

Women in Vedic Culture

The respect and honour that vedic traditions had for women needs to be preserved, in order to address the turbulence which exists in modern society.



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. 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 *dharmā*, 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 Brahmadhinis, 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 *Sanātana-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.

Anasuya feeding the_Hindu Trinity The Krishna-Sudama Temple of Porbandar.

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.

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.

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 Srimati Radharani, 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

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.

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.

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.

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 complementary 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. 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.

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Stephen Knapp(Sri Nandanandana Dasa) grew up in a Christian family, during which time he seriously studied the Bible to understand its teachings. In his late teenage years, however, he began to search through other religions and philosophies from around the world and started to find the answers for which he was looking. He also studied a variety of occult sciences, ancient mythology, mysticism, yoga, and the spiritual teachings of the East. He continued his study of Vedic knowledge and spiritual practice under the guidance of a spiritual master, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.