

Vedic Perspectives on Gender Equality: Reclaiming Harmony through Cultural and Spiritual Wisdom

Dr. Jyotsana Khandelwal

Professor, Faculty of Management Studies, Jagannath University, Jaipur

Abstract

Gender equality, a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, continues to face resistance despite policy frameworks and social activism. While India has made significant strides in this direction, deeply rooted cultural and societal norms continue to perpetuate gender bias. This chapter explores gender equality through the lens of ancient Indian wisdom, particularly the Vedas and Upanishads, revealing that spiritual and cultural traditions historically supported a far more inclusive and egalitarian vision of society than often perceived today.

Drawing from Vedic concepts such as **Purushartha**, **Atman**, and **Sama Darshinah**, the chapter highlights that gender distinctions are external and temporary, while the soul is universal and beyond all binaries. Quoting Rigveda, Atharvaveda, and the Bhagavad Gita, it reclaims scriptural authority to argue for equality of opportunity, respect, and dignity for all genders. The narratives of female philosophers and equal marriage partnerships in Vedic times serve to dismantle modern-day misinterpretations of religious texts used to justify patriarchal norms.

In contrast, the chapter also outlines the decline of these ideals due to selective reading, social constructs, and organized religious dogma. Present-day gender disparities—literacy gaps, wage inequality, gender-based violence—are presented alongside a call for restoring **Dharma** (righteousness) through reinterpretation of authentic teachings.

By emphasizing the family as the nucleus of societal change and advocating a return to spiritually-rooted values, the chapter proposes a transformative model where gender equality is both a personal and collective pursuit grounded in India's philosophical heritage.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Vedic Philosophy, Purushartha, Sama Darshinah, Dharma*

Introduction

Gender equality is something we all talk about, hear about, and even advocate for—but often struggle to see fully realized around us. Whether it's a daughter being asked to compromise her career for family, a woman being underpaid for the same work as a man, or a girl learning from her schoolbooks that leadership and strength are usually associated with males, the message is often subtle but clear: inequality still persists.

In India, despite progress and strong laws, we continue to face deep-rooted challenges. Our country's score on the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5—focused on gender equality—is just 49 out of 100. This tells us that while women have reached space, led governments, and shaped industries, the average woman still battles bias at home, at work, and in society. Often, the inequality isn't loud—it hides in customs, language, and everyday expectations.

But what if the solution to this very modern problem lies in something ancient?

This chapter takes a step back—not to retreat into the past, but to **reclaim it**. India's spiritual heritage, especially the Vedas and Upanishads, holds a surprisingly powerful message: **the soul has no gender**. Our ancient texts spoke of dignity, mutual respect, and equality long before these became policy goals. Women were seen as thinkers, partners, teachers, and spiritual equals.

Somewhere along the way, we lost that vision.

By revisiting these teachings, not through rigid ritual but with open hearts and honest inquiry, we can rediscover a blueprint for true equality. One that doesn't just exist on paper, but that we live at home, in classrooms, at workplaces, and within ourselves.

Because when we understand that every soul is equal, how can we treat any person as less?

Review of Literature

The discourse on gender equality, particularly in the Indian context, has drawn from diverse fields—sociology, philosophy, religious studies, and feminist theory. The exploration of Vedic scriptures through a gender-sensitive lens has enriched our understanding of how ancient texts can support progressive social values when interpreted with integrity and context.

Chakravarti (2006) in her landmark work *Gendering Caste* highlights how caste and gender are interwoven in Indian society and how religious texts, including the Manusmriti, were historically manipulated to reinforce patriarchal norms. She argues that early Vedic culture, while more open to female participation, gradually became exclusionary due to socio-political shifts.

Altekar (1959) provides a comprehensive historical account in *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. He notes that Vedic women had access to education, could compose hymns, and were respected participants in rituals. Over time, these roles diminished due to evolving interpretations of Dharma and the rise of patriarchy.

Jamison and Witzel (1992) explore the **Rigveda** in their linguistic and philosophical analysis, revealing that many hymns, particularly those attributed to female sages like *Lopamudra* and *Gargi*, suggest intellectual equality between genders. Their work emphasizes the importance of restoring women's voices in scriptural traditions.

