

# GENDER IN EARLY INDIA

## Abstract

This article questions the dichotomies when we look at the idea of gender in early India through the prism of the positioning of women in early Indian societies in terms of their social, economic, religious framework which highlights that the position of women cannot be ascertained as static. It raises the moot point where we can question the centrality of women posited as goddesses and thus denied their basic rights as individuals' representative of their culture and civilization. It posits a challenge to a social hierarchy which needs to be refuted to enable women to see themselves in their reality. It explores the literature to threadbare the position of women as being defined in the most restricted and parochial narrowness.

**Keywords:** gender, early India, Manusmriti, stridhana, marriage, kinship, inheritance, property, ownership, goddesses, fertility, matriarchal, consort, procreation

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It is not only necessary to have an understanding of gender relations as well as a gender sensitive view of history despite knowing that the data at our disposal is scarce and at times the date cannot be corroborated with the data in hand. A survey of the time can be made by moving chronologically though it is fraught with limitations. The treatment meted out to women was that of servility in the primitive times, as masculine prowess was an imperative aspect for success and undoubtedly man was seen superior to woman when it came to physical power.

Men could have maimed, slain, sold and abandoned women at their whims. Women also acted as beasts of burden as they carried children when the tribe moved from place to place. It was the veritable man who fed the family and shielded his family from wild beasts and inclement weather conditions. Besides this a woman was periodically in a condition of confinement due to the natural and periodic biological constraints.

Cultural attributes had not yet taken their root in man who did not comprehend that women underwent these trials and tribulations for the sake of preservation of the lineage and race and thus could be treated with dignity, grace and consideration. Physical dauntlessness and muscle power established the primacy of men over women. Women were invariably seen as servile and weak in the face of the strength of men.

The position and status of women can be ascertained from the myths, lore, tradition, customs and laws that a civilization or a nation or even a community evolves during its long history of existence. It is in the cultural and religious framework that we find the truest picture of the placement of an individual or institution in any culture and civilization. Manu represents the continuity from the past, to the present of its own as well as ours, making it impossible for us to ignore him and his codes.

Manu lays down the obligations of husband and wife that they should not prove false to each other till death and they must constantly endeavor to be together and have faith in each other. The first duty of the wife was to cooperate in every form in the rituals with the husband. The R̥gveda states that ‘they, accompanied by their wives, worshipped the fire who is worthy of worship’.

We can state that all the Sm̥rtis and other related normative literature stress a great deal on the duties, obligation and responsibilities of a woman. All agree that the foremost duty of the wife is to obey her husband and to honour him as her god.

Manu has been mentioned in the Vedas but the antiquity of the man who was the author of Man̥sm̥rti cannot be ascertained. Man̥sm̥rti has been assigned to a fairly long phase from BCE 200- 200 CE: a phase difficult for an earthling to survive. The Man̥sm̥rti begins with the aim to propound a definition of dharma, which would have universal validity. However Medhātithi who wrote a commentary on Manusm̥rti in the late 9th century or early 10th century contested its universality based on alternative prescriptions and practices. He states that the Manusm̥rti is a comprehensive text which elucidates the social, political and moral norms of the times. It seems Medhātithi was trying to reinforce the Manusm̥rti norms in time and place when it was no longer recognized as authoritative or self-evident.

This phase saw the rise of heterodox religions; decline of Vedic form of religion and its ascendancy in its new form; the great empires of Ashoka, Mauryan and the Guptas; the

influx of people from Central Asia; the Greek invasion; which are only too few to mention. Manu's work codifies, enacts and creates the laws on the authority of the supernatural to give direction, stability and sanctity to human institutions of his times, and in the process, beyond his own time.

Manūsmṛti, therefore is a mirror of the society in its past, present and future times, and therefore must bear the onus for the condition of its adherers in the present Indian society, including women. Its all-pervasive authority derives its strength from the sacred and secular powers of times, including our own.

Wife is regarded as the key instrument as through her the man attains puruṣārtha, the goals of a man's life, especially dharma and kāma. Manūsmṛti insists on the subordination and instrumentality of the wife in a household wherein he ordains the man to exercise considerable and continuous control over the wife in order to protect birth, the family (kula), one's self (ātman) and dharma. The concept of control was certainly closely interlinked with the idea of procreation in which a woman is seen as the passive recipient of the male progeny. The ideal relationship of a husband and wife is derived etymologically by referring to Pṛthu as the mythical ruler of earth and his wife Pṛthvī, upon whom he exercises proprietary.

