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সংগীতের মূলভূত উদ্দেশ্য	: ছায়ারানী মণ্ডল	১৪৬
মজরুলের শিশুসাহিত্য : নির্বাচিত রচনার আলোকে	: অপর্ণা দাস	১৫৩
রবীন্দ্র ডাবনা ও ব্রাহ্মসমাজ	: তনুশ্রেতা চট্টোপাধ্যায়	১৫৭
কবির 'আদি কবি' : একটি অনুসন্ধান	: চিরঞ্জিৎ রায়	১৬৩
স্মৃতির আলোকে ব্যতিক্রমী লেখক কার্তিক লাহিড়ী	: সুলতা হালদার	১৭১
<b>A Comparative Study of three diseases in Atharvaveda and Caraka Samhitā</b>		
	: Laxmi Maji	১৭৫
✓ <b>Life of Women in Upaniṣad Literature</b>	: Pitas Das	১৮২
<b>VISHNUPRIYA - THE FORLORN QUEEN OF GOURA EMPIRE</b>	: Susmita Nath	১৮৭
ধন্যবাদ	: সুমনা দে	১৯৩
অবগাহন	: সুরজিমা সাহা	১৯৭
অধিকার	: চন্দ্রাণী মুখোপাধ্যায়	১৯৭
সেই দিনগুলি	: ছায়া দাস	১৯৮
আরাম	: শ্রীময়ী ঘোষ	১৯৮
বাংলা গানে বাউলের স্থান	: শিল্পী পাল	১৯৯
সাম্প্রতিককালের সাতটি বই	: ইন্দ্রাণী রুজ	২১৯

না কোন প্রয়োজন  
কেন মনোনয়ন কর  
নাম পশ্চিমবঙ্গ, সেখা  
আবদ্ধ, বিশ্বভ্রাতৃহবো  
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করে এত হানাহানি,  
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সততা, মমতা ব্যানার্জি  
নিজে যত বড়ই নেত  
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বিশ্বাস কর্পূরের মতো  
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ভুল হলে সংশোধন ব

# Life of Women in Upanisad Literature

## Pitas Das

### Abstract

The Upaniṣad era society was male dominated. In such a world full of male domination where all the teachers, the students, the authors and even the Gods were male, it is difficult to figure out the life of women in Upaniṣad era, though there are a number of references found in different scriptures about men-women relationship that illuminate the life of women in the Upanisad literature. It is astonishing to find that around 1400 B.C. India had scholarly women and their glory is still intact in ancient Indian history. Upaniṣad essentially deals with deeper spiritual philosophical and religious ritual information though we can draw a comprehensive picture regarding the life of women if we thoroughly examine the scriptures and verses. My present paper tries to find out the life of women in the Upanisad texts to determine the status of women in the Upaniṣad era.

**Key Words:** Women, Upaniṣad, Philosophy, Debate, Society, Religion, Divine, Education, Financial

### Introduction

Upaniṣad is the part of Veda, to be very specific; it is the conclusion part of Veda. The term 'Upaniṣad' comes from Sanskrit word 'Upa' means near, 'Ni' meaning down, and 'Ṣad' means to sit. The objectives of the Upanisad are threefold—

- a) To develop detachment from material life,
- b) To eradicate ignorance,
- c) To acquire knowledge in Brhma-Vidya or spiritual wisdom.

The literal meaning of Upanisad is to surrender one's complete self to Guru or the teacher for acquiring knowledge. So a Guru is indispensable in order to acquire knowledge in Upanisad<sup>1</sup>. Since the prehistoric times women had always been there beside men hand in hand to fight the battle of uncertainties. The women reared the children while the men went for hunting, in this way they saved the children and they contributed to the existence of the species thereafter. So, women had always been taking a very significant part in the evolution of mankind's. But unfortunately, the position of women in the modern society has declined to an alarming level. We have historical records that tell us about the status of women in the ancient India in a male dominated society was around four thousand years ago. The women enjoyed esteemed position in the society. We have numerous evidences that show us that there were women saints, philosophers, politicians, administrators and teachers. Men and women both participated in all secular and religious occasions.