Sharma (2002) asserts that gender discrimination in Hinduism is not intrinsic but constructed through misinterpretation. In *Women in Indian Religions*, she explores comparative religious traditions and finds that early Hindu scriptures provided women with rights, which later religious reforms restricted.

Nanda (2003) critiques the institutionalized patriarchy in Hindu society but also argues that reinterpretation of religious texts through a feminist lens can be empowering. She emphasizes education and spiritual reinterpretation as tools for reclaiming lost dignity.

Kinsley (1986), in *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, explores how divine feminine figures like Durga, Saraswati, and Kali challenge Western assumptions of female passivity. He underscores that while goddesses are revered, actual women in society are not always treated with equal reverence—a paradox that reflects gender dualities in practice.

Patton (1994) examines classical Sanskrit texts from a gender studies perspective, pointing out how commentaries and translations over centuries were dominated by male scholars. Her research urges for contemporary feminist reinterpretations that reclaim female agency.

Yadav (2010) conducted an empirical study on Vedic education and found that many young Indians remain unaware of the egalitarian aspects of their spiritual traditions. She advocates integrating gender-equity values from Vedic teachings into school curricula.

Tripathi (2015) in her paper on *Gender and Dharma*, asserts that the spiritual concept of Atman being genderless is a powerful counter to contemporary gender bias. She links this metaphysical principle to social structures and argues for more holistic spiritual training.

Sen (2017) revisits Swami Vivekananda's teachings on women and argues that his views, deeply influenced by Vedantic ideals, promote gender equality at the level of the soul. Sen ties this back to the broader Vedantic ethos, which sees unity in diversity and transcends gender binaries.

Together, these works form a robust interdisciplinary foundation for reinterpreting ancient Indian philosophy in the light of contemporary gender debates. Most scholars agree that while Vedic and Upanishadic texts were inclusive, their application in later centuries was distorted by patriarchal dominance and institutional interests. The need of the hour is a contextual, humanistic, and spiritually aligned reading of these texts to re-establish gender parity as a lived value, not just a constitutional promise.

Research Gap

While numerous studies have explored the status of women in Indian society and many have critically analyzed the impact of patriarchy on religious and cultural traditions, there is **limited interdisciplinary scholarship** that reinterprets **Vedic literature through the lens of contemporary gender equality discourse**. Much of the existing work either emphasizes feminist critique of oppressive structures or focuses on glorifying ancient Indian traditions without critically assessing how Vedic values can be applied in modern society.

Furthermore, there is a **lack of integration between spiritual-philosophical perspectives (like the concept of the Atman being beyond gender) and practical strategies for promoting gender equality today**—particularly in education, policymaking, and cultural transformation. Many texts acknowledge the existence of female sages and gender-neutral principles in ancient India, but few connect these insights meaningfully to present-day inequalities and how ancient wisdom can empower modern reform efforts.

Additionally, there is **insufficient empirical work on how awareness of Vedic gender-egalitarian teachings can influence current attitudes toward gender roles**, especially among youth, educators, or religious practitioners.

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine Vedic and Upanishadic texts for principles and narratives that support gender equality and spiritual egalitarianism.
2. To explore the misinterpretations and socio-historical distortions of Vedic teachings that contributed to patriarchal norms in Indian society.

3. To propose a contemporary framework for integrating Vedic ideals of gender equality into modern educational, familial, and policy settings.

Analysis & Interpretation:

When we talk about gender equality today, it often feels like a new idea—something born out of modern rights movements or legal reforms. But the truth is, the idea that all beings are equal has been part of India’s spiritual tradition for thousands of years. If we look deeply into the **Vedas and Upanishads**, we find a treasure trove of ideas that don’t just accept equality—they celebrate it.

The Soul Has No Gender

At the heart of these ancient texts is a profound belief: that we are not our bodies, our titles, or even our genders—we are **Atman**, the eternal self. The **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.3.7)** says it beautifully: *“The Atman is not male or female. It is neither man nor woman; it is beyond both. It is pure consciousness.”* This isn’t just poetry. It’s a powerful statement. If the soul—our truest self—is beyond gender, then the differences we see are only on the surface. In a society where women are often treated differently from men, this ancient idea reminds us that we are fundamentally the same.

