



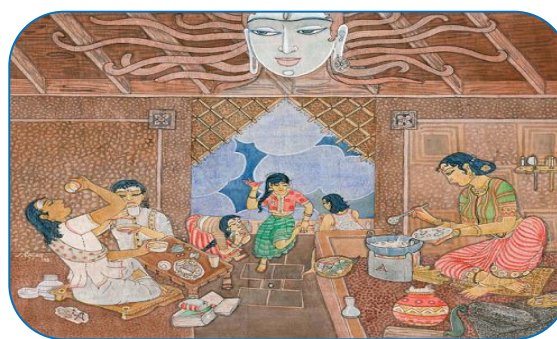
## EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND PROFESSION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

**Dr. Susmita Gangopadhyay**

Associate Professor, Madhyamgram B.Ed. College, Madhyamgram,  
North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

### ABSTRACT :

*In the Vedic period, and also in the Later Vedic period women played a prominent role in the social, educational, religious and political life of the time. But the status and dignity of women declined during this period. During this period, women were not accepted to participate in public meetings and they were kept under strict surveillance and subordination in all most situations. Politeness and submissiveness were considered as symbolic virtue of a wife. They had no right to have property. The daughter was regarded as a source of misery. Child marriage was allowed and widow re-marriage was prevented. During this period, monogamy was the rule, but the polygamy was practiced. Education was limited only to the upper castes. The education system of women also gradually started to deteriorate. Male students used to stay with their teachers in Gurukula, but no women were sent to Gurukula. War tactics and Dhanur Veda were taught to princes. Students were taught some important subjects such as religion, astronomy, grammar, arithmetic, medicine, philosophy, ethics and logic. Students were observed strict discipline, obedience and high respect to the teachers. So, in this paper, the researcher discusses the extra-curricular activities and other professions of the women in Ancient India.*



*During this period, monogamy was the rule, but the polygamy was practiced. Education was limited only to the upper castes. The education system of women also gradually started to deteriorate. Male students used to stay with their teachers in Gurukula, but no women were sent to Gurukula. War tactics and Dhanur Veda were taught to princes. Students were taught some important subjects such as religion, astronomy, grammar, arithmetic, medicine, philosophy, ethics and logic. Students were observed strict discipline, obedience and high respect to the teachers. So, in this paper, the researcher discusses the extra-curricular activities and other professions of the women in Ancient India.*

**KEYWORDS :** Vedic Period, Post-Vedic Period, Extra-curricular Activities.

### INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit language and literature is one of the most important heritage of India. The Vedas were composed for over several centuries and threw a fresh light upon the social, educational, cultural, economical, political and religious condition of the contemporary period. Vedic literature comprises primarily four sections, Samhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka and Upanishad. They also lend an insight into the changing social pattern of India in general and the position of women in particular. Vedic literature has been holding a vital position to evaluate the status of women of earlier age and present age. Hence, tracing the status of women in the Vedic Society is a topic of the important research field.

The social and educational status of **women in India** has been changed greatly over the past few centuries, starting from the Vedic Age. The Vedic age is divided into two, such as the Early Vedic period and the Later Vedic period. The Early Vedic period is recognized from the R.g. Veda. The condition of women in India during the early Vedic age was immensely superior to that we find now. Women enjoyed a respectable status in the early Vedic society. They were defied, glorified and also regarded as myths. They were treated equally with men and properly educated. In cultured circles, a

qualified daughter was regarded as the pride of the family. The daughter herself had the freedom to select husbands. The wife was the nerve centre of the home. Widow re-marriage was often allowed by society. Child-marriage was not common. Women followed the teaching profession. Some of them were also excellent warriors. Some Vedic women were great philosophers and educationists. They used to participate in public meetings and debates to deliver lectures. Women followed the teaching profession. They were also experts in solving critical problems of serious topics as Vedānta, Upanishad, Mimāṃsā etc. There were women scholars like Lopāmudrā, Viśvavārā, Ghoṣā, Sikatā, Nivavarī, Apālā, Gargi and Maitreyi.

