

## CHAPTER 2

### Persona of Women in the Vedas

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*Yasyām bhūtam samabhavat  
yasyām viśvamidaṁ jagat.  
Tāmadya gāthām gāsyāmi  
yā strīnāmuttamam yaśah.<sup>1</sup>*

**T**he present paper proposes to expound and examine the rendering of women in the Vedas. The study is limited in its scope as it pertains to the four Vedic *saṁhitās* only, with some occasional references to the subsequent Vedic literature.

#### I

The Vedas are a rich matrix of knowledge and have a distinguished place in the world literature for various reasons: historical, philosophical, linguistic and otherwise. But they are singularly unparalleled in that they accord the highest esteem to woman as an individual and an equally respectable status as a member of the family and society. The Vedic depiction of women not only portrays their role in family and society, but also their affinity with the cosmic creative process and their identity as symbols of power and glory. Needless to say that the Vedic view of woman is a holistic one in which male and female are integrally complementary, none is better or worse half, they are just two equal halves of the same substance, two aspects of the same reality.<sup>2</sup>

The women are depicted in the Vedas from several perspectives and a framework of the persona of women may be defined through different delineations. But the dignified pictures of woman-power that emerge from these enunciations are uniformly impressive and eternally enviable. However, it must be clarified and emphasized at the outset that a study of this type should be descriptive as well as evaluative, and research and reflection, both are called for herein; we should neither decry our past without deciphering it, nor should we eulogize it, without telescoping out views therein. It is with this idea that we can now analyse the portrayal of women in the Vedas from two angles:

- I. The outer form, i.e., the narrative angle
- II. The inner content, i.e., the semantic angle



## II

From the point of view of narration, any serious reader of Vedic verses might notice, without delving deep into their semantic aspect, that there are three types of expressions available in the Vedas, namely: *First Person*, *Second Person* and *Third Person*. To illustrate this point, we may refer to a statement of Yāska, the famous Vedic etymologist, as follows:

There are three kinds of verses—indirect, direct and spiritual. Out of these three, the indirect ones are those which are used with all the declensions of the noun but in the third person of the verb. The direct type verses are those which have the second person verb and the pronoun 'you' being used therein. The third type, i.e. the spiritual ones are those, where the first person verb is used and pronoun 'I' is employed.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the above, if we now closely look at the form of Vedic expressions, indicating all the three forms which have been suggested by Yāska in his *magnum opus*, *Nirukta*, but in a reverse order, the following points are worth mentioning:

## (A) FIRST PERSON EXPRESSIONS

This type of utterances in the Veda are marked by the pronoun 'I' and have been termed as of an 'autobiographical style' by a modern Vedic scholar.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, we may refer to a hymn of the tenth *mandala* of *Rgveda*, popularly known as *Vāgāmbhṛṇī* hymn.<sup>5</sup> The narrative style of this hymn is autobiographical and it has been stated by Kātyāyana in his Vedic index that the daughter of sage Ambhṛṇa, Vāk Āmbhṛṇī, is eulogizing herself in this particular hymn.<sup>6</sup> But there is no doubt that the verses of this, as well as other Vedic hymns of this sort, can be, and have been interpreted to signify the self-eulogistic statements of a bold, confident and straightforward woman<sup>7</sup> of the Vedic age. Two examples can be quoted here :

I rouse and order battle for the people and pervade heaven and earth.<sup>8</sup>

I make anyone I wish, an aggressive person, or a scholar; a seer or an intelligent one!<sup>9</sup>

Of course, such statements have also been interpreted as indicating the omnipresent, supreme, divine<sup>10</sup> power, by none else than Sāyaṇa himself, but still there is no denying the fact that the same is expressed in feminine gender and first person.

There is another such hymn in the *Rgveda*,<sup>11</sup> where Indrāṇī, the wife of Indra, is eulogizing herself; she not only commands her household but is also the all-powerful source of strength for her husband Indra. She is the daughter of Puloma, and is therefore called Paulomī while her own name is Śacī, which itself signifies action according to Nighaṇṭu.<sup>12</sup> So Indrāṇī, Śacī or Paulomī is a symbol of bravery and courageous action. Just as Indra is known for his valour in the Vedas, similarly his wife commands respect for her strength and status. To quote her own statements from the Veda:

My sons are destroyers of enemies and my daughter is great!<sup>13</sup>

I am the flag of my family and forehead of society!<sup>14</sup>

## (B) SECOND PERSON EXPRESSIONS

There are a whole lot of Vedic verses which seem to be directly addressed to a woman, irrespective of the deity invoked or the seer mentioned therein; these are the statements of



the middle type, i.e. the second person verb is used in such sentences. It is worth quoting a few examples of this type as follows:

- (i) You are generating motion in every living being and understand the voice of each adorer!<sup>15</sup>
- (ii) You are the sister of gods!<sup>16</sup>
- (iii) O the best of mothers, the best of rivers and the best of goddesses, we have become like unadorables, please make us all adorable!<sup>17</sup>
- (iv) O fortunate one! O named as Sitā! you please approach us, we adore you so that you may be both propitious and fruitful for us!<sup>18</sup>
- (v) O steady woman! arise and awaken your greatness!<sup>19</sup>

As is clear from the above, these and many more such statements of Veda are enough to show and establish that woman symbolizes wisdom, power and radiance. It is in this background that she is addressed as a *samrājñī*<sup>20</sup> (illuminant, empress) of the house. The Veda goes even a step further and blesses her as follows:

O wise woman! awake and keep awakened; live as long as hundred years!<sup>21</sup>

### (C) THIRD PERSON EXPRESSIONS

The Vedic *samhitās* abound in such statements where the woman is described as an individual and the style of expression employed there is mostly in third person. Some select expressions in this narrative form may be quoted here which throw sufficient light on the persona of women:

- (i) The Supreme Lord, the mighty *Vṛṣā* as a father, begets a heroic son for the battle while the lady as a mother brings him forth.<sup>22</sup>
- (ii) (a) A woman, who is an accomplisher of praiseworthy deeds is more noble than a man who reverences not the God and does not offer wealth in charity.
- (b) For she discerns one who is wear and worn, one who thirsts and is in want and she sets her mind towards God.
- (c) And I proclaim that the man, her other half, the greedy, is not worth of commendation until he also becomes equally liberal in munificent donations.<sup>23</sup>
- (iii) Let the bright upkeepers of divine knowledge, adorable, pious and gracious, women of substance, be respected by noble men!<sup>24</sup>
- (iv) The mind of woman (being sensitive and delicate), resists control.<sup>25</sup>
- (v) Let these women who are not widows, and have noble husbands, adorn themselves with fragrant cosmetics, cremes and perfumes. Let women adorned with jewels be without tears and free from sorrow, let them ride the carts first!<sup>26</sup>

### III

Another significant feature worth noting from the point of view of expression in the Vedas is that numerous adjectival epithets have been employed therein which denote various aspects of women persona. It is quite interesting to derive the exact meaning of such expressions because it may help in getting a better idea of different roles of women in home and in society. For instance, a woman as wife is denoted by three words: *jāyā*, *jani* and *patnī*. Of



these, *jāyā* is the woman who gives birth to one's progeny, *jani* is the mother of children and *patnī* is the co-partner in the religious duties.<sup>27</sup> What is more important to mention here is that we neither find the word *bhāryā* as a synonym of wife nor *bhartā* as an appellation for husband which mean the dependent one, and the provider, respectively. Hence, we might observe that woman was not held to be a liability in the Vedic age; lack of this single expression in Vedic *saṃhitās* is enough evidence for such an observation. On the other hand, we have many more such terms which go on to prove that the woman was accorded the highest respect in Vedic society. To quote a few such terms as follows:

1. *Aditi*, because she is not dependent (*Nirukta*, 4.22).
2. *Aghnyā*, for she is not to be hurt (YV, 8.43).
3. *Brhatī*, for she is liberal (at heart), (YV, 11.64).
4. *Candrā*, because she is happy (YV, 8.43).
5. *Devakāmā*, since she is pious (AV, 14.1.47).
6. *Devī*, since she is divine (AV, 14.1.45; YV 4.23).
7. *Dhruvā*, for she is firm (YV, 11.64).
8. *Havyā*, because she is worthy of invocation (YV, 8.43).
9. *Idā* for she is worshippable (YV, 8.43).
10. *Jyotā*, because she is illuminating, bright (YV, 8.43).
11. *Kāmyā*, because she is lovable (YV, 8.43).
12. *Kṣamā*, for she is tolerant/indulgent/patient (AV, 12.1.29).
13. *Mahī*, since she is great (YV, 8.43).
14. *Menā*, because she deserves respect (*Nirukta*, 3.21.2).
15. *Nārī*, for she is not inimical to anyone (AV, 14.1.59).
16. *Purandhīh*, for she is munificent (YV, 22.22).
17. *Rantā*, because she is lovely (YV, 8.43).
18. *Rtāvarī*, *Rtachit*, for she is the preserver/fosterer of truth (RV, 2.41.18).
19. *Sañjayā*, since she is victorious (YV, 20.84).
20. *Sarasvatī*, since she is scholarly (YV, 20.84).
21. *Siṃhī*, since she is courageous (YV, 5.12).
22. *Śivā*, for she is benevolent (AV, 14.1.64).
23. *Śivatamā*, since she is the noblest (RV, 10.85.37).
24. *Strī*, since she is modest (RV, 8.39.9; *Nirukta*, 3.21.2).
25. *Subhagā*, because she is fortunate (YV, 8.43).
26. *Subudhā*, for she is knowledgeable (AV, 14.2.75).
27. *Sumaṅgalī*, since she is auspicious (AV, 14.2.26).
28. *Suśevā*, for she is pleasant (AV, 14.2.26).
29. *Suvarcā*, since she is splendid (AV, 14.4.47).
30. *Suyamā*, since she is self-disciplined (AV, 14.2.18).
31. *Syonā*, for she is noble (AV, 14.2.27).
32. *Viriṇī*, since she is mother of brave sons (RV, 10.86.9, 10).
33. *Viśrutā*, since she is learned (YV, 8.43).
34. *Yasasvatī*, for she is glorious (RV, 1.79.1).
35. *Yoṣā*, because she is intermingled with man, she is not separate (*Nirukta*, 3.5.1).

