-immolated in fire and left this world altogether, leaving her body in ashes.

When Lord Shiva heard about this, he was terribly angry and taking a hair from his head, he threw it to the ground and it turned into the demon Veerabhadra who was the anger of Lord Shiva and who disrupted the *yajna*. In disappointment, Lord Shiva then bore the body of Sati to different places in the world. Sati's various limbs dropped as Shiva carried her body, and wherever a limb dropped became a Siddhapeetha, which remain major places of Shakti worship. According to the *Devi Bhagavata* there are 108 such Siddhapeethas, while other texts say there are 51. Among these, 42 are in India, 2 in Nepal, 1 in Tibet, 1 in Sri Lanka, 1 in Pakistan, and 4 in Bangladesh.

Sati then reincarnated as the daughter of the Himalaya Parvata, and thus she became known as Parvati. She underwent great austerities and won Lord Shiva as her husband once again.

Anasuya was a woman who could bring back the life of a dead sage due to the power of her own austerity and devotion to her husband. She showed that devotion to a qualified husband gives the wife fame, power and is the fulfillment of her dharma. Anasuya was the wife of the sage Atri. Her mother was daughter of the sage Svayambhuva and her father was Kardama Muni. Her fame had spread throughout both the Earth and the planets of the Devas.

According to the *Markandeya Purana*, there was once a sage named Mandasya who cursed a brahmana named Kaushika to die the next morning at sunrise. When Kaushiki, Kaushika's wife, heard the news, she vowed that by the power of her chastity the sun would never rise. When the sun did not rise for many days, everyone started to become alarmed. Brahma then told the other demigods to go to Anasuya and she could assist them to continue the sunrise by the force of her moral power.

Anasuya then entreated Kaushiki to allow the sunrise to resume. Kaushiki then allowed the sunrise to take place, but her husband immediately expired because of the curse. Yet, Anasuya brought the husband back to life by the power of her own austerity and devotion to her husband. Being pleased by this, the demigods gave Anasuya the blessing to have her wish for three sons who would be reincarnations of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Thus, Brahma appeared as Soma, Vishnu as Dattatreya, and Shiva as Durvasa. Of course she was also greatly honored by her husband who said to Sri Rama when Rama once visited Atri's ashrama during His exile, that Anasuya was a great lady, following the path of austerity and deserves the salutations of all beings. Anasuya was a bright example among women.

Sita is fully described in the *Ramayana*. She was the daughter of King Janaka, ruler of Mithila. The king was engaged in ritually plowing the land to help produce food to counter a famine at the time, and while using a golden plow, it revealed a pitcher that had been buried from which Sita appeared. The plow tip is called a *sita*, thus Sita was the name given to her. At the time, the demon Ravana had collected tax from the local sages who had placed their blood in this pitcher. Thus, when the plow later uncovered and churned the pitcher, the life-force from the sages produced Sita, and Sita thus became the cause of Ravana's destruction.

As related in the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama won Sita's hand in marriage. But due to political intrigue, Rama's father, Dasharatha, had to keep a promise he had made to his second wife Kaikeyi, who wanted her own son to ascend the throne and not Lord Rama. So she had Rama and Sita thrown into exile and made to wander the forests. During that time, Ravana abducted Sita and kept Her in the Ashoka-Vatika, the garden of Ashoka trees. He tried to force her to marry him but she would not. During that time Rama and Lakshmana wandered the forests in search of Her. In time they found out she had been taken by Ravana, and having learned where he was, Lord Rama finally put the end to him and rescued Sita.

Even though some citizens doubted Sita's purity, she had undergone the Agni-Pariksha, or witness by fire to attest to her purity as a devoted wife. Even then it was over-heard that a washerman had doubts of Sita's character, having spent so much time in Ravana's house. So to help ward off any criticism, Rama exiled Sita to the forest ashrama of Valmiki. While there she gave birth to, Lava and Kush, the twin sons of Lord Rama. Valmiki

once brought Sita and her sons to Ayodhya, the capital of Lord Rama, where the sons sang the *Ramayana* in front of Lord Rama. Valmiki also proclaimed that Sita was as good as purity and chastity incarnate.

Though Sita's life was full of struggle and hardship, she was innocent and pure. She gave up all comforts to serve her beloved husband and uphold sanctity, faithfulness, virtue and moral standards. Thus she holds one of the highest places among women in Vedic culture and of woman's character.

Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada who was the king of Panchala. She was born from the fire ritual and for this reason was also called Yajnaseni. Her dark complexion also gave her the name of Krishnaa. Queen Kunti was the mother of the five Pandava brothers, Arjuna, Bhima, Yudhisthira, Sahadeva and Nakula. When the Pandavas brought Draupadi back to their home, they wanted to show her to their mother, but Kunti, without having seen Draupadi, told them that whatever they have they must all share equally. So Draupadi became the wife of all five Pandavas. It is said that Draupadi in a previous life had been the wife of Indra, the King of heaven, and she took five separate forms in serving her Pandava husbands. Thus, she was most devoted to her five husbands and was also a great devotee of the Supreme Lord, and regarded Lord Krishna as her ultimate protector.

One episode that shows this was when in the court of the Kauravas, wicked Dushashana tried to disrobe her in front of everyone. Draupadi became hopeless and fervently prayed to Krishna for protection. Krishna heard her prayers and though He was in Dwaraka, He protected her by providing an endless supply of cloth to her sari so that it never ended, and she was always covered and not dishonored in such a way.

Another time was when Durvasa Muni, who was known for his quick anger, suddenly decided to drop in on the Pandava camp, along with his many thousands of disciples. He would also want something to eat for himself and his followers. But the Pandavas had just ate and there was nothing more to prepare. Lord Krishna asked for whatever remnant grains were left in the pot. Being the Supreme Lord, if He was satisfied, then everyone would be satisfied. So He took what few grains were there and when Durvasa Muni arrived, they were all so full that they no longer wanted anything to eat, and thus left peacefully.

In Draupadi's service to her husbands, she had said that she rises before anyone else, tolerates hunger and

thirst, and goes to bed after the others. She also gave birth to five sons, all of whom were killed by the wicked Ashwatthama. But since he was the son of the family guru, and she had such respect for their gurus, he forgave him.

When the Pandavas had reached the end of their lives and were setting out to ascend to heaven by climbing up into the mountains, she was the last in line. But she was the first to fall and thus rise to heaven after her death. Her dedication and devotion make her one of the great personalities of Vedic culture.

Maitreyi was the wife of the great sage Yajnavalkya. His second wife was Katyayani. Both were devoted to their husband and of lofty character. However, Maitreyi had a higher regard for spiritual knowledge and devotion to God than did Katyayani. The *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* relates that finally, the sage Yajnavalkya wanted to renounce householder life and accept the sannyasa order of life, and divide his possessions between his two wives. Maitreyi then questioned to herself what greater thing her husband must have found if he is willing to give up his present status in householder life. Surely no one will give up his position unless he finds something better. So she asked her husband if she had all the riches in the world, could she still attain immortality. Her husband said certainly not, it is not possible. All the happiness and conveniences from wealth will not lead you to God. So Maitreyi then asked why she should acquire wealth if it is not going to deliver her from future rounds of birth and death. She requested that he tell her about the Supreme Being, for which he was happily giving up household life.

Therefore, Yajnavalkya explained to Maitreyi all about the divine knowledge of the Self. He informed her that no being in this world has any capability of being dear to another without the presence of the soul within. Even to enjoy the beauty of this world has no meaning without the soul within our own body, for the soul is all that we are. Understanding the depths of spiritual knowledge is the way to attain *moksha*, liberation from the continued rounds of birth and death. Thus, Yajnavalkya took sannyasa and Maitreyi attained supreme bliss by hearing her husband's discourse and by diving deep into this spiritual understanding. In this way, Maitreyi showed how all women can achieve the heights of spiritual understanding simply by careful listening and practicing the Vedic path.

Gargi was the daughter of Vashaknu, and was also

called Vachakni. But because she was born in the line of the GargaGotra or family line, she was also called Gargi, a name by which she became well known. The *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* explains that she asked the sage many questions on spiritual science and became highly educated in this way. Once in the court of King Janaka there was arranged to be a debate on the spiritual sciences. He wanted to find out who was the person who knew best the science of the Absolute, and that person would receive 1000 decorated cows with horns plated with gold. None of the local brahmanas complied because they were afraid they would have to prove their knowledge, and may not be up to the task. However, the sage Yajnavalkya told his disciple to take all the cows to his place, which started the debate.

Yajnavalkya answered the questions from many scholars who approached him, setting aside all of their concerns and doubts. However, then came Gargi's turn to ask the sage whatever she wanted. But she asked many different and complex questions on the immortality of the soul, the arrangement of the universe, and many other topics. Finally Gargi herself bowed to the sage and proclaimed that there was no one else who was more greatly learned in the Vedic Shastras than Yajnavalkya. In this way, Gargi showed that in Vedic culture it was not unexpected for women to become greatly learned in the Vedic sciences, nor that they could not discuss such topics with wise and kindly sages who also shared their knowledge with them. Thus she is a luminous example of women in the Vedic tradition.