Not only in the Vedic period but also in the Later Vedic period women played a prominent role in the social, educational, religious and political life of the time. But the status and dignity of women declined during this period. During this period, women were not accepted to participate in public meetings and they were kept under strict surveillance and subordination in all most situations. Politeness and submissiveness were considered as symbolic virtue of a wife. They had no right to have property. The daughter was regarded as a source of misery. Child marriage was allowed and widow re-marriage was prevented. During this period monogamy was the rule, but the polygamy was practiced. Education was limited only to the upper castes. The education system of women also gradually started to deteriorate. Male students used to stay with their teachers in Gurukula, but no women were sent to Gurukula. War tactics and Dhanur Veda were taught to princes. Students were taught some important subjects such as religion, astronomy, grammar, arithmetic, medicine, philosophy, ethics and logic. Students were observed strict discipline, obedience and high respect to the teachers.

In Vedic society almost everywhere, the son was valued more than the daughter. The son was a permanent economic asset of the family in old age. Secondly, the son was an investment for the future. But in some cases, girls who were highly qualified were as important as a skilled boy in the family. But in the post-Vedic period, it was not considered these aspects. Women were considered as a property, and as a property gradually lost all their rights.

In the earlier part of the Vedic age, women enjoyed a respectable position in society. Through families in the Vedic age prayed for the birth of a son, a daughter, whenever born was treated with kindness. <sup>1</sup> Yajur Veda viii-7.

She was afforded facilities for the development of the personality. The Vedic women were imparted education by their teacher. As such, the standard of education had reached its highest in the Vedic period. Women in those times were considered as seers with whom numerous hymns are associated. Prominent among them are Ghoṣā, Apālā, Lopāmudrā, Viśva vārā, Suryā, Śacī, Mamatā, Sarpārājiñī and others. These it can be seen that they are on the same footing with their male seers. Men and Women had equal status in matters of education marriage, re-marriage, in managing the household, right to property, intellectual pursuit, participation in public debate and some women even participated in battles along with their menfolk. Women shared an equal standing with their men. There were women teachers, scholars Brahmāvinīs and highly respected rsis. In the Vedic age, there is evidence that women were not only involved in family or religious duties, but they have engaged in other professions also. In this chapter, the researcher wishes to show the other activities and profession of the women in Vedic society.

It is widely agreed that the Vedic Rsis realized that the purpose of education is that students shall be trained not only to know the right things but also behave in the right way. They wanted the intellectual development of the students. However, the objective of education is not confined to intellectual development only but also an all-around development of personality, that is besides intellectual growth, education shall also cater to the emotional, physical, psychological and social development. In India there is ample evidence from of ancient scriptures like Upanishads, Brāhmins etc. which reveal that in the ancient Gurukulas and Āśrams of the Vedic Rsis and Gurus, the pupils were expected to participate in a number other activities such as taking the cows to pastures, milking the cows, cleaning and decorating Āśrams or Gurukulas, cooking, wrestling, arching, singing dancing etc.

During the Vedic age, Indian dance took a new turn. It was enriched with new emotions and a variety of presentation. In the Vedas, which belonged to this age, the word 'Nrtya' has been mentioned

at various places. It is also revealed that the risis of this age were well aware of the art of dancing. According to Prof. Alag Retron artists of all are these types – singers, dancers and instrument player were present during this age. Women dancers used to participate without any hesitation in public performances of music as singers, dancers and instrument players and enjoyed high status in the society. In Brāhmins Upanishads and other Vedic scriptures of this age, Nrtya has been described vividly. We these see that during the Vedic age, dance was an important social activity. In all festivals and functions, Nrtya was an essential performance and was viewed highly. Aryans linked Nrtya to yoga, made it simple to learn and gave it a spiritual memory. They used to practice of dance of purifying and strengthen their mental state and capabilities. They believed that dance was a powerful medium for purifying the soul and taking it out of the darkness and evil thoughts. They elevated their state of mind through the practice of dance. During this period Nātya Nrtya, Geet Nrtya, Roop Nrtya and Bhav Nrtya, were developed which enriched and elevated the level and control of the dance.

