

The Characters of Women Reflected on The Upaniṣads: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the Upaniṣadic period, women occupied a significant position that exhibited true empowerment of women in society. Therefore, the significance of women's education is necessary for social progress. In this article, we will discuss the educational empowerment and status of women from some of the stories related to these Upaniṣads. This paper will discuss the role of women in the Upaniṣadic period and critically analyse the position of women in society in ancient time

KEYWORDS: upaniṣads, women, education, empowerment

INTRODUCTION:

Men and women are supplementary to each other. The mutual relation between men and women denotes the standard of living of people in a society. From the Vedic times, in the society, Indian women have had a glorious culture as they have been treated with deep reverence. Indian tradition has always regarded women with high honour. Sage Manu described in his manusmriti

In the Mahabharata, Bhishma told Yudhishthira that all the relatives of a woman should provide her with all the necessities of life. Everyone should respect women and never dishonour women.

Bhishma acknowledged that women deserved appropriate respect and an honourable status in society just as much as a man gets in societyⁱ. He again stated that women bear the responsibility of begetting children. They take full care of the newborn.

Bhishma further says that all religious activities are futile in a family where women don't enjoy due honour. when women remain sad in a household, it is never, considered auspicious. such a household is like an abode of demonsⁱⁱ.

In ancient India, the social thinkers realised that women were the most essential part of the society, members of the family and also the nation. Any dissatisfaction of women causes serious ramifications in the family and society. The job of a woman is not just to bear children but also to mould them to stand in society as responsible citizens. It is a great service rendered by them.

In ancient India, women remained confined to the household and the household chores. They had no independent source of income, they had to rely on the income of their husband. There was also the question of social insecurities due to the presence of many anti-social elements.

It is practically only for these reasons Manu has advocated that women should remain under the protection of her father, husband and son. They should be left alone, helpless and insecure. This is a practical advice of great significance. this kind of advice that is mentioned in those texts can grant appropriate safeguards towards women. Yet proper honour is shown towards women's womanhood by saying that a man can achieve perfection only with association with a womanⁱⁱⁱ.

The upaniṣads are the last part of the Vedas. They are called Vedanta which means the end of the Vedas. The upaniṣads mark the culmination of the Vedic speculations and contain the essences of the Vedic teachings.

The Upaniṣads are the records of the mystical expositions of the sages with philosophy hidden in them. The goal of the upaniṣad is to reveal the highest knowledge of the ultimate reality. One can find some ideas about the Upaniṣadic women, especially about their educational empowerment and status from some of the stories related to these Upaniṣads.

The system of female education was very much developed in the Vedic age. In the Vedic age, women also got enough opportunities to educate themselves together with their male counterparts. This can easily be inferred from the names of the great members of women seers found in the Vedas^{iv}. Women of that time also began to take an interest in the study of philosophical problems. The dialogues between Gārgi and Yajnavalkya as its proof of that. Gārgi was a learned female sage who participated in the discussion of the highest truth with other sages in the court of King Janaka. when other scholar sages were defeated by Yajnyavalkya, Gārgi challenged him and a very long debate began in which Yajnavalkya was declared victorious by Gārgi^v. But from this story, it is also proved that Gārgi was equal in terms of intellect to the great sage Yajnavalkya.

At the time of Upaniṣadic, women were also given the freedom to participate in gatherings and learned discussions of knowledge.

The story of māitrī in the *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad* further points to the fact that knowledge of the highest kind was not denied to women. Māitrī was the wife of Yajnavalkya, she was a learned woman. When Yajnavalkya wanted to renounce the world and wanted to delve into *sanāyasa*, he asked for the permission of his two wives, māitrī and Kātyāyani. he wanted to divide his wealth between his two wives. But Māitrī was not contented with the material things and all the wealth that her husband wanted to offer her. Rather she asked about the highest truth, the knowledge of the reality which will provide her with immortality. Yajnyavalkya was very much delighted at the intelligence and spiritual inclination of the mind of his wife and accordingly, he taught her about the knowledge of *ātman*^{vi}. This shows the sharp contrast between the Upaniṣadic period with the later Sūtra and Smṛti periods when learning, especially of the Vedas was prohibited for women.

Some other aspects of the society of the Upaniṣadic period are – Gārgi led an ascetic life as a *Brahmacārini*. moreover, it appears that child marriage was not prevalent in the Vedic period. But even in the Chhandogyopaniṣad, the wife of the sage Usasti was described as a minor girl, however, this may be an exceptional case and as such is especially mentioned in the Upanisad.

Another important aspect of the Upaniṣadic society is noticed in the story of māitrī and Yajnyavalkya. At that time, without the permission of the wife; a man could not even enter into the life of an ascetic. It is also evident that the wife never becomes an impediment towards the spiritual aspiration of her fulfilment of the spiritual desire of her husband. One more aspect is evident from the very story that at the time of the Upanisad, a woman was entitled to inherit the property and wealth of her husband.