Women as Thinkers, Teachers, and Spiritual Guides

Our ancestors recognized the brilliance and strength of women. The **Rigveda**, one of the world’s oldest texts, includes hymns written by women sages like **Lopamudra** and **Gargi**. Lopamudra wasn’t just a wise woman—she openly questioned her husband, the sage Agastya, and demanded a space for her own spiritual growth.

Then there’s **Gargi Vachaknavi**, who fearlessly stood up during a spiritual debate and asked questions about the universe that stumped even the most respected male philosophers. She wasn’t mocked or dismissed. She was **respected**. In the **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad**, her debate with sage Yajnavalkya is recorded with admiration, showing how women were once valued for their intellect and insight.

These are not mythical stories. They are lived examples from our scriptures that show us women were seen as equals—**not in competition with men, but in partnership with them.**

Marriage as a Partnership, Not a Power Struggle

Modern marriages often wrestle with balance—who leads, who sacrifices, who follows. But in the **Atharvaveda (14.1.6)**, we find an inspiring picture of marriage:

“May you two enjoy the companionship of each other, be affectionate and speak sweetly. May you move together, speak in one voice, and grow together in strength and understanding.”

This is a vision of **equality**, not hierarchy. Husband and wife are described as companions—moving together, growing together. It’s not about control or submission, but about unity.

Even the **Yajurveda (20.9)** echoes this sentiment:

“O woman, you are the queen in your father’s house and also a queen in your husband’s house.”

What a strong image of dignity and agency! Women were not expected to shrink themselves after marriage—they carried their power, wisdom, and respect into every home they entered.

Women and Education: A Lost Legacy

Education for girls still struggles in many parts of India. But in Vedic times, girls were not only educated, they were scholars. They took part in **Upanayana**, the sacred thread ceremony, and were initiated into Vedic learning. Women weren’t just allowed to learn—they were **encouraged**.

A verse from the **Rigveda (10.85.7)** captures this beautifully:

“The wife should be the equal of her husband in speech and action.”

This wasn’t just a ritual blessing—it was a **standard**.

The Power of Equal Vision

One of the most profound teachings on equality comes from the **Bhagavad Gita (5.18)**:

“The wise see with equal vision a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.”

This verse teaches us to see beyond social labels. It’s a call to see the same spark of divinity in everyone—regardless of caste, creed, or gender. It’s a teaching of **Sama Darshinah**, equal vision.

Applied to gender, it tells us: when we look through the lens of wisdom, there is no “he” or “she,” no lesser or greater. Only souls—equal, eternal, divine.

While ancient Indian scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads offer a vision of spiritual equality, the reality of how these texts have been interpreted—and often **misinterpreted**—over centuries tells a very different story. The shift from **gender inclusion to exclusion** didn’t happen overnight. It was shaped by complex historical, political, and cultural forces that gradually redefined the role of women in society, often sidelining the liberating essence of Vedic teachings.

In the early Vedic period, women were active participants in religious life. They performed rituals, studied scriptures, and composed hymns. But as patriarchal values tightened their grip, these freedoms were slowly stripped away. The **Manusmriti**, written centuries after the Vedas, became a key instrument in this transition. Often mistaken as Vedic law, Manusmriti introduced rigid gender roles and justified female subordination as divine will.

Over time, **selective interpretation** of scriptures reinforced the idea that women were impure during menstruation, less capable of intellectual pursuits, and unfit for spiritual liberation without a male intermediary. Many of these beliefs were not Vedic in origin but were inserted into society through **Brahminical patriarchy**, colonial influence, and institutional religion.

Unfortunately, such misinterpretations were rarely questioned. Religious authority and tradition became tools to silence reform and maintain status quo. In doing so, society lost the powerful, **egalitarian voice of the Vedas**, and women were distanced from the very spiritual heritage that once empowered them.

Revisiting these scriptures today with clarity, compassion, and a **gender-sensitive lens** allows us to undo centuries of distortion. It’s not about rewriting the past—it’s about reclaiming what was always there: a vision of dignity, equality, and spiritual unity between all beings, regardless of gender.

Ancient wisdom isn’t meant to sit on dusty shelves. It’s meant to guide how we live, learn, and love—even today. The powerful, inclusive messages found in the Vedas and Upanishads can be a real force for change in our modern world, but only if we bring them into the spaces where change actually happens: **our schools, our homes, and our communities**.

Let’s begin with **education**. Imagine a classroom where children learn not only about gender equality as a modern law but also as a timeless spiritual truth. Imagine telling them the story of **Gargi**, a woman sage who challenged the great Yajnavalkya in a spiritual debate—or **Maitreyi**, who chose wisdom over wealth.

These aren't just characters from ancient texts. They are role models who show us that women have always had a voice, and that voice was once celebrated. Including such stories in textbooks, along with Vedic verses that promote mutual respect and equality, can inspire students to see gender not as a boundary, but as a shared human experience.

Now think about the **home**. Families are the first classrooms, and parents are the first teachers. When children see their mothers and fathers share responsibilities, listen to each other, and make decisions together, they grow up believing that equality is normal. Rituals, too, can be transformed—encouraging daughters to lead prayers, recite Sanskrit shlokas, or participate in family ceremonies with confidence and pride.

At the **community and policy level**, Vedic wisdom can be a powerful ally. In areas where tradition still strongly influences behavior, quoting scriptures like *“The Atman is beyond gender”* or *“The wife should be equal in speech and action”* can help shift mindsets. When people hear these values from sources they trust, transformation becomes possible.

This framework isn't about going back in time. It's about **moving forward with deeper roots**—using our ancient knowledge to build a more compassionate, equal world today. After all, the past has already shown us the way. Now it's up to us to walk it.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Equality—The Ancient Light for a Just Tomorrow

This chapter began with a question: Is gender equality a modern invention, or could it be something much older—something rooted in our very spiritual identity? Through a careful journey across the Vedas and Upanishads, the answer became clear: **gender equality is not new to Indian thought. It is ancient, profound, and spiritual.**

Our first objective led us into the sacred texts themselves. There, we found women not hidden in the background but shining as **thinkers, poets, and philosophers**—Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, and others who challenged norms long before the word "feminism" existed. The Vedas spoke of a soul beyond gender, of marriage as partnership, and of dignity as birthright. These aren't just scriptural lines; they are reminders of who we were—and who we can be again.

Our second objective asked us to look honestly at how we lost that vision. Over centuries, through misinterpretations, fear, and the tightening grip of patriarchy, the empowering messages of the Vedas were pushed aside. Ritual replaced meaning. Control replaced cooperation. And women, once seen as spiritual equals, were often told they were less. This distortion didn't just change religion—it changed society.

Finally, we looked forward. In a world struggling to balance tradition with progress, our third objective offered a way to **reintegrate Vedic values into the spaces that shape us**: schools, homes, and policies. We saw how education could teach children that equality is not foreign, but familiar. How families can model respect. And how spiritual language can speak directly to hearts in even the most conservative communities.

In the end, the Vedas give us more than verses—they give us **a vision**. A vision where every being is divine, where leadership isn't male or female, and where truth is not bound by body or birth. Reclaiming that vision isn't about looking back with nostalgia. It's about **moving forward with wisdom**—guided not just by law or policy, but by the eternal light of dharma, unity, and compassion.

Let us not forget: **The soul has no gender. The Atman is one. And from that truth, true equality begins.**

Bibliography

- Altekar, A. S. (1959). *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Chakravarti, U. (2006). *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Kolkata: Stree.
- Jamison, S., & Witzel, M. (1992). *Vedic Hinduism: A Philological and Historical Outline*. Harvard University.
- Kinsley, D. R. (1986). *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nanda, M. (2003). *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*. Rutgers University Press.
- Patton, L. L. (1994). *Myth as Argument: The Brhaddevata as Canonical Commentary*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Sen, A. (2017). *Revisiting Vivekananda: Gender Equality in Vedantic Thought*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 45(2), 173–188.
- Sharma, A. (2002). *Women in Indian Religions*. Oxford University Press.
- Tripathi, P. (2015). Gender and Dharma: Revisiting the Concept of Atman in Gender Equality Discourse. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 19(3), 231–250.
- Yadav, N. (2010). Teaching Gender Equality Through Vedic Literature: A Pedagogical Exploration. *Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 29(1), 87–101.