

# The Glorious History of Womanhood in Ancient India

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## Abstract

Women are an integral part of society, playing remarkable and challenging roles. Their contributions and sacrifices can be traced back to ancient India. This study aims to evaluate and analyse the roles and status of women in ancient times, highlighting their significant impact on society.

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Vedic culture, Manusmirti, Ramayana, Ancient Indian Art, Mythology.

## Introduction

Woman is said to be the most beautiful creation of God on this planet. She is herself the origin of life and ultimate creator. She is the foundation of family who embraces everyone with her unconditional love and care as a grandmother, mother, daughter, sister and wife. She forms nearly half of the total population and thus has always been a centre of study and discussion in Indian literature. The Indian writers have continuously tried to present the complicated world of women from different perspectives and points of view. Woman's condition and position in Indian society have undergone many changes from ancient times to the present. This article is an attempt to critically assess the depiction of woman in Indian literature and Indian art since ancient times. Women have always been integral to society, playing roles that are not only remarkable but also inherently challenging. This study aims to delve into the historical contributions and sacrifices of women, particularly in ancient India. By evaluating and analysing their roles, this research seeks to provide insights into the status and significance of women in ancient Indian society. To explore the glorious past of Indian women in ancient times and understand their roles and status in society, we delve into a rich history marked by diverse achievements and societal contributions. Women in ancient India is rich and multifaceted, reflecting both challenges and remarkable achievements in various spheres of life. In ancient civilizations, women were often dignified with respectable positions and statuses. The revered Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, also highlight the roles of women in promoting prosperity, dharma, and pleasure.

Women's contributions in ancient times were not limited to being mere subjects of discussion but were substantial and sometimes surpassed those of men. Venkatesh (2020) notes that prominent women from the past have transformed patriarchal societal thinking. Examples include Razia Sultan, the first female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, Savitribai Phule, the first female teacher in India, and Maharani Durgavati, a leader who fought against Mughal Emperor Akbar. The status of women in ancient civilizations evolved over time. In the Indus Valley Civilization, there was evidence of worshipping goddesses and valuing women's education, which was deemed essential for marriage. However, practices like sati, where women were expected to sacrifice themselves upon their husbands' deaths, were prevalent. In patriarchal societies,

women were expected to bear sons to carry on the family lineage, although men's fidelity was not as stringently expected. Initially, women performed religious rituals, but this role diminished as priests took over, weakening women's societal positions. The condition of widows improved over time with the lowering of the marriage age, allowing them to receive money to sustain themselves and pursue education. Here's a glimpse into the diverse facets of ancient Indian womanhood:

### Women Education in the Vedic Period

In ancient India, education was a significant aspect of life, and women were granted equal opportunities to pursue education. The Rigveda, one of the oldest Hindu texts, highlights the importance of women's education, emphasizing their participation in religious ceremonies and study of the Vedas.

### Prominent Female Scholars

1. **Gargi (7th century BCE):** A renowned philosopher and Vedic scholar, Gargi engaged in philosophical debates with male scholars and participated in discussions with Yajnavalkya on various philosophical issues.
2. **Lilabati:** Known as a notable mathematician, she exemplified the high level of learning attained by women in ancient society.
3. **Lopamudra (3rd millennium BCE):** A Vedic poet and philosopher, she composed hymns still used in Hindu ceremonies.
4. **Maitreyi (6th century BCE):** A scholar of the Vedas who actively participated in philosophical debates.

Women in the Vedic period also received education in music, dance, performing arts, medicine, and even warfare. Female physicians and warriors were part of the society, showcasing the diverse fields women were trained in.

### Women Education in the Buddhist Period

With the support of his aunt Maha Prajapati Gautami and disciple Anand, Mahatma Buddha allowed women to join the Sangha for education. Female monks, or bhikshunis, underwent a two-year apprenticeship before receiving 'Diksha' (religious initiation). Initially, Buddhist education was restricted to monks and nuns but later opened to commoners for the propagation of Buddhism.

### Notable Female Figures

1. **Sanghamitra:** Emperor Asoka's daughter, she was inducted into Buddhism and sent to various countries to propagate the religion.
2. **Jayanti:** A princess from Kosambi who chose to remain unmarried to study religion and philosophy. Women were taught to read and write, as indicated by texts from Lalita Vistara, and received cultural and literary training. The practice of Upanayana (Vedic initiation) for women was as common as for boys, indicating their privileged position and high moral standards.