Savitri was the only child of a king named Ashwapati, the king of Madra-Desha, as explained in the *Mahabharata* and *Matsya Purana*. He had performed austerities to please Lord Brahma and his consort, Savitri Devi, to have progeny by chanting the Savitri prayer. When a daughter arrived, he named her Savitri, and she grew to be a girl of great beauty and character, and wonderful personality and qualities. Unfortunately, her father could find no suitable husband for her when she became of age. So he sent her to different parts of the country so she could find a husband she deemed acceptable. After some time Savitri decided to marry Satyavana, but he was the son of Dyumatsena who was the blind and exiled king of Shalya-Desha. Because of this, they lived in the forest. Satyavana was simple but bore a countenance of royalty, which attracted Savitri.

Savitri returned to her father to relate the news,

however the sage Narada Muni happened to be there and heard it and revealed that Satyavana was highly qualified but was to live for only one year longer. But Savitri had made her decision and would not marry another. So to fulfill Savitri's intention, the king arranged for a wedding.

One day, after living in the forest for a year, Satyavana went off to chop some wood as usual. Savitri had been observing penance for many months and followed him into the woods. On this day Satyavana fell down with a headache. At that same time, Savitri saw a ferocious person approaching and could recognize that it was Yama, the lord of death, who was coming to take Satyavana since his life was ending. After Yama had taken Satyavana, Savitri started to follow Yama. He asked her not to follow him and even promised her many boons, all but the life of her husband. Nonetheless, Savitri continued to follow him until he granted her wishes.

Savitri asked Yama for her father-in-law's eyesight to return, along with his lost kingdom. Then she asked for one hundred sons for her father. All these were granted as Yama became increasingly impatient. Then she asked for one hundred sons for herself as well, all of them as handsome and wise as Satyavana, to which Yama also agreed without much thought. But then he realized his mistake and had to allow Satyavana to continue with his life. Thus by the power of Savitri's austerity, wisdom and devotion, she conquered death for her husband and blessed her own father and father-in-law as well.

Some hymns from Vedic and post Vedic text which reflects the status of women in society

"Women are worthy of worship. They are the fate of the household, the lamp of enlightenment for all in the household. They bring solace to the family and are an integral part of Dharmic life. Even heaven is under the control of women. The Gods reside in those households where women are worshipped and in households where women are slighted all efforts at improvement go in vain." Manusmriti 3-56

"O bride! May the knowledge of the Vedas be in front of you and behind you, in your centre and in your ends. May you conduct your life after attaining the knowledge of the Vedas. May you be benevolent, the harbinger of good fortune and health and live in great dignity and indeed be illumined in your husband's home." Atharva Veda 14-1-64.

"The wife should do Agnihotra (yagna), Sandhyavandana and all other daily religious rituals. If,

for some reason, her husband is not present, the woman alone has full rights to do yagna." Rigveda Samhita, part 1, sukta 79, sloka 872.

That women and men are equal in the eyes of dharma is made explicit in a beautiful sloka from the Rigveda: "O women! These mantras are given to you equally (as to men). May your thoughts, too, be harmonious. May your assemblies be open to all without discrimination. Your mind and consciousness should be harmonious. I (the rishi) give you these mantras equally as to men and give you all and equal powers to absorb (the full powers) of these mantras." Rigveda 10-191-3.

Indeed the virtues of the loyal and virtuous (pativrata) wife are comparable to only those of agnideva (the fire god). "... This agnideva is pure and worthy of worship just as pativrata women." Rigveda Samhita, Part -1, sukta 73, sloka 829.

During Hindu marriage ceremonies the following slokas are read out by the grooms but, these days, little understood. "O bride! I accept your hand to enhance our joint good fortune. I pray to you to accept me as your husband and live with me until our old age. ..." Rigveda Samhita Part -4, sukta 85, sloka 9702

Conclusion:

Women in vedic age were given all the rights and their status was equal with the male in society. In law and theory at least women in ancient India, contrary to the sentiments of other ancient peoples, were not denied civic rights, although in practice this equality was rendered all but nugatory for all but a few by their social subordination to the male and their domestic preoccupation; instances have yet survived in the existing records of women figuring not only as queens and administrators and even in the battlefield, a common enough incidence in Indian history, but as elected representatives on civic bodies

REFERENCES

- Dr.V.S.SukthankarGhate's Lectures on Rigveda
- http://www.stephen_knapp.com/Women_in_vedic_culture
- RaghbendraJha.Women& the Vedas,May 03,2007
- <http://wwwshvoong com/books/89798 dec.27,2007>
- http://sify.com/news/other_news/fullstoryPhd
- <http://www.surichat.nl/forum/index.php>

<http://group.msn.com/hindu>

www.indiaandianians.com/early vedic age

<http://history/rawarchives.msnw?action>

www.ivarta.com/columns/OI