Aryans laid great importance on purity and considered purity as beauty. Beauty was, however, considered to be months of Nrtya. Nrtya was considered as an expression of beauty. In Śatapatha Brāhmana, it is mentioned that Gods created music and dance to teach that art to Goddess Sarsvati at first. The relationship of the body, senses, mind, intellect and soul is articulated in the Upanishads. It is survival to the world view where the body is regarding as the adobe of the divine and the divine descends in the body. Logically, the body, beautiful is the tempt of God and dance is a medium of invoking the divine within. Each form of dance the stammer, the movement and the context are imbued with deep spiritual discipline and is hence considered yoga. Its performance is a higher transcendental order. It is the medium which evokes the supreme state of bliss and also, the vehicle of release. Through the medium of dance, aware embodies the progenitive powers of cosmic energy through, which ace to ancient dance treatise (Nātya śāstra) 'the entire phenomenal world is kindled to life'.

Music and dancing were certainly taught to women. Songs were sung on all important occasions such as squeezing out the soma juice etc.

समु त्वा धीभिरस्वरन् हिन्वतीः सप्त जामयः ।  
विप्रमाजा विवस्तः ।<sup>2</sup>

(R.V., ix-66-8)

We find direct references to the female dancer Nrtu who is described as putting on pesami or embroidered garments for dancing "She like a dancer, put her embroidered garments on"<sup>2</sup> (R.V., ix-68-9)

Whether dancing was mixed or not is a doubtful question although kaegi suggests its existence and says that young men taking maidens by the hand whirled about to the accompaniment of the cymbals. Music and dancing, therefore, must have been included in the maidens training in arts. Ladies used to practice music, dance and painting as a regular course and they were encouraged by their family's musical recitation of the Sama hymns was originally the special function of ladies.

पत्नीकर्मव वै तेऽत्र कुर्वन्ति यदुद्गातारः ।<sup>3</sup>

(S.Br. xiv, 3, 1, 35)

Some legends show evidence about women's partiality to music. Once Devas and Asuras both wanted to win the Goddess of speech. Gods wou very cleverly, so they started to sing and dance in front of her. Goddess of speech became very happy and pleased upon them, from this story, it is proved that women can be easily won through melodious song and beautiful dance.<sup>3</sup> (S. Br. iii, 2,4,6)

Vocal and instrumental - both were well known to the women. Women, along with the family members chanted hymns with music during the extraction of soma juice.

स त्वा धीमिरस्वरन् हिन्वतीः सप्त जामयः । विप्रमाजा विवस्वतः ।<sub>2</sub>  
(R. V. ix - 66 - 8)

Frog hymn proves this case.

अन्यो अन्यमनु गृभ्पात्येनोरपां.... संपृङ्के हरितेन वाचम् ।  
यदेषमन्यो अन्यस्य.... सुवाचो वदथनाध्यप्सु ।<sub>2</sub>  
(R. V. vii - 103-7)  
(R. V. viii - 103-8)

Instruments like vinā, drum were also used by the Ladies. The dialogue hymns of RG Veda are the source of drama where men and women both took part. The sāmaveda is one of the most important evidence of the ancients in the science of vocal music.

Musical recitation of the sama hymns was originally the special function of the Ladies.

पत्नीकमेव वै तेऽत्र कुर्वन्ति यदुद्गातारः ।<sub>3</sub>  
(S. Br., xiv, 3, 1, 35)

Another reference to music is preserved in the passage “Ten dames have sung to welcome thee, even as a maiden greets her lover”.

अभि त्वा योषेणो दश जारं न कन्यानुषत ।<sub>2</sub>  
(R. V. 56-3)

In the sīmantonnayana ceremony, a wife was an aspect to sing a song. In the marriage ceremony bridegroom song, a gāthā after the treading on the stone of the bride. Acc the rule of Gobhila Grhya - Sūtra, the vāmadevya gāna sāma was to be sung at the end of every ceremony. The lute players were asked to play lute in the ceremony of ‘Parting the hair’ and four or eight women (not widows) used to dance in the marriage ceremony. Through music and dance was practiced by the women, but in respectable family’s music was not open as a carrier to ladies, because of respectable lady music teacher is not found in Vedic age.

