

SYMBOLS OF STRENGTH OR OF SUBSERVIENCE? VARYING STANDARDS OF WOMANHOOD IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURE

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[doi: 10.33329/joell.7.2.94](https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.7.2.94)

ABSTRACT




Women have been accorded varying statuses in the history of India and Indian literature. Ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads have exalted the glory of women and celebrated womanhood as the most powerful, divine and empowering. As time progressed, however, the status of women has steadily declined. Post-invasion India imported standards and conventions from regions like Central Asia, Greece, Rome and other European countries. British India imposed gender roles that were an amalgam of the Brahmanical conventions and bourgeoisie Victorian standards. The existing Indian literature was altered substantially to reflect these standards which were unfavourable to women. The Pativrata / Panchakanya tales stand as an example of such an alteration. The tales, which were simply depictions of the lives of inspiring women, were modified to preach domesticity and subservience to women. Modern Indian writers are reclaiming the tales by reinterpreting them based on modern literary theories and by unravelling the distortions made to the original lore. This paper seeks to examine the original Pativrata tales, the distortions made to the same over the course of time and their reinterpretation in the post-colonial period.

Keywords: *Mythology, Pativrata, Panchakanya, Victorian Gender Roles, Brahmanical Gender Roles.*

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**Introduction**

Though the Constitution of India offers equal rights to all, there has been a noticeable lack of gender equality in the country today. India was ranked 112th in the recent World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index 2019. This gender inequality is often blamed on the predominant Hindu culture and tradition that is followed in the country.

A perfunctory study of Hindu culture and tradition would reflect an over-arching patriarchal attitude which espouses subservience of womankind. Practices like dowry, child marriage, preference for the male child, female infanticide, taboo on widow remarriage, etc. have plagued, and continue to plague the Hindu society.

However, a deeper study of the culture would reveal the fact that the position of women in Hinduism has been subject to constant change. Hindu texts project varied, and often conflicting, views on the status of women.

Ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads have exalted the glory of women and celebrated womanhood as the most powerful, divine and empowering. The Devi Sukta of Chapter X of Rig Veda establishes the feminine as the power and principle behind all the events and happenings in the universe:

I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship.

Thus Gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and abide in. Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them, each man who sees, breathes, hears the word outspoken.

They know it not, but yet they dwell beside me. Hear, one and all, the truth as I declare it.

I, verily, myself announce and utter the word that Gods and men alike shall welcome.

I make the man I love exceeding mighty, make him a sage, a Rishi, and a Brahman. I

bend the bow for Rudra that his arrow may strike and slay the hater of devotion.

I rouse and order battle for the people, and I have penetrated Earth and Heaven (Griffith)

A similar sentiment is expressed in the Shakta Upanishads where Shakti, or the sacred feminine, is called the guiding force behind everything in the universe – Prakriti (“matter”) and Purusha (“consciousness”), bliss and non-bliss, Vedas and the contrary, the born and the unborn, the elements and the non-elements, the Brahman (“the Ultimate Reality”) and the Atman (“the Soul”)(McDaniel 90-91)

An analysis of certain hymns of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad also reveals a society which did not necessarily have a preference for a male child.

And if a man wishes that a learned daughter should be born to him, and that she should live to her full age, then after having prepared boiled rice with sesamum and butter, they should both eat, being fit to have offspring.

And if a man wishes that a learned son should be born to him, and that he should live his full age, then after having prepared boiled rice with meat and butter, they should both eat, being fit to have offspring. (Muller 219-220).

The Upanishads also mention ancient female philosophers such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Vishwawara, Sikta and Ghosha. They were hailed as Brahmadivinis or 'expounders of Vedas'(Das).

Vedic literature also stresses on the education of women.

"A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care" (Mahanirvana tantra).

"All forms of knowledge are aspects of Thee, and all women throughout the world are Thy forms. (Devi Mahatmya) (Das)



Women, who enjoyed a position of importance during the Ancient Vedic times, began to decline in social importance as years progressed.