In the Upaniṣadic period, women occupied a significant position that exhibited true empowerment of women in society. The matronymic found in the Upaniṣads is its proof. Even an illegitimate child was sometimes accepted by the *guru* and designated by his mother's name. the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* illustrated the story of Satyakāma Jābāla, who was the illegitimate child of Jābālā. But even then, he was not barred from attaining education from his *guru* for this truthfulness. Rather he was accepted in the society of

Jābāla, the son of Jābāla.^{vii}. another example is when a child designated by his mother's name is Mahidas Aitareya, the seer of the Aiteriya Brāhmaṇa and Aiteriya Upanisad, he was the son of Itarā

The Upaniṣadic women had a very important role in household matters also. the wife of the *guru* looked after the well-being of the pupils who resided with them in their house. She sometimes instils her husband to perform his duties appropriately.

In can be inferred from the story of Satyakāma and Upakosala in the *Chandogyopaniṣad*, Here the wife of Satyakāma urged her husband to perform the graduation ceremony for Upakosala, which has been postponed for many years^{viii}.

In ancient times, celibate girls were provided with sacred threads and had the right to recite the Vedic Mantras and Sāvitrī verses.

In the *Smṛti* texts, it delineates that there were two types of women: Brahmavādini and *sadyavadhū*. The *Brahmavādini* were initiated with the sacred thread in the *upanayana* ceremony, after enkindling fire and had the right to study the Vedas at home, resorting to alms. The *sadyavadhū* were wedded after the initiation ceremony.

In the *Ṛgveda*, it was described that; the wife and husband, being equal halves of one substance and are equal in every aspect be it works of religious or secular^{ix}. Manu claims that one *Ācārya* is ten times more respected than a teacher, a father is a hundred times more venerable than the *Ācārya*, but the mother is a thousand times more respected than the father^x. The woman is the pillar of the house. The social and spiritual ideals are inculcated and nurtured here. Therefore, the significance of women's education is necessary for social progress.

The ancient Indian thinkers always desired that women live as ideal wives after marriage. In the *Mahābhārata*, women have been advised to be dutiful to the members of the family and perform her domestic affairs regularly and faithfully. women are expected to serve their husbands, elders, the poor and the helpless people.

In the Upaniṣadic period, although women were not at the center of the power in society no one can say that the positions of women in society were degraded. They are also given equal importance and respect in many aspects. There is one chapter in the *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad*, in which one long verse lists an entire lineage of about almost fifty teachers. but the unique feature of that verse is that; all of them bear the names of their mothers as their last names to signify that men derive their greatness from their mothers since they influence their early development.

Although the Upaniṣads contain deeper spiritual, philosophical and ritual information, but few inferences are not worthy.

- Men shared their knowledge and wisdom with their wives and engaged them in philosophical conversations. Sage Yajnyavalkya engaged his two wives in philosophical debates and discussions and acted as their teachers according to their interests.
- Women often took interest in the duties of their husbands and gave them counsel. They are engaged and discuss about their husband's duties and activities. in the story of Upakosala, the son of Kamala of the *Chhandogyopaniṣad*, he was the pupil of the sage Satyakāma Jabala. Upakosala toiled hard for twelve years to please his teacher and learnt from him the secret of fire sacrifice, but his teacher was not yet satisfied that the student was ready. Therefore, he was reluctant to teach him about that secret knowledge. Satyakama's wife was aware of the situation that her husband was rather strict with his students to bring out the best of him, yet she could not bear the suffering of the young student who had been fasting for several days and going weak day by day. She urged Satyakāma to take pity on his

students and teach him the knowledge so that he would not be blamed by the fire spirits of the household for treating him harshly. But Satyakāma did not respond and give heed to her advice and went away to another village without teaching the boy. But the student continued to fast. Satyakama's wife requested the disciple to break his fast, but he refused. but fortunately, the domestic fire took pity on him and taught him the knowledge. So, it can be observed that although the wives of teachers did not share the teaching responsibility with their husbands, they had a role in the welfare of the students as a guardian mother and did not hesitate to interfere if the situation required.

CONCLUSION:

In the Upaniṣadic period, women had a respectable status in society. they even had the opportunity to study the vedas along with their male counterpart, upaniṣads mentioned many women scholars like Gargi, Maitryi etc. who had played the role of mother to the disciples of their husbands who were teachers. By the above analyses, one can clearly observe that women were an important element in the household as well as the society to prosper.

REFERENCES:

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3. यो मत्रा सा स्मृतागना (मनुसंहिता x-25)
4. *Veda or paricaya* by Yogarāja Basu, Calcutta, 1975. P. 196
5. *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad*, 3.6.8
6. *Ibid.*, 2.2.2.5
7. *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, 4.4
8. *Ibid* 4.10
9. Ṛgveda, 5/61/8
10. उपाध्यान् दशाचार्य आचार्यानामं शतं पिता सहस्रन्तु पितृन्मता गौरवेनातिरच्यते