Manūsmṛti gives us substantial information about the position of women in the Vedic times as well as in the early Christian era and alludes to the present state of affairs in the life of women in our times. Manu does not regard women as necessary evil, but as the prime factor in man's life. She is not inferior to man in any respect. She is as much part of the creator as man is; as the creator divided himself into two parts - one being male and the other female - to initiate creation. Manu sees in women God's grace by making her desire for a love for bed, chair and ornaments, physical desires, anger, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct. He sees both man and woman complementing each other, a part of the whole. Since he finds her frail to fall into vices, he does not consider her equivalent to man. Thus Manu sees the two as part of the divine but due to the infirmities of the woman he seeks to provide her protection.

Contrary to the Vedic preference of a male progeny, Manu does not show any favour to either. He is interested in the increase of progeny in general and not of sons only. He therefore uses santati, denoting a child without mentioning the gender, in place of definite and indicative word. Putra (son) for him means either son and daughter and they are thus equal which should have been able to remove the social prejudice against a female child by advising people to treat daughters with tenderness, and parents not to enter into argument with them. They should be groomed, sophisticated, and well-ornamented in their own house as well as the in-laws' house. Her sorrow and humiliation will only be at the loss of the sanctity of the house and its ruin.

Manu gives a special place and preference to the daughters. The elder sister gets preference in marriage first. The man who marries a girl, whose elder sister is yet not married, is considered to be an undignified man. He gives instruction that unmarried girls should be given preference over the Brahmans at the feeding on ceremonial occasions, making them no way less propitious than them. He makes it mandatory to invite the daughter, her husband and their son at the shrāddha ceremony and assigns a very high place of honour to the son of the daughter.

According to Manu, the girl's father is her real guardian and protector until her marriage. The father is held accountable to arrange a suitable groom for his daughter or else he is seen with contempt and disregard. Manu's contempt for a marriage in which the bride chooses her groom is reflected in his deprivation of the woman of her strīdhana.

Manu recommends heavy penalty for a man who defames a maiden unwarrantedly on the one hand and on the other he denies religious sacrament marriage to such maidens. In dealing with laws related to adultery Manu has been most sympathetic towards the maidens. If the maidens consent is not taken then the crime is akin to capital punishment but if she has consented willingly then she has to face seclusion at home. Manu imposes injunctions among women to perform sacraments without rituals. This is strange as he considers women auspicious and also encourages parents to give auspicious names to their daughters.

Manu did not treat women at par with man so far as Vedic recitals are concerned. According to Manu women were not eligible for the study of Vedas nor could they recite the mantras in performing samskaras except marriage. The nuptial ceremony is the only sacrament in which women participated. Manu has greatly emphasized on the fact that serving your husband is seen as akin to serving the teacher. He makes allegories to household activities seen as performing yajna. Manu mentions that "The whole series of the sacraments must be performed for female also in order to sanctify the body at the proper time and in the proper order but without the recitation of sacred mantras . He claims that these specifications and guidelines are in relation to the paucity of time that women have in mastering the mantras for they get married much earlier than boys.

In terms of inheritance right Manu does not give the right to inherit the parental property to the daughters but urges the brother's to give one-fourth of the property to the sister. He does concede the right of the daughter who does not have a brother to inherit her parental property. According to the law-giver the husband and wife are united in marriage by dharma and their main function is to procreate and perform religious sacraments together.

In Vedic times women were married no sooner they attained puberty as they were seen as the vehicle towards procreation. As in later times, child marriage gained prominence, the concern evidently shifted away from the procreative potential of the bride to transfer the guardianship of the daughter from the father to the husband. So the female chastity was replaced by progeny as the most important expectation of marriage. There will be an attempt to analyse the extent to which the ancient doctrines have amplified and repeated the continued dependence of women.

Both Manu and Yājñavalkya have approved marriage by mutual choice (gandharva) in the earlier times with a caveat in the case of the former that the woman will not be entitled to strīdhana. Also if a woman has no guardian or her guardians do not perform the duty of giving her in marriage she is allowed to choose her own husband.

According to an old axiom which is quoted by Manu, women like slaves have no right to property. Only an unmarried woman may be given a share in her ancestral property by her brother. According to Manu and Yājñavalkya, a mother and even the widow (according to the latter) have the right to inherit a man's property in the absence of his sons. This requires an enquiry into the property relations in gender context in a patriarchal form. Yājñavalkya

has stressed on private law instead of criminal law while situating the right to inherit property by women indicating that during the Gupta age law was more complicated.

In the opinion of Priya Darshini a communal society is logically absolved of a patriarchal or a matrilineal allegation for it is believed that the early Vedic society was an egalitarian society which implies that the proprietary rights for women meant more than the recognition of the right of the husband over the woman's reproductive labour to continue the lineage. This only reasserts the sexual freedom enjoyed by women in the early Vedic times was greater than in the latter period.

However Altekar has explained the lowering position of women in the later Vedic age as a result of the introduction of non-Aryan wife in the Aryan household, an argument which is inconsistent and incoherent.