### Women Empowerment in Ancient India

During the Maurya period, women enjoyed a high status in society with rights to own property and inherit from their fathers. They participated in religious ceremonies, often serving as priests, and held significant political roles.

### **Political and Economic Power**

1. **Queen Nandini of Magadha:** Ruled the kingdom after her husband's death.
2. **Princess Shanta of Ayodhya:** Known for her scholarship and philosophical contributions.

Women were also involved in trade and commerce, with cities like Pataliputra (capital of the Mauryan Empire) being renowned for its women traders. Additionally, women had influence in social and cultural matters, actively participating in decision-making processes and contributing to the arts and literature with their creativity and talent.

### **The Ideology of Indian Woman in Ancient Scriptures**

The ideology of Indian womanhood in ancient scriptures is deeply rooted in religious and cultural texts that portray women primarily through the lens of motherhood and domesticity. The reverence for motherhood is epitomized by the phrase "Matru Devo Bhava," which means "Mother is a Goddess," indicating the high regard for women as mothers.

### **Manusmriti**

The Manusmriti, or Manava-dharma-shastra, is a key text that outlines the duties and roles of individuals based on caste and gender. It prescribes a rigid patriarchal structure, emphasizing the subordination of women. Women are exalted as mothers, essential for bearing male children, yet their independence is severely restricted. They are seen as inherently weak and in need of male protection throughout their lives. Manu's views enforce the notion that women's primary role is to serve their husbands and family, with chastity and obedience being paramount virtues.

### **Ramayana**

The Ramayana, an epic by sage Valmiki, further enforces these ideals through the character of Sita, who embodies the perfect wife and mother. Sita's unwavering devotion to her husband Rama, despite severe trials, sets a high standard for women to follow. Her life of sacrifice and purity is presented as the ideal model for Indian women. The Ramacharitmanas by Tulsidas reiterates these themes, often depicting women in subservient roles and highlighting their duty to remain loyal and chaste.

### **Mahabharata**

The Mahabharata, another seminal epic, also reflects the subordinate status of women. It portrays the significant role of mothers, yet often depicts women as property of their male relatives. The epic underscores the necessity of sons for spiritual salvation and familial honor, reinforcing the idea that women's ultimate purpose is to bear male children. The story of Draupadi, who is forced into a polyandrous marriage and subjected to public humiliation, highlights the limited autonomy and harsh realities faced by women.

### **Women's Exclusion from Sacred Texts**

Women were historically excluded from studying these texts, deemed unworthy due to their biological functions and societal roles. The scriptures were written in Sanskrit, a language inaccessible to most women and common people, further restricting their understanding and engagement with these texts. This exclusion perpetuated the notion that women's primary value lay in their maternal roles, reinforcing their subordination.

## Women in ancient Indian Art



**Fig. 1. Terracotta Figurine, Mohenjodaro Photo: Wikimedia**

The representation of women in ancient Indian art, particularly during the Mohenjodaro and Lothal periods, reflects their roles in society as earthly and functional beings. In these civilizations, women were depicted in a realistic and utilitarian manner, showcasing their involvement in agricultural activities such as planting and reaping crops, as well as their roles as mothers. This portrayal is symbolic of their reverence as Earth Goddesses, representing fertility and productivity.



**Fig. 2. Śalabhañjikā, East Gate at Sanchi Great Stūpa. Photo: Wikimedia**



**Fig. 3. Mahāmāya, Gandhāra. Photo: Wikimedia**



**Fig. 4. Woman on Pillar, Mathura. Photo: Wikimedia**

The art of Gandhara, especially in its representation of Mahamaya, the mother of Buddha, reflects a fusion of cultural influences and symbolic depth. In Gandhara art, Mahamaya is often depicted as a śālabhañjikā, a tree nymph, holding a tree while Buddha is born from her right hip. This imagery symbolizes both her role as a mother and her fertility, highlighting themes of birth and renewal.

As the depiction evolves in later Indian religious art, Mahamaya's roles of sensuality and fertility continue to be emphasized. In a representation on a railing pillar from Mathura, she stands on two lotus buds emerging from a vase of plenty (pūrṇaghāṭa). Her right hand holds a fruit, symbolizing her apparent fecundity, while her left hand holds her breast, evoking the image of a lactating mother offering milk to her child.