Of course, these words have separate connotations and various shades of their meaning can be exactly grasped only by referring to the context. Still they are quoted here with a view to suggest the respectable status of woman in the Vedic society.<sup>28</sup>



## IV

As regards the content of the Vedas connoting the identity and status of women, we find that there are three levels<sup>29</sup> of their persona suggested therein such as follows:

- (i) The transcendent women in the form of deities invoked in Vedic hymns.
- (ii) The extraordinarily gifted women described as female seers of Vedic hymns.
- (iii) The ordinary women depicted as daughter, wife, mother, sister, etc.

There are more than twenty female deities and as many as twenty-seven female seers in the *Rgveda* alone.<sup>30</sup> These deities are described as personified female charm, grace and freedom, e.g. goddess *Aditi* is etymologically explained as unbinding freedom of boundlessness, she is the mother of gods.<sup>31</sup> In fact, she denotes the endless expanse of the infinite cosmic power. Similarly, *Vāc*, who is the seer as well as a deity signifies the feminine counterpart of the creating and annihilating God. Her hymn is interpreted as in honour of the primal energy of life and is made the basis of Śāktism. She is the energy drawing forth from *Paramātman*, the whole universe from *ākāśa* downwards.<sup>32</sup> *Indrāṇī*, the wife of Indra, who is also the seer as well as deity of a Ṛgvedic hymn, personifies a brave, bold and glorious woman who proclaims that:

I am the mighty wife of Indra and the friend of Maruts, while this noxious being thinks that I am a weak and timid person.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, the female deities and the lady seers of the Veda are endowed with all the tender or terrific traits of a woman and that is why the pictures of *Saraswatī*, *Uṣā* or *Prthvī* and all other Vedic goddesses are so lively that they are able to imprint the readers' minds with their impressive images.

But it is with regard to the third category of women stated above, that the persona of women as an individual is actually concerned. Viewed from this point of view, many more rich, refined and chiselled feminine images emerge from the Vedas in several shades, prominent among them being the following:

- (A) Physical charm
- (B) Intellectual calibre
- (C) Familial roles
- (D) Social status
- (E) Spiritual strength.

## V

In fact, the conception of womanhood in the Vedas is so comprehensive and impressive that right from the beautiful exterior and up to the innermost spiritual strength, both feminine grace and power are portrayed perfectly, of course through the pictures of goddesses only. To illustrate the first point, a reference to the delineation of dawn, i.e. the goddess *Uṣā*, in the Vedas will be the best. Vedic *Uṣā* is the personification of utter feminine charm and beauty. As many as twenty hymns of *Rgveda* alone are exclusively addressed to her, which constitute the finest Vedic poetry as well as the most beautiful portrayal of feminine charm. She is described as bright and resplendent in her form, the lady of the light and the radiant



mover of the sweet sounds with wealth of horses and cows.<sup>34</sup> This brilliant daughter of the heavens is a charming, graceful lady,<sup>35</sup> a maiden decked by her mother, showing her form.<sup>36</sup>

*Uṣā* is even linked to a professional dancer who arrays herself in gay, embroidered garments and lays bare her breasts just as a cow yields her udder.<sup>37</sup> The unfailing charm of *Uṣā* is delicately woven as of an ancient goddess, ever young, born again and again, decking her beauty with the self-same raiment,<sup>38</sup> clothed in light, the maiden appears in the eastern horizon and unveils her maddening charm<sup>39</sup> to her beholders.