It is well known that from the post Vedic period until the early medieval times women continued to have a subordinate position. The development of productive forces in the early Christian era initiated a social process that led to the breakup of communal living to nuclear family system. The division of property among the brothers led to the weakening of bonds which held the patrilineal group together and this finally resulted in recognition of the rights of the close female relatives including the widow.

The Dharmasāstras mainly voice the social pattern of the upper classes who are primarily the property owning groups. It has been controverted that the patriarchal joint family was the norm among the Hindus. Though the Dharmasāstra and secular literature have shown correctly that the joint family was a multifunctional unit but they have not emphasized lucidly the relationship of this type of family structure with proprietary rights and the possibility of its absence among some groups who did not earn their livelihood through joint enterprises.

Chitrarekha Gupta has raised questions regarding the relationship between the status of women and those conventional turning points in the socio-economic history that had been identified. She has focused on the period of second urbanization which starts from the first millennium BCE up to the second century CE. She utilizes the epigraphic evidence along with the textual sources to exhibit the rural-urban dichotomy was not as piercing as is considered and that there was a merging between the two domains. From the evidence that is available from the votive inscriptions, Gupta has identified the strategies women adopted to associate themselves within the rural-urban sectors.

The evidence of women being identified based on their own profession is however limited. This suggests that women did identify themselves beyond the kinship structures though this by no means can be seen in a linear manner as some women, say in Mathura region, did identify themselves with their husband's occupation or other kinship categories. But it can be stated as an axiom that women did not exercise single-handed control over the productive process in either the rural or the urban areas.

Gupta asserts that the golden period which is synonymous with the Gupta age is a falsity as it did not bring about an iota of improvement in the status of women. In fact, it is during this period that we have the first inscriptional evidence of satī in north India.

The economic convention that had been recognized as universal transcending the gender relations is far too simplistic as it eschews the understanding that the socio-economic phase of prosperity and development may have had different implications for both women and men. Class relations were not similar in rural and urban sectors. Tentatively it can be suggested based on ample evidence that land ownership varied in early India and this can help to understand the implications it had on gender relations in areas where agriculture was the predominant occupation of the people.

Vijaya Ramaswamy has provided ample evidence to substantiate that women were associated with different forms of agricultural activity like planting, weeding, husking, winnowing, and even guarding the ripened grain. Apart from these, women were engaged in pastoral activities like processing milk, extracting oil, salt and toddy. There were others engaged in service sector related activities of cooking, nursing, pottery making, basket weaving. Some also served the king in administrative and military capacities, whereas there were others who were temple servants. We also have reference to serving women and slave women. This clearly indicates the varied occupational opportunities available to women within a specific region. The time frame covers a vast span from the first century BCE to the thirteenth century CE and thereby has undergone many transformations.

The internal dynamics of the household will be explored in terms of production, distribution and consumption of resources for it cannot be seen as a uniform whole. Intra-household relations would have had gendered identities for in the pre-industrial societies the household was the main loci of production. Also these intra-household relations would also be affected by the hierarchies of age, sex, kinship structures.

There is another interesting visage to women in their ubiquitous presence as goddesses or their multiple manifestations as goddesses. There is a plethora of evidence both iconographic and textual to the popularity of goddess. The importance of women is thus established except for the interpretation of the data available in terms of its historical terms. Myths associated with the divine are usually associated with their sexual roles and relationships. Many attributes associated with goddesses are in contravention to the role of women as described in the Dharmasāstras. The sexuality of a goddess poses a problem and so does the idea of her motherhood.

In contemporary times femaleness and motherhood are seen as synonymous. Equating mother goddess to her mortal counterpart is seen as a simple representation of an economy which was under the control of women and marriage may have been non-existent. Thus consequently the worship of female deities is viewed as befitting the tribal egalitarian societies when people practiced simple agriculture.

Shubhangana Atre has argued that the principal deity of the earliest Harappan culture was a female goddess who subsumed all the manifestation of fertility. There appears a contradiction as civilization presupposes complex social and economic relations so the centrality accorded to the female deity by Atre would run counter to a single uniform pattern associating goddess worship to egalitarian simple social structures. As stated by J N Tiwari the worship of goddesses has followed a diverse course so it can be termed as a 'loose federation of cults'. There is another view of the goddess as embodied through a vision of gender relations rather than reflecting the reality.

One way to understand it is to see the vision as intense and personal and the other is to be able to communicate the vision at the social level. It is the spiritual vision embodied through the visual representation which is more socially and historically relevant.

One needs to ask a pertinent question if these representations do not reflect the reality but are actually embedded in it, do they contravene the idea of a gender stratified society and thus are socially empowering or are they compensatory to prevaricate from the grim and routine reality. D D Kosambi's work highlights the contradiction that surrounds the representational context and the virtual aspect of the goddess. Kosambi establishes the position of the male protagonists in most of the Vedic and Puranic depictions as a sacrificial victim and explores the nature of the mother goddess. He draws on the association of the goddesses with water, one of the most static symbols of generative power and fertility. He states that as in the Vedic mythology the triumph of Indra is an allusion to the defeat of matrilineal, matriarchal society and matriarchal mother goddess worshipping people. But then mother goddesses resurface in various genealogies as in the case of Bharata's apsara mother Shakuntala, the ancestral hero of the Mahabhārata.

Kosambi has traced the origin of the cult of the goddess to pre-Vedic times. He identifies them with water rituals for birth and female figurines. He suggests that the cult was a part of the broader social and economic transformation. Kosambi identifies the practice of group marriages or polyandry which resulted in prostitution and practice of *satī*. The practice of *satī* was meant to ensure that the woman does not sacrifice her husband by reverting to the cultic practices of the earlier times. But then the symbol of the fertility cult of mother goddess flourished as represented by the earthen pot which is suggestive of the womb and an indispensable aspect of the rituals in the rites of passage. The connections suggested by Kosambi between myth and ritual practices, ritual practices and social practice and social practice and material conditions remain invaluable.

Kosambi's understanding helps us understand the relationships more significantly and can further be tested in specific contexts. The limiting of the powers of the goddess can be sighted in the spousification of an independent female deity by seeing her as the consort of the male deity as also elucidated by Lynn E Gatwood. This is seen as a specific context of Sanskritisation of the religious symbols. The consort is representative of the chaste high caste woman while the independent *devi* is seen in the context of the low caste woman for whom chastity and sexuality were not problematic aspects. This allows us to explore further the histories of the regional and local goddesses. The degree of distinction in their worshippers and their associated caste hierarchies will help to know the status of the goddess. Gatwood sees the incorporation of the Tantric cults within the Brahmanical tradition as a way of creating bridges in assimilating the tribal population in the garb of actually appropriating their land and labour.

The concept of consorts for the male deities is embedded in the system of caste-stratified society. It can be seen that the spousification concept is more focused on caste hierarchies rather than based on gender lines. Though Gatwood suggests a linear difference between gender and caste the evidence suggests that these tendencies are interspersed and mutually reinforced. The concept of a female deity is fraught with the symbolism of gender. The existence of copious data on the female divinity cannot be seen from a single perspective. Bynum observes 'Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to

gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it, or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male or female roles’.

Kosambi’s work implicitly illustrates the need to contextualize existing goddesses and their symbolic cults in terms of their coexisting and occasionally conflicting systems of belief and practice. The relationship of women with the goddess is a pertinent area of research to understand the complex relations between gender and religion.

To understand the divide between the secular and the divine we can also see the evidence where the construction of tanks and wells were also ordained as a means of acquiring religious merit as well as for more mundane purposes. Singh has attempted to give an overview of the endowments across India though his main focus is on the southern parts of India. He asserts that the women donors enjoyed high familial and social status.

The right to donate by women indicates they had access to resources which were in excess of the need, for it also exhibits the generosity of the donor. This can also be located within competing systems of distribution especially those associated with prestigious transactions. As the performance of rituals in the Vedic society was the male bastion, women resorted to donations as an alternative accessible to women.

Uma Chakravarti views the tradition of Bhakti as the alternative space within which social meanings could be questioned and restructured. Avvaiyar’s antecedents are traced to a low caste mother and a high caste father wherein she was raised by a family of bards. She avoids marriage by the simple expedient of becoming old and motherly. She was seen as more concerned with the aspects of the material world than with the spiritual. In contrast is her brother Tiruvalluvar, the renowned author of Tirukkural, who is located within a domestic context and attains fame with his wife Vasuki, who typifies the attributes of an ideal wife. It is claimed that Avvaiyar could not have achieved this fame had she been located within the ambit of domesticity which in turn reflects the gendered nature of the domestic domain and the limiting of the freedom of women. This leads to a diverse envisioning of the variety of gender relations between a masculine deity and his female worshipper.

So we see that one of the complex relationships is between women and their counterpart goddess. Thus an examination of Saktism and Tantrism can further reveal the complex relationship between the goddess and the female. We have to understand the two-way process by which symbolism and rituals are gendered and gender relations are expressed through these religious symbols. Given the symbolic space myths occupy in our society and consciousness, unconventional renderings remain uncommon. It is far less troubling to present pious versions of great women – goddesses, saints, and the rare ruler – to claim for ourselves a civilizational legacy which accorded a central and venerable status to women. In the process we also displace potential challenge to a social order which has so far refused to grant women genuine equality.

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