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Upanisad believes that soul is the ultimate being. Each and every soul takes birth as both male and female in different rebirths. So, people in the Upanisad age had great respect for the women. There are a number of women philosophers, saints, teachers who glorified the womanhood in ancient India<sup>2</sup>.

### Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to understand the status of women in a male dominated society in India in the Upanisad era by minute examination of the verses in Upanisad literature.

### Methodology

The present research work is based on various primary and secondary sources. The method which is adopted in this paper is descriptive, while sometimes expository technique has also been adopted. As this paper deals with the significance of women in the context of religion in Upanisad ages, the information were mainly collected from Bṛhadāranyak Upanisad, Chāndogyopaniṣad, Kenopaniṣad, Taittirīyopaniṣad, Kathopaniṣad, Svetasvatara Upanisad, Aitareya Upanisad, Kauṣītaki Upanisad, Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Praśnopaniṣad, Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad, Īsopaniṣad and other Upanisad.

The necessary data are accumulated from different secondary sources such as Vedas, Manusmṛti, other critical studies and different web sources.

### Women as divine entity

People in the Upanisad age worshipped goddesses like Sarasvatī, Kālī, Umā, Satī, Pārvatī, Gangā and numerous other divine women deities. In Tripuropaniṣad we find goddesses Tripura Sundarī and other goddesses like —Maha Tripura Sundarī, Tripuramba, Tripura Siddha, Tripura Mālinī, Tripurasrī, Tripura Vāsinī, Tripura Sundarī, Tripuresī and Tripura. In Kālikā Upanisad the goddess Kālī and lord Śiva are described as Ardha-Narīsvara means a single entity. Devī Sarasvatī was described as the goddess of wisdom. The great hermit Āśvalāyana gives the description of essence of Mahā Sarasvatī containing ten hymns. In Rāmāyana Sītā is portrayed as the ideal Indian women. In Devī Upanisad we find that the goddess Dūrgā is the Brahma and Prakṛti or matter and Puruṣa or consciousnesses arise from her being<sup>1</sup>. So, we may say that the people of the Upanisad age had a very religious and respectful perspective for women.

### Women and religion in Upanisad text

Women had great importance in the religious matters which is obvious because as I here told

1. Dr. Das, Dev Kumar. Sanskrit Sahityer Itihas. (Kolkata : Swadesh Publication, 1404) : 33-53.
2. Dr. Trivedi, Rajendra Kumar. Upanishadik Kalin Samaj & Samskriti. (Delhi : Parimal Publications, 1986) : 9-160

before that the people of the Upaniṣad era worshipped goddesses or women deities. In a family the wife and the husband are regarded as a single entity. Women had the rights to participate in the religious and secular affairs equally along with their husbands. Even the presence of wife was mandatory for performing any kind of religious rights, in the absence of wife a husband could go to Vānaprastha. A mother in the Upaniṣad family enjoyed esteemed position. She is highly respected and ever worshipped as God 'Mātṛ devo bhava' (Ghosal 82). Humiliation of mother was a very serious offence in the society. Father always wished to have intelligent girl child and in order to do that, as it is prescribed in Bṛihadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad, "the husband and wife would eat rice mixed with sesame seed cooked with clarified butter" (Ghosh, Tattvabhusan and Basu 494).

### Women in the Society

Women in the Upaniṣad age had significant participation in family. Their principal duty was to give birth to children and rear them properly. They were the perfect home makers. In the Upaniṣad period it is often seen that men encouraging their wives to engage themselves in acquiring spiritual knowledge and education. There were numerous examples where learned women are seen taking active part in religious discourses and philosophical debates and other such matters.