The Vedic women received a fair share of masculine attention in physical culture and military training. The RG Veda tells us that many women joined the army in those days. Women sometimes accompanied their husbands to war and Viśpalā, the queen of King Khela, who had lost her leg in conflict, had it replaced by an iron one through the grace of Aśvins.

चरित्रं हि वेरिवाच्छेदि पर्णमाजा खेलस्य परितकम्यायाम् ।  
सद्यो जङ्घामायसी विशपलायौ धने हिते सर्तव प्रत्यधत्तम् ।<sub>2</sub>  
(R. V. 1-116-15)

“When in the time of night, in Khela’s bath, a leg was served like a wild bird’s pinion, strength gave Viśpalā a leg of iron that she might move what time the conflict opened”.

The Apsarāses and Gāndhravas to whom the later Classical literature ascribes the art of music and dancing as a profession have found a mention in the Rigveda. This we have already noted elsewhere. Dancing is a necessary auxiliary to music as an art. Urvāśī and others of her profession must have maintained dancing along with music, for after all the profession of courtesans was not unknown to the authors of the samhitā. In Rg - Veda, we find the female dancer Nrtu, while dancing kept her blossom uncovered. This proves that she was a professional dancer.

अधिपेशांसि वपते नृतूरिवापोर्णुते वक्ष उस्त्रेव वर्जहम् । 2

(R. V. 1-92-4)

Mudgalānī or Indrasenā, wife of the sage Mudgala, helped her husband in the pursuit of robbers who had stolen their cows, drove the car for her husband when he was in difficulty gave battle, defeated them, and recovered the stolen property.

उत स्म वातो वहनिवासो अस्या अधिरथं यदजयत् सहस्त्रम् ।

रथीरमूत्मुद्गलानी गविण्टौ भरे कृतं व्यचेदिन्द्रसेना । 2

(R. V. x-102-2)

Women of higher classes also used to take an active part to manufacture bows, arrows and other war martial. These instances show that women played a very important part in the domestic and social life of the Vedic period. They received physical training equally to the men, whom they sometimes surpassed in the bravery, intelligence and cleverness. Women also received military training which enabled them to become soldiers.

स्त्रियो हि दासू आयुधानिचक्रे किंमा करन्नबलाअस्य सेनाः ।

अन्तरर्हाख्यदुभे अस्य धेने अथोपप्रैद युधयेदस्युमिन्द्रः । 2

(R. V., v-30-9)

Women also took part in the administration of the country. In the Vedic age, there were democratic assemblies. From the marriage hymn, we can see that the bride was allowed to speak successfully in the public assemblies to her old age.

वशिनी त्वं विदमथमावदासि । 2

(R. V. x - 85 - 26)

Women also took part in the games; A form of chariot race was one of the games most popular during the Vedic period. People were fond of swinging. Ball games were played both by men and women. Apart from this a number of courtyard games like "hide and seek" and "Run and Catch" were also played by the girls. Playing with dice became a popular activity the dices were apparently made of vibhidaka nuts. From the Rig Veda, it appears that the Vedic Aryans knew the art of boxing.

Women in the Vedic age were also expert in nursing. They were protecting and caring for their children, aged sick members of the family Nursing evolved to respond to the desire to keep healthy as well as provide a comforting, nourishing and cleansing aspect of the patient. These love and hope were expressed in empirical practice of nursing. Indian medicines are found in the sacred books of "Vedas". The 'Āyurveda' is thought to have been given by Brahma. In 1400 B.C. 'Sushrūta, known as 'Father of Surgery' in India wrote a book on surgery, Charaka' wrote a book on internal medicine. Women during that age used to follow the instruction of the books and tried to do proper nursing of various diseases. It is curious that women of the Vedic period were interested in plant life and animal life. Reference is made to a plant black in heu (probably indigo). Traditionally in Atharva Veda we find that it was medically used by āsura women and the kirāta women of the mountains. They probably collected and sold drugs and herbs to the Vedic asrama settlements. So, it is proved that medical functions were not unknown to the Vedic women.<sup>4</sup> (A.V. vii-5.4)

Women used to take part in agriculture, dyeing, embroidery, basket making and various crafts. Women from lower society used to weave cloth, prepare baskets and took part in agriculture. Women from Lower classes, commercial and industrial circles used to take an active part in the business

transactions of their families. The making of an embroidered garment was a regular occupation of women as is indicated by the Peśākārī the female embroidered figuring in the list of victims at the Purusamedha in the yajurveda, through the commentator on the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa interprets the word as "Wife of a maker of gold".<sup>2</sup> (R. V. iv-3-2)

The Vedic women were also expert to decorate themselves with beautiful dresses and ornaments. Wearing jewellery and adorning themselves with ornaments was natural to women in Vedic period, as is today. Women were always fond of dressing themselves well so as to be attractive.

अयं योनिश्चकृमा यं वयं ते जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासाः ।

उतो स्मै तन्वं वि सस्त्रे जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासाः ।<sup>2</sup>

(R. V. x-71-4)

They knew the art of washing clothes and dying them with indigo. They used to wear woollen, silk, cotton, linen and hempen cloth. The female dancer (Nrtu) used to wear embroidered garments with artistic and intricate designs inlaid with gold, heavy and brilliant. The garments were well made and beautiful and dyed cloths with rich gold thread brocades were worn by gay women as illustrated in the attire of usās.

अधिपेशंसि वपते नृत्तुरिवापोर्णुते वक्ष उस्त्रेव बर्जहम् ।

ज्योर्तिविश्वस्मै भुवनाय कृण्वतो गावो न ब्रजं व्युषा आवर्तमः ।<sup>2</sup>

(R. V. 1-92-4)

The red and gold borders indicated the horizon at sunrise and sunset.

उद् यंयमीति सवितेव वाहु उभे सिचौ यतो भीम ऋञ्जन ।<sup>2</sup>

(R. V. 1-95-7)

The toilet and makeup system of Vedic women was very modern. They used bath powder, ground sandalwood during bath. The use of collyrium (anjana) and eye slave is also found. Ladies used to put garlands and kundals after their bath.

At the marriage ceremony brides used to wear special garment which was very colourful and bright. There was a general fashion for dressing well as may be inferred from words like suvasas and suvasana, and there were garments of different colours too.

Vedic women used to wear a different kind of ornaments to look them beautiful. They knew the art of fashion. The word niska is frequently mentioned in the Rgveda as a golden ornament worn on the neck. The women wore golden necklaces or neck chains or pearl necklaces as pearls are mentioned in the Rgveda.

Khādī was either a golden anklet worn by women or an armlet worn on the arm or bangle worn on the wrist. It sometimes signified a ring on the hand. They used to wear ear ornaments called karnaśobhana. Three gems were strung on a woollen or linen cord, used as an ornament and it was really beautiful to see when a bride tied it on her body.

Vedic women knew various kind of hairstyles and they used to decorate their hair with beautiful ornaments. They kept their hair combed and oiled. The word "opaśa" indicates that plaits were worn by women in dressing the hair. They wove their hair in a number of different styles, which are however rather vaguely indicated by the special terms stuka, kurīra or kumba, besides the opaśa and kaparda. The term stuka means a braid and there are epithets like prthu stuka which means having broad braids, visita stuka means loose braids.

किं सुवाहो स्वङ्गुर पृथुण्टो पृथुजाघने ।<sup>2</sup>

जोषद् यदीमसुर्या सचध्वै विषितस्तुका रोदसी नृमणाः ।<sup>2</sup>

(R. V. x-86-8)

(R. V. 1-167-5)

The word kumba has a connection with the kumbha or pot, implies something rounded. In Atharva Veda the word kumba refers to a style of dressing the hair like a pot.<sup>23</sup> (A. V., vi-138-3)

Vedic Index regards these terms as denoting female head ornaments connected with the dressing of the hair' (Vedic Index, vol. I, p. 163) Acc. To Vedic Index 'Opaśa' means a 'plait' as used in dressing the hair of women. The women dressed their hair in braids and sometimes it was woven into four braids which "dangled behind on the back".