Women steadily lost their rights through the Post-Vedic period, Smriti period and the period of Muslim rule right until the period of British rule. (Tharakan)

Sociologists often attribute this loss of rights and position to the division of labour and specialization in the society (economic factors) and to outside influence (external factors) (Stewart and Winter).

In the case of India, outside influence comes in the form of various invaders from regions such as Central Asia, Greece, Rome and other European nations. Their standards, conventions and customs were adopted and followed. In the period of British rule, an amalgam of Brahmanical traditions and Victorian gender roles was imposed on women. Literature was altered to reflect those gender standards.

Today, the texts are being reinterpreted by post-modern authors, and changes are being made to the customs to accommodate women as equal beings.

Thus, changes in societal perspectives on the position of women also lead to changes in the literature of the period.

The subsequent chapters of this paper will examine changes made over several periods to the Panchakanya tales.

The Panchakanya Tales

Panchakanya, or the 'five virgins' are a group of five women idolized and worshipped for being ideal women. The sloka invoking their names runs thus:

*ahalyā draupadī kuntī tārā
mandodarī tathā |
pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ
mahāpātakanāśinīm ||*

'Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari

The virgins five remembered regularly

Destroy the greatest failings.'
(Bhattacharya)

Thus, the five virgins are Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari. Some versions of the hymn replace Kunti with Sita.

The term 'virgins' or 'kanya' here merely refers to their chasteness. (Apte 73)

The tales of the Panchakanya and their alterations over the years are examined below:

1. Ahalya

The tale of Ahalya may be summarized as follows:

Indra, the king of the gods, has fallen in love with Ahalya, the wife of an ascetic Brahmin named Gautama. In order to seduce her, Indra takes on the shape of her husband. When caught in the act, he is cursed by the ascetic to lose his testicles (and thereby, naturally, his male powers)...Ahalya, guilty of adultery, is also cursed by her husband, but with the rider that she will be released by Rama when he passes this place on his way to King Janaka's court. (Sohnen-Thieme 39, 42, 43).

The tale of Ahalya varies across versions. The original tale suggests that Rama considers Ahalya "blameless and inviolate".

"When he and Lakshmana touch her feet in salutation, this recognition restores her self-respect and her status in society, so that she truly lives again."
(Bhattacharya 7)

The earlier versions of the tale, thus, depict Ahalya's conscious choice to satisfy her sexual needs. When she is caught committing adultery, she and her lover, Indra, are punished. She is redeemed when she meets Rama.



Later renditions of the tale, however, present Ahalya as a victim of rape who was condemned by her husband for being “damaged goods”. The Uttara Kanda of the Ramayana, which is considered a later addition, distorts the tale to conform to an amalgam of Brahmanical standards the western ideals of womanhood. It became unthinkable for a woman to pursue sexual pleasures.

Uttara Kanda narrates the story thus:

“Indra raped Ahalya, thus absolving her of any active role in the liason... [Ahalya] would cease to be unique as the only beautiful female.” (Bhattacharya 5)

The tale, which was altered to suit the sensibilities of pre-independent India’s patriarchal society, is now being reclaimed by post –modern authors such as Pratibha Ray. In her work, “Ahalya: A Woman’s Eternal Quest for Love”, she portrays Ahalya as “an eternal emblem of women’s quest for equality and love.”

2. Sita

Ramayana, the Sanskrit epic which narrates the tale of Rama and Sita, has been reinterpreted in pre-independent India as a classic Victorian tale thus:

“By rescuing her[Sita] from the clutches of the demon-king, Ravan, Ram attains his status as hero and god, with him as the knight-in-shining-armor and her as the damsel-in-distress.”

“But”, Devdutt adds, “there is more to Sita than meets the eye...Sita was no ordinary woman. She was plowed out of the earth by Janak, king of Videha. She was called Janaki meaning Janaka’s daughter, Vaidehi meaning Videha’s princess and Maithili meaning resident of Mithila, the city of Janak. But her most famous name, Sita, meaning furrow, clearly establishes her as the daughter of the earth. That she was not conceived in a womb, made her a-yoni-ja,

hence a goddess in her own right.” (Pattanaik)

The following passage from Ayodhya Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana shows Sita’s impudence as she argues with her husband, Rama, about his disagreement over taking her along on the Vanvas:

“What thought of thee, O Rama, my father, the king of Mithila, accepting thee as his son-in-law, who was a man in form but (in deeds) a woman? Henceforth, if people through ignorance say that the sun has not that burning flood of light which in Rama does shine forth, woe is them, it is falsehood.” (Dutt 276)

Sita has also been depicted in the original Valmiki Ramayan as physically strong.

“It took a dozen men to lift this bow (Shiva’s bow) but Sita could pick it up with one hand as if it was a toy and wipe it clean.” (Devdutt)

The following modifications have been noted in later day retellings of the Ramayana, which are often attributed to outside influence:

a. The abduction of Sita by Ravana

The original scripture written by Valmiki suggests that Ravana dragged Sita along by her hair.

The text was altered to state that he did not touch her and instead transported her along with the tract of the land she was on.

The alteration was possibly made to conform to western standards of feminine ‘purity’.

b. Lakshman Rekha

The original text does not mention the ‘Lakshman Rekha’. It was added in later renditions, possibly to paint Sita as the ‘damsel in distress’, a Victorian concept.

**c. Maya/Chaya Sita**

The Kurma Purana, which is believed to have been composed in medieval India, suggests that Ravana kidnapped 'Maya Sita', while the real Sita remained under the protection of Agni, the fire God. This modification, again, reflects the then society's convoluted notions of feminine 'purity', which is believed to be a concept borrowed from the west. (Bulcke 115)

A prominent post-modern reinterpretation of the tale of Sita is Amish Tripathi's 'Sita-Warrior of Mithila' which reimagines Sita as a tough warrior princess.

3. Mandodari

Mandodari, the daughter of an Asura king Mayasura and a celestial nymph Hema, is the consort of Ravan, Ramayan's chief antagonist and the ruler of Lanka. She is depicted as a righteous woman who boldly expresses her disapproval of her husband's antics. After her husband's death at the hands of Rama, she marries Vibhishana, Ravan's brother in order to retain her status as the Queen of Lanka and to prevent strife in the kingdom.

Subsequent versions of the Ramayana mention tales of her ill-treatment and assault at the hands of Rama's army. Post-modern retellings of Mandodari's saga, such as Sundari Haran's 'Mandodari's Ravanayana', discuss her mettle as a survivor of assault.

4. Tara

Tara's tale may be summarised thus:

"Tara is the wife of Vali, the Vanar king who ruled from Kishkinda. In the original Valmiki Ramayan, she comes across as a woman of extraordinary foresight. She advises her husband not to accept the

challenge that led to his ultimate death but he refuses to listen. When Vali is on his death-bed, he advises his brother to trust Tara's knowledge and she ultimately ends up marrying her husband's younger brother. She also saves Sugreev later from Lakshman's wrath with her brilliant tact and diplomacy, cementing her own position in the kingdom, and paving the way for Angad, her son from Vali, to be crowned the king-in-waiting." (Aggarwal)

Anand Neelkanthan, a post-modern author, refashions Tara's tale to match a "Shakespearean tragedy"- a doomed love-triangle between her and the Vanar brothers.

5. Kunti

Kunti, the mother of Karna and the Pandavas, is one of the protagonists of the Sanskrit epic, Mahabharata. In the original text, she is depicted as a shrewd woman who understands the ways of men and uses that understanding to navigate through the wicked world.

Subsequent versions of Mahabharata, particularly the 20th century film and television adaptations of the work, present Kunti as a passive widow who suffers through hardships. This is in keeping with the ideals prescribed to widows in the period.

Post-modern interpretations of the Mahabharata, such as Kavita Kane's 'Karna's Wife', Chitra Banerjee Divakurni's 'The Palace of Illusions' and Anand Neelkanthan's 'Ajaya', seek to restore Kunti's role as a shrewd woman.

6. Draupadi

Draupadi, the chief female protagonist of the Mahabharata, is the daughter of Drupad, King of Panchal and the wife of all



the five Pandavas. Born of sacred fire, she is known for her beauty and fiery temperament. She manages her polyandrous conjugal relationship with flair and finesse. She is humiliated in the Kuru court for her marriage to five men, but instead of backing down, she mocks the men present of being incompetent, as they could not safeguard the honour of a woman. She also insists on seeking revenge on the Kauravas for their ill-treatment of her.

Draupadi was also presented as a skilled Empress, competent in managing the royal treasury and considerate while dealing with her subjects' problems.

India's post-invasion interpretations of the Mahabharata often blame Draupadi for being too emotional and for being the prime cause behind the Mahabharata war. She began to be compared to Helen of Troy, for being the harbinger of violence and destruction.

Authors of today seek to restore Draupadi to her original fiery glory, instead of being reduced to a mere plot device. Chitra Banerjee Divakurni's 'The Palace of Illusions' and Pratibha Ray's 'Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi' present Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view.

CONCLUSION

Women in Indian mythological literature were often depicted as those of bravery and fiery temperament, seeking equal rights in all spheres.

The protagonist of Ramayana, Sita was no docile woman, though she was later made out to be one. She could lift the 'Siva Dhanassu' even when she was young, a feat not capable of even warriors like Ravana. She was assertive, and could and did argue with Rama. She even berated him when he was against her accompanying him into forest, chided Laxmana with impunity when he refused to leave her alone, tongue-lashed Ravana for taking her away stealthily, refused to prove her chastity a second time and preferred to go away with her mother, the

Goddess of Earth. She was no pushover, though she was later made out to be all demure and no fire.

Tara, who served as the wife of Vali and then of Sugriva, stands out for her ability to foresee situations and for her clever advice.

Mandodari was also known for her ability to understand situations and forewarned Ravana not to abduct Sita and, later, to return her.

Draupadi of Mahabharata was of course all 'fiery', having come out of fire, was friendly with Krishna all along, said to have sympathised with Karna, balanced her relations with equanimity with her five husbands, and was definitely one of the persons responsible for the war, refusing to let her insults go unredeemed, in the process, pressurising and berating her husbands into agreeing for the war.

Kunti, though she begot sons through people other than her husband, was never looked down upon and played an important role in bringing up her sons and inculcating in them a strong desire to fight for their rightful inheritance.

In fact, all the women in Mahabharata, like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawathi (who ran the show while looking to continue the progeny), Amba (who steadfastly worked for the downfall of Bhishma) were more principled and certainly more dominant than the males who turned out to be either cowards (Pandavas who could not show their valour even when their wife was being insulted) or villains (Duryodhana, Sakuni) or those who could not control their sons (Dhritarashtra).

Several mythological scriptures also portray dominant women. Goddess Parvati is said to be constantly arguing with her husband, Siva. A prominent Saivite tale talks of her insult by Bhingi, a devotee of Siva, who did not acknowledge her. By way of unrelenting 'tapas', as severe as done by any male, she achieved the status of equality with her husband, becoming one half of 'Ardhanaareeswara'. Even as Sati, in her earlier life, she stood up for her dignity in a show-down with her father, Daksha.

As such, women have been portrayed as



brave, fiery, argumentative (in a positive manner), principled, steadfast in their beliefs and everything positive in Indian literature, but the portrayal took a beating in later times when they were depicted as being weak and docile and submissive. This may be due to the influence of outsiders like Greeks, Romans and English who fobbed off their gender "ideals" on Indian writers, not to mention the male dominance which started taking shape during those periods.

There is every need now to reclaim the original Indian woman and restore her independence and independent thinking. Post-modern authors have attempted to restore Indian women to their former position of glory and strength, but a lot remains to be done.

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