The noble women like Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī have been described in the Upaniṣad. Gārgī Vācaknavī was known as a natural philosopher in Upaniṣad verses. Maitreyī was the other prominent woman philosopher. She was the wife of Yājñavalkya. In that age the wife of the Guru was equally respected by the disciples. Men in the Upaniṣad age were allowed doing more than one marriage whereas women could not remarry. As an example Yājñavalkya had two wives named Kātyāyanī and Maitreyī. Kātyāyanī was an average intelligent woman whereas Maitreyī was a philosopher. According to Ṛṣi Bāmadeva a man must not refuse any of his wives in any circumstances. The word 'Bhārya' is used for wives which means something that can be taken care of. The presence of child marriage was prominent in the society—"Uṣasti Cākṛāyana" (Ghosh, Tattvabhusan and Basu 32). In order to get rid of the difficulty regarding the identity of biological father's children were known by their mothers. Thus, we find the names of Satyakāma Jābāla, Gautamī putra and Gārgī putra who were known by their mothers. Women in the Upaniṣad era had the opportunity to learn, arts and crafts like dancing, singing, musical Instrument like Bīṇā (a string instrument) and Dundubhi (a kind of drum instrument) was popular in musical ceremonies.

Regarding financial matters women were less privileged in comparison to the men. An unmarried daughter would receive one fourth of patrimony and they were permitted to keep personal property

1. 112 Upaniṣads. Ed. K. L. Joshi, O. N. Bimali, Bindiya Trivedi. (Delhi : Parimal Publication, Reprint 2016) : 356-359, 476-484.

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in the shape of ornaments, jewelry and dresses. In case the mother died all the children including the daughter would be entitled to enjoy the equal share of the property. But astonishingly a widow was deprived of the property of her husband. Women were found to help their husband in all sorts of works like agriculture and other household activities. The educated women served the society as teachers. There was a reference of grooming by the 'Apsarā' found in Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad—"Taṃ pañcaśtānyapsarasam pratiyanti—sataṃ curnahastāḥ, sataṃ vāsohastāḥ, sataṃ falahastāḥ, sataṃ āñjanahastāḥ, sataṃ mālyahastāḥ. Taṃ brahmā-lamkāreṇa alamkurbanti" (Ghosh, Tattvabhusan and Basu 510).

Women contributed in the literary sphere of Upaniṣad age to a great extent. As we know Gargī was one of the prominent figures in the Upaniṣad age, Vāca and Kānvī were also learned women who held discussions, too, with Yājñavalkya. Maitreyī, wife of Yājñavalkya took part in numerous scholarly discussions. There were two types of scholarly women namely Brahmvādinīs. They never got married and cultured the Veda throughout their lives and Sadyodvahas were also there who studied Vedas till they were married. Women of higher status enjoyed liberty of higher education while a common house-wife received limited education<sup>1</sup>. According to Maitreyī it is important to acquire spiritual knowledge or the knowledge of eternity rather than getting busy in material pursuit.—"Sā hovāca Maitreyī yenāhaṃ nāmṛtā syāṃ kimahaṃ tena kuryāṃ? Yadeva bhagavān Veda tadeva me brūhīti" (Ghosal 541).

### Conclusion

From the above study we may come to conclude that in the Upaniṣad age women held a much respected position in the society. The women of the age could enjoy the liberty of education and practice the spirituals rites just like the men. Women were worshipped as the symbol of God like Durga, Laxmi, Sarasvatī and deities of strength and courage. The mother's were respected. The daughters had rights to enjoy their parental possessions to a great extent. They were the integral part of their husbands helping them in all sorts of works in day to day lives. Even some of the women were teachers.

It is really astonishing to know that in Upaniṣad age women were treated the way they deserve to be treated. The sense of equality among men and women was very prominent. The society was very much conscious about preserving the rights of women. Such was the golden time for Indian women in the age of Upaniṣad. It would really be great if we still practice the same legacy and improve it in our modern society; because a common feature of every prosperous society is that they treat women respectfully and take care of their rights of equality.

1. Ghosh, Mahesh Chandra, Tattvabhusan Sitānath, and Basu Prafulla Kanta. Upaniṣad Trayee. (Kolkata : Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1928) : 374-495.

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