चतुष्कपर्दा युवतिः सुपेशा धृतपतीका वयुनाति वस्ते ।<sup>2</sup>

(R. V. x-114-3)

The Kaparda from traditional representations was a spiral coil of the braided, plaited hair piled on the top of the head at different angles. The four kapardas must have formed a crown-shaped coiffure. We find a word kurīna, which means "some sort of female head ornament". Women also used to wear the golden crown to decorate their hairstyle. In the "Yajurveda Samhitā" the Goddess Sinivali is described by the epithets Su-kaparda, Su-kurīra, Su-opaśa, as wearing a beautiful headdress." (Y.V. viii – 3)

Suryā, who was the daughter of the God Surya, had her hair done up into a kurīra or crest, and this was probably the fashion of bridal coiffure in Rg Vedic times. The diadem or tiara that was worn was called tiritā.<sup>4</sup> (A.V. viii-6-7)

The above discussion proves that the Vedic ladies were the most attractive and elegant at that time, some of them appear to us now to be very grotesque and fantastic as fashion is always changing though it repeats itself at long intervals.

Vedic women were also expert in cooking they knew the art of hospitality so they could entertain the guests with a warm reception.

Milk was an important food material in the Vedic age. Women used to prepare ghrita from milk. Flour was perched from grain, then it was mixed with ghrita and milk and finally made into cakes. Women used to roast or cook the flesh of the ox, or the sheep, or the goat in earthenware or metal pots in any occasion of sacrifice as a rule. They used to serve the warm milk as it came from the cow. They prepared porridge made of grain and barley called Karambha. Rice was cooked with milk and with beans. Women of Vedic age were specialized to prepare clotted curds, (āmikshā), sour milk (dadhi), fresh butter (navanīta), payasyā or curds mixed with sour milk (prshad-ājya), phānta, creamy, butter and vajina a mixture of hot fresh, milk and sour milk. They knew the art of making sthālīpāka, and purodāśa. They delivered boiled rice mixed with ghee and milk. Krsara, dadhimantha, madhumantha were well known to them. They cooked the scum of boiled rice as a very light liquid food for the patients. They cooked vegetable food as a substitute of meat. They also knew the preparation of fish, and specified bird, because mainly non-veg food was offered to the guests in any occasion. People in this age were not vegetarians so women were very expert to cook non-veg foods.

Guests were entertained with a warm reception in the families of the Aryans. Women took an active part to arrange those facilities. Firstly, when the guests arrived, they (women of the family) gave them water to wash their feet, then argha water, water for sipping, and madhuparka was offered to them. After this, they cooked various items (especially meat) for their lunch or dinner. Students who used to stay the Gurukuls or teachers house or ashramas wives of the Guru used to protect and take care of them.

Thus, it is proved that women in the Vedic age took an important role in their families and they were expert in all other fields.

Thus, we can conclude that in the Vedic society women held a very important position. It was a position superior to men. As they were not only highly educated but also expert in other activities. As time passed, there was a decline in the status and dignity of women during the Later Vedic period. Women were subordinated. Submissiveness was considered as an ideal virtue of a wife. Women were not allowed to participate in public affairs. They could not own property. Child marriage was not prevented. Widow re-marriage was not allowed. Though monogamy was the rule, polygamy was practiced. Women degradation started from the Later Vedic period.

In the next future, the intention of the researcher is to discuss that how the position of women gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time.

#### REFERENCES

1. Griffith. R.T.H., (2002). Yajurveda Samhita, Indica Books, Sonapura Road, Jangambari, Rampura Luxa, Varanasi UP.
2. Kashyap, R. L., & Sadagopan. S, (1998). Rigveda Samhita, Sri Aurobindo Kapali Sastry, Institute of Vedic Culture, Jayanagar, Bangalore, Karnataka.
3. Eggeling J., Maxmuller. F, (1.1.90). Satapatha Brahmana, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Dariya Ganj, New Delhi.
4. Kashyap. R. L., (2012). Atharva Veda Kanda, Sri Aurobindo Kapali Sastry, Institute of Vedic Culture, Jayanagar, Bangalore, Karnataka.