*Uṣā*, the immortal goddess has shone in earlier days, she shines today and she will shine hereafter, never aging.<sup>40</sup> Like a shining silver wheel, she revolves ever anew<sup>41</sup> and ever shortening the ages of men, she shines forth, the last of the dawns, that have always gone, the first of those to come.<sup>42</sup> Effulgent in peerless beauty, she does not give her light with discrimination but she floods the entire world, all small and great, with her brilliant torch.<sup>43</sup> Rising resplendent as from a bath, showing her charms, she approaches with light, dispelling darkness.<sup>44</sup>

To quote Macdonell, "Uṣās is the most graceful creation of Vedic poetry and there is no more charming figure in the descriptive religious lyrics of any other literature. The brightness of her form has not been obscured by priestly speculation nor has the imagery as a rule been marred by referenes to the sacrifice."<sup>45</sup>

The physical charm and feminine grace of a woman is so intricately woven in the Vedic diction and depiction of female goddesses that the poetic appeal of Vedas is also enhanced substantially. Besides the beautiful goddess of dawn, *Uṣā*, we can indulge in the beautifully adorned bride, *Sūryā*, who is wearing a lovely garment, embellished with the *gāthā* song. She had decorated herself in such a way that "thought was the pillow of her couch, and sight the unguent of her eyes, heaven and earth were her treasure-box, when *Sūryā* went to her husband."<sup>46</sup> The sage who is *Sūryā* herself, invites everyone to behold the comely forms of *Sūryā*, her border cloth and her headwear, and her garment triply parted, which have been sanctified by the priest.<sup>47</sup>

## VI

Vedic goddess *Saraswatī* is the perfect feminine personification of mental capabilities: wisdom, imagination and creativity. She is depicted as the purifying power, the source-fountain of flowing knowledge, the mighty ocean of intellect.<sup>48</sup> She is the inspirer of sweet words, impeller of noble thoughts, and the bearer of oblations.<sup>49</sup>

In this regard, it is worth strating here that Vedic *Saraswatī* has usally been interpreted as a river or as the goddess of speech; but there have also been Vedic interpreters, who have, on the basis of Vedic evidence itself,<sup>50</sup> presented her as a living, learned woman.<sup>51</sup> No doubt such interpretations should be given more priority and publicity, since they are prone to appeal to the modern, rational mindset and can also be linked to the women's education in Vedic times. Several epithets used for *Saraswatī* in Vedic verses are worth quoting<sup>52</sup> here from this point of view:

1. *Akawārī*, i.e. the faultless female (RV, 6.61.4).
2. *Anumati*, i.e. the assent-giving (AV, 5.7.4.).
3. *Amba*, i.e. the mother (RV, 2.41.16).
4. *Ambitame*, i.e. the best of mothers (RV, 2.41.6).
5. *Avitrī*, i.e. the protectress (RV, 7.96.2).



6. *Asuryā*, i.e. the most powerful (RV, 7.96).
7. *Āpaprūṣī*, i.e. the radiant one (RV, 6.61.11).
8. *Upastutyā*, i.e. the glorifiable (AV, 6.61.13).
9. *Úsatī*, i.e. the eager (RV, 5.43.11).
10. *Rtāvarī*, i.e. the truthful (RV, 2.41.8).
11. *Kanyā*, i.e. the lovely lass (RV, 6.49.7).
12. *Gṛnānā*, i.e. the adorable (RV, 7.69.3).
13. *Gaurī*, i.e. the divine female (RV, 1.164.11).
14. *Ghṛtācī*, i.e. the one who offers (RV, 5.43.11).
15. *Ghorā*, i.e. the strict disciplinarian (RV, 6.61.17).
16. *Cikituṣā*, i.e. the inquisitive (AV, 6.61.13).
17. *Citrāyuh*, i.e. the graceful (RV, 6.49.7).
18. *Cetanī sumatīnām*, i.e. the encourager of truthful ones (YV, 20.85).
19. *Codayitrī sūnṛtānām*, i.e. the inspirer of sweet speech (Ibid.).
20. *Jāgrvi*, i.e. always awakened, alert (Ibid.).
21. *Jujusānā*, i.e. the caring one (RV, 5.43.11).
22. *Tanūpā*, i.e. the protector of body (YV, 21.130).
23. *Tanyatu*, i.e. the knowledgeable (RV, 10.65.13).
24. *Triṣadhassthā*, i.e. abiding in all the three levels (RV, 6.61.12).
25. *Devitame*, i.e. the best of goddesses (RV, 2.41.16).
26. *Dhiyāvasuḥ*, i.e. the source of inspiration (RV, 1.4.10).
27. *Dhīnāmavitṛī*, i.e. protectress of knowledge (RV, 1.61.4).
28. *Dhr̥ṣatī*, i.e. the strong one (RV, 2.30.8).
29. *Pāwakā*, i.e. the purifier (RV, 1.3.10).
30. *Pāwamānī*, i.e. the propitiating (YV, 34.55).
31. *Pāwīrawī*, i.e. the auspicious (RV, 6.49.7).
32. *Pārāvataḥnī*, i.e. the underminer of both her rivals (RV, 6.61.2).
33. *Priyā*, i.e. the beloved (RV, 6.61.10).
34. *Priyatame*, i.e. the most beloved (RV, 7.95.5).
35. *Bṛhatī*, i.e. the vast in capacity (RV, 6.61.13).
36. *Bhadrā*, i.e. the noble one (RV, 6.96.4).
37. *Madhumatī*, i.e. the sweet-worded (AV, 5.7.4).
38. *Marutwatī*, i.e. the resplendent (RV, 2.30.8).
39. *Marutsakhā*, i.e. the friend of vitality (RV, 7.96.2).
40. *Yajatā*, i.e. the noble one (RV, 5.43.11).
41. *Yasobhaginī*, i.e. the sister of fame (YV, 2.20).
42. *Vardhayantī*, i.e. the cherisher (RV, 6.61.12).
43. *Vāvṛdhānā*, i.e. the sweeping in majesty (RV, 7.59.1).
44. *Vājinīvatī*, i.e. full of wisdom (RV, 6.61.4).
45. *Viśvatūrtih*, i.e. one who rears the world (RV, 2.3.8).
46. *Virapatnī*, i.e. damsel of the brave (RV, 6.49.7).
47. *Vṛtraghñī*, i.e. destroyer of obstructions (RV, 6.61.7).
48. *Vṛtrahā*, i.e. killer of evil forces (RV, 9.3.10).
49. *Śagmā*, i.e. the melodious one (RV, 5.43.11).
50. *Śatrujayā*, i.e. suppressing her foes (RV, 2.30.8).
51. *Śantamā*, i.e. bestower of happiness (AV, 2.30.8).
52. *Śivā*, i.e. the propitious (AV, 7.41.3).