In this later representation, Mahamaya is equated with Lakshmi, the goddess of sustenance, abundance, and fortune in Hinduism. This transformation illustrates the fluidity and adaptability of religious symbolism in Indian art, where deities and figures can take on multiple roles and meanings.

This canon of feminine imagery in shastras (sacred texts) and Sanskrit literature aligns with the four aims of life (puruṣārthas) in Hinduism: dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity), kāma (pleasure), and mokṣa (liberation). Goddesses, including Mahamaya/Lakshmi, symbolize the sacredness of love, fertility, and creation, often depicted in a sensuous, naturalistic form in Hindu and Jain art.



**Fig. 5. Ganga as River Ganges from Sri Lanka temple Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara. Photo: Wikimedia**

During the Gupta Classical Period (4th-6th century CE), female figures were prominently represented in art and symbolism. Rivers, particularly the Ganges and Yamuna, were personified as goddesses on the doorjambs of Hindu temples, symbolizing purity of body and mind. The period saw a vast array of goddesses playing vital roles in religious art, scriptures, and worship. Some of the major goddesses included Durga, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Parvati, Brahmi, Maheshvari, Kumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani, and Chamunda. These goddesses were depicted in various forms, each with its unique significance and symbolism. One iconic representation is of Durga battling the demon Mahisha, symbolizing the victory of good over evil. This period marked a flourishing of artistic and religious expression, particularly in the portrayal of female deities and their symbolic roles in Hinduism.



**Fig. 6. Durga, Aihole. Photo: Wikimedia**



The Hindu goddess Durga and her fierce form, Kali. Durga is depicted as battling the demon Mahisha, shown in the form of a water buffalo, in her role as Mahishasuramardini, the slayer of Mahisha. She is portrayed with multiple arms, symbolizing her superhuman power, and rides a lion. Durga is revered as a protector in Hindu mythology, with the male gods giving up their weapons to her as she alone can defeat Mahisha. Kali, on the other hand, is described as a frightening deity but is also seen as a strong mother and the goddess of preservation. Despite her fearsome appearance, she is a nurturing protector. Kali's power is so great that she can subdue even the mighty god Shiva. Both Durga and Kali exemplify the multifaceted nature of Hindu goddesses, embodying aspects of ferocity, protection, and preservation in their respective roles.



**Fig. 7. Apsara at Khajuraho Temple, Belur. Photo: Wikimedia**

The representation of women in art has often been intertwined with themes of sensuality and idealization, reflecting the social and cultural values of the time. In the context of Hindu art, feminine imagery, including that of goddesses, was frequently imbued with voluptuousness and portrayed sensuously with attractive contours, gestures, and alluring postures. This portrayal extends to celestial beings known as apsaras, who, despite being revered, are depicted engaging in mundane activities such as playing ball or applying makeup. The depiction of women in this manner serves multiple purposes. It not only reflects contemporary society but also aligns with the philosophical and religious tenets of Hinduism. The enjoyment of love and physical pleasure, or *kāma*, is considered one of the aims of life (*puruṣārthas*), alongside *dharma* (duty), *artha* (prosperity), and *mokṣa* (liberation). Consequently, these themes are prominently featured in temple architecture, which symbolizes the world of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth). Moreover, the portrayal of feminine beauty and sensuality in art is not unique to Indian culture. It parallels similar trends in world art, including Renaissance, modern, and ancient art. The sexual objectification of women (and men) in art is a socially constructed phenomenon, influenced by the prevailing cultural and societal norms. Sanskrit literature provides detailed evidence of these pastimes, illustrating the cultural context in which such artistic representations were created. The male artist's portrayal of a woman's contours, even under the pretext of a scorpion beneath her garment, underscores the societal fascination with feminine beauty and sensuality. This idealization in literature and art reinforces the societal construct of beauty and the role of women, which, while reflecting the cultural ideals, also perpetuates the objectification of the feminine form.

## Conclusion

In ancient Indian society, women held a dignified and superior position, often referred to as "Shakti" or power. There is ample literary evidence to suggest that women were considered the origin of power, and many kings fought bravely to protect the dignity of women. While women's priority was higher in the early part of ancient India, this status deteriorated in later periods. The study highlights the significant role of women in ancient India, particularly in decision-making during the Mauryan Period. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding women's contributions to social, political, and cultural spheres through various art forms, reflecting their physical form, allure, and religious roles. The conclusion stresses the need to recognize visual mediums as agents of cultural, political, and economic change, requiring a deep understanding of visual forms and their analysis.

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