53. *Śuci*, i.e. the pious (RV, 7.95.2).
54. *Śubhre*, i.e. the bright (RV, 7.95.6).
55. *Sakhyā*, i.e. the friendly female (RV, 6.61.14).
56. *Sajoṣā*, i.e. accompanied with her dear associates (RV, 6.49.7).
57. *Saptadhātu*, i.e. comprising seven aspects (RV, 6.61.2).
58. *Saptathī*, i.e. the seventh stream (RV, 7.36.6).
59. *Saptasvasā*, i.e. having seven sisters (RV, 6.61.10).
60. *Sādhayantī dhiyam*, i.e. perfecting our intelligence (RV, 2.3.8).
61. *Sindhumātā*, i.e. mother of the ocean of milk (RV, 7.95.2).
62. *Sujusṭā*, i.e. well propitiated (RV, 6.61.10).
63. *Sudughā*, i.e. liberal in providing (YV, 20.75).
64. *Subhagā*, i.e. the blessed one (RV, 7.95.4).
65. *Sumṛḍhikā*, i.e. the gracious one (AV, 7.68.3).
66. *Suyamā*, i.e. the tractable (RV, 9.81.4).
67. *Stuvānā*, i.e. the glorified (RV, 7.96.3).
68. *Haviṣmatī*, i.e. supplying abundantly (YV, 20.74).
69. *Hiraṇyavartani*, i.e. traversing on a golden path (RV, 6.61.7).

As is clear, the above terms in Vedic verses also substantiate the view expressed by Dayananda Saraswati, who interprets Vedic verses on two levels: the transcendental as well as the empirical. Evidently, the empirical interpretation of Vedic verses will be more acceptable and relevant today than the mere ritualistic or highly spiritualistic ones. The present paper is clearly concerned with an issue which is of social significance and hence empirically relevant; therefore this depiction of Vedic *Sarasvatī* as an enlightened woman is highly called for.

## VII

The Vedic woman is depicted in several familial roles also, such as the daughter, the bride, the wife, the mother, and the sister. The Vedic society was definitely family-oriented and woman was the undisputed centre of household in the words of Veda itself : *Jāyedaṣṭam*.<sup>53</sup> She is the equal partner in all the familial matters and an equal owner of the house; the Vedic term *dampatī*<sup>54</sup> is in dual number and it suggests an equal status for both, the husband and the wife.

However, it must also be mentioned here that we do find a frequent desire for the male child in the Vedic *saṁhitās* but there is nowhere an explicit expression for the desire of a daughter's birth in the Vedas. Nevertheless, there are several references in the *saṁhitās* which clearly convey that the daughters were lovingly caressed and affectionately brought up by the parents. There is no evidence to show that a girl child was regarded as an unwanted baby, rather we have one statement expressing pride of a mother who has an illustrious daughter<sup>55</sup> and also a prayer for the birth of a scholarly daughter.<sup>56</sup> Hence it may be deduced that the birth of a daughter was not a source of consternation to the family in the Vedic age.<sup>57</sup> This may also be corroborated from an internal evidence where mention is made of twin sisters and their fond relation with the parents.<sup>58</sup> We can also trace several terms to denote the young girl or the daughter such as *kanyā*, *kanā*, *kanīnakā*, *duhitā*, *putrī* and *kumārī*, etc.<sup>59</sup>

The young girl, when she reaches her marriageable age, and chooses a husband for herself, adorns herself as a bride. The depiction of a lovely bride, her adornment and the



marriage ceremony itself is a rare poetical treasure in the Sūryā-hymn of the *Rgveda*.<sup>60</sup> The verses and the rituals based on this hymn are still prevalent in the Vedic Hindu marriage. The blessings bestowed on the lovely bride in the Veda speak volumes about the women and their auspicious place in the family. The young bride enters the home of her husband and acquires the status of wife, which is the most important aspect of a woman's personality in Vedic view. The wife is designated as *patnī*<sup>61</sup>, since the husband cannot perform any religious rite without her<sup>62</sup> by his side. That is why she is termed as *dharmapatnī* while the husband is merely a *grhapati*.<sup>63</sup> The respectable religious status given to a wife in the Vedic family is also suggestive of the significance of marriage in Vedic view, it is not just a contract or a compromise but a sacrament, a synthesis of spirits and harmony in thoughts,<sup>64</sup> which lies at the heart of Vedic marriage. Both husband and wife are essentially complementary to each other, they work for the same goal—the bearing and rearing of children and carrying forward the chain of continuity. They have equal rights as well as duties for the welfare of society at large, there is no difference at all between them.<sup>65</sup>

This fact is very well reflected in the Vedic marriage ceremony itself where friendship is solicited between the husband and wife.<sup>66</sup> During *Saptapadī*, an important ceremony in the marriage rituals, the bridegroom says to the bride: *Sakha saptapadī bhava*<sup>67</sup> (take the seventh step along with me for friendship between both of us). It clearly shows that in the household as well as in the society, the wife had a complementary role of a friend to her husband. In fact, marriage in Vedic view is not just an external relation undertaken for physical pleasures or material comforts, but an inseparable bond which is designated as an *āśrama*<sup>68</sup> meaning total functional dedication to the cause of social and religious duties wherein the wife had a prime position and shared an equal status with her husband; she was really a *sahacārī* and not an *anucarī*.

The respectable wife attains a much more elevated status in Vedic depiction, once she bears progeny and becomes the mother. Motherhood is the most coveted position of women persona in the Vedas as well as later Hindu literature. Several Vedic goddesses have been personified as mother and given an adorable reverence, the most popular of them being that of the mother earth and her son: *Mātā bhūmih putro' ham pṛthivyāh*.<sup>69</sup> The pictures of daughter and sister are also available in the Vedas and the relations of brother-sister,<sup>70</sup> father-daughter, mother-son etc. are all enunciated here. They throw sufficient light on the various familial roles played by women in Vedic society.

## VIII

This brings us to the point of society, larger than the family. Women in the Vedic society enjoyed a lot of freedom and were not secluded by *pardah* or prohibited by any such custom; the fact can be corroborated from several Vedic statements such as: *Yoṣā sabhāvati*,<sup>71</sup> i.e. the woman does go to the assembly or the *sabhā*; she also addresses the learned gathering: *Vasīnī tvam vidathamāvadāsi*.<sup>72</sup>

As stated earlier, the women were given priority in riding the vehicles and enjoyed certain privileges such as *pūrvahūti*,<sup>73</sup> i.e. women also went to participate in the social festivities like *samana*,<sup>74</sup> a general popular festivity to which women went to enjoy themselves.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the mention of a special type of marriage, in which the young maiden could herself choose a husband,<sup>76</sup> could not have been possible in a society where women were denied liberty. We also find mention of a woman, named Viśpalā, who accompanied her husband in the battle field<sup>77</sup> and many more Vedic verses where woman is described as *simhī*,<sup>78</sup> i.e. the tigress or



the fearless, courageous person. All these references go on to prove that the persona of women in Vedic delineation is both of a delicate female and a strong woman, an upholder of familial and social norms.

## IX

The most significant aspect of the persona of women in Vedic society is that she is held to be morally pious, spiritually powerful and creatively potent,<sup>79</sup> so much so that she is elevated to the level of creator himself.<sup>80</sup> From this point of view, woman is not simply a physical form or merely part of a biological species but a spirit so strong that the whole cosmos pulsates around her and she permeates the whole universe. In many of the hymns addressed to Vedic Goddesses such as *Vāc*, *Aditi*, *Bhūmi*, *Ilā*, *Saraswatī* or *Bhāratī*, one can easily discern that the feminine force is being conceived as an emphatic expression of the unity of the cosmos. The conception of these female deities is identified with the Supreme Spirit, the universal soul and the guiding principle in the scheme of creation. For example, *Vāc*, the goddess of speech, herself boasts that she is mighty in her grandeur and appears from beyond the heavens and from behind the earth.<sup>81</sup> There are many more Vedic goddesses who are in fact personified abstractions, like *śraddhā*,<sup>82</sup> *anumati*,<sup>83</sup> *aramati*,<sup>84</sup> *āraṇyānī*,<sup>85</sup> *nadyah*<sup>86</sup> and *apsarases*.<sup>87</sup> Their depiction in the Vedas is quite convincingly that of an equally respectable, adorable feminine and capable persona, not only on the physical plane but also in the spiritual sphere.

## X

What emanates from the above short delineation is that the persona of women in the Vedas is representative of a totally cohesive identity and perfect parity with the male. It is in fact a model of complete complementarity and cooperation rather than competitiveness or confrontation. In other words, the Vedic view is an elaborate and extensive, but subtle and profound paradigm of woman-power without disempowering the other half of humanity. In brief, it may be said that the comprehensiveness of Vedic vision of women is of great value in helping us to get out of the conflict models that envelope all contemporary discussions on the place of women in human society.

To conclude, I would like to quote a contemporary woman writer, Clarisse Bader:

Has not the time arrived, we repeat, to refresh ourselves from more life-giving and generous sources. And only India has the honour of affording such sources. There is a sense of duty dominating all affections, a feeling of respect for the family life, a love for one's neighbour, a charity, including even animals in its tender effusion, a spirit of sacrifice—such are the forms of a literature, which aims not only at imagination but in strengthening the heart.<sup>88</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Pārashara Grhyasūtra*, 1.7.2.
2. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.3.
3. "Tāstrīvidhā ṛcaḥ. Parokṣakṛtāḥ pratyakṣakṛtāḥ ādhyātmikyaśca. Tatra parokṣakṛtāḥ sarvābhirnāmavibhaktībhīrvyajyante prathamapurusaīścākhyātasya. Atha pratyakṣakṛtā madhyamapurusaḥ. -Tvamiti ca sarvanāmnā. Athādhyātmikya uttamapurusaḥ. ahamiti caiteṇa sarvanāmnā."—*Nirukta*, 7.1.



4. Ramnath Vedalankara, *Vedon Ki Varnana-Sailiyān*, Haridwar: Gurukul Kangri, 1976, pp. 116-119.
5. *Rgveda*, 10.125.1-8.
6. *Vāgāmbhrīṇī tuṣṭavātmānam*.—*Sarvānukramaṇī*, quoted by Sāyaṇa in his commentary on the hymn.
7. Ramnath Vedalankara, *Vaidik Nārī*, New Delhi: Samarpaṇa Shodha Sansthana, Samvat 2042, pp. 23, 72.
8. *Rgveda*, 10.125.6.
9. "Yam kāmāye tam tamugram kṛṇomi  
tam brahmāṇam tamṛṣim tam sumedhām."—*Rgveda*, 10.125.5.
10. Sāyaṇa in interpretation of the above.
11. *Rgveda*, 10.159.1-6.
12. *Nighaṇṭu*, 2.1.
13. "Mama putrā śatruhaṇo atho me duhitā virāt."—*Rgveda*, 10.159.3.
14. "Aham keturaham mūrdhā."—*Rgveda*, 10.159.2.
15. "Viśvam jīvam carase bodhayantī viśvasya vācamavidanmanāyoḥ."—*Rgveda*, 1.92.9.
16. "Devānāmāsi svasā."—*Rgveda*, 2.32.6.
17. "Ambitame nadītame devitame saraswati  
Apraśastā iva smasi praśastimamba naskṛdhi."—*Rgveda*, 2.41.6.
18. "Aroācī subhage bhava sīte vandāmahe tvā  
Yathā naḥ subhaga sasi yathā naḥ suphalā sasi."—*Rgveda*, 4.57.6.
19. "Uthāya bhṛhālī bhavadutiṣṭha dhruvā tvam."—*Yajurveda*, 11.64.
20. (i) "Samrājīṇī śvasūre bhava samrājīṇī śvasūvam bhava  
Nanāndari samrājīṇī bhava, samrājīṇī adhi devīṣu."—*Rgveda*, 10.85.46.  
(ii) "Yathā sindhurnadīnām sāmrajyam suśuve vṛṣā  
Evā tvam samrājīṇyedi patyurastam paretya."—*Atharvaveda*, 14.1.43.
21. "Prabhudhyasva subudhā budhyamānā  
Dīrghāyutvāya śataśaradāya."—*Atharvaveda*, 14.2.75.
22. "Vṛṣā jajāna vṛṣaṇam raṇāya  
Tamu cinnārī naryam susūva."—*Rgveda*, 7.20.5.
23. (a) "Uta tvā strī śaśīyasi pūmso bhavati vasyasi  
Adevatrādarādhasaḥ."—*Rgveda*, 5.61.6.  
(b) "Vi yā jānati jasurim vitusyantam vikāminam. Devatrā kṛnute manah."  
(c) "Uta gha nemo astutah pumānī iti bruve paṇih. Sa vairdeya itsamah."—*Rgveda*, 5.61.7-8.
24. "Viśrayantām rītvīdhaḥ pra yai devebhyo mahūḥ  
Pāvahāsaḥ puruṣpṛho dvāro devīrasaścataḥ."—*Rgveda*, 1.142.6.
25. "Strīyā aśāyam manah."—*Rgveda*, 8.33.17.
26. "Imā nārīravīdhavāḥ supatnīrāñjanena sarpiṣā sam viśantu  
Anaśravo' namīvaḥ suratnā ārohantu janayo yonimagra."—*Ibid.* 10.18.7.
27. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, *Women in the Vedic Age*, Bombay: Bhāratīya Vidyā Bhawan, 1969, p. 30.
28. Shashiprabha Kumar, *Facets of Indian Philosophical Thought*, Delhi: Vidyānidhi Prakashan, 1999, pp. 32-33.
29. B.S. Upadhyaya, *Women in Rgveda*, New Delhi: S. Chand Publishers, 1974, pp. 1-41.
30. *Bṛhaddevatā* of Śaunaka (ed.) Macdonell, A.A. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965 (Second Issue), (Part I, 128-129; 2.82-84) p. 18.
31. *Nirukta*, 4.22.
32. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1977 (Xth Impression), Vol. I, p. 487.
33. "Avīrāmiva māmāyam śarārurabhimanyate  
Utāhamasmī virīṇīndīpatnī marutsakhā."—*Rgveda*, 10.86.9.
34. *Rgveda*. 1.92.4, 1.48.10.
35. 'Divo duhitā.' *Ibid.* 1.113.7, 1.124.3.
36. "Susānkāśā māṛmṛṣteva yośāvīstanvam kṛṇuṣe drśekam."—*Rgveda*, 1.123.11.
37. "Adhi peśānsi vapate nṛtūrivāpōṇate vakṣa usreva varjaham."—*Rgveda*, 1.92.4.
38. "Punah punarjāyamānā purāṇī samānam varṇamabhi śumbhamānā—1.92.10.  
Śvaghāva kṛtnurūija āmimānā martasya devī jarayantyāyur."—*Rgveda*.
39. (i) "Eṣā divo duhitā pratyadarśī jyotirvasānā samanā purastāt."—*Rgveda*, 1.124.4.  
(ii) "Uṣa adarśī śumdhyavo na vakṣo nodhā ivāvīrakṛta priyāṇī."



40. (i) "Śaśvatpuroṣā vyuvāṣa devyatho adyedañ vyāvo maghoni".  
(ii) "Atho vyucchāduttarañ anu dyūnajarāmṛtā carati svadhābhīḥ."—*Rgveda*, 1.113.13,15.
41. "Samānamanyañ caraṇīyamāsā cakramiva navyasyā vavṛtsva."—*Rgveda*, 1.61.3.
42. "Amivati daiṛyāni vratāni praminatī maṇṣyā yugāni  
Iyusīnāmupamā śaśvatīnāmāyatīnām prathamoṣā vyadyaut."—*Rgveda*, 1.124.2.
43. *Rgveda*, 1.124.6.
44. *Rgveda*, 5.80.5,6.
45. A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002 (Reprint), p. 46.
46. *Rgveda*, 10.85.6,7.
47. *Rgveda*, 10.85.35.
48. "Maho arṇaḥ sarasvatī pracetayati ketunā  
Dhiyo viśvā virājati."—*Rgveda*, 1.4.12.
49. "Codayitrī sūmṛtānām cetantī sumatīnām  
yajñam dadhe sarasvatī."—*Rgveda*, 1.4.11.
50. Dayananda Saraswati, in his *bhāṣyā* on *Rgveda*, 6.49.7, 2.141.16; *Yajurveda*, 9.27; 19/18; 19.82; 20.64.
51. "Yoṣā vai Sarasvatī."—*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.5.1.11.
52. Shashiprabha Kumar, "Vaidik Sarasvatī: Viduṣī Nārī ke Roop Mein", *Vaidika Anusilana*, Delhi: Vidyanidhi Prakashan, 1998, pp. 140–142.
53. *Rgveda*, 3.53.4.
54. *Rgveda*, 1.92.10, 8.31.5.
55. *Rgveda*, 10.159.3.
56. *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.4.18.
57. A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1956, p. 3.
58. *Rgveda*, 1.185.5.
59. *Rgveda*, 9.67.10; 4.32.33; 10.159.3; 8.31.8; *Atharvaveda*, 10.3.20.
60. *Rgveda*, 10.85.6, 7, 35.
61. *Rgveda*, 1.72.5; 5.44.5; *Yajurveda*, 15.50; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 5.2.1.10; *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, 2.2.2.6.
62. "Ayajñīyo vā eṣa yo' patnīkaḥ."—*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 3.3.3.1.
63. "Patnī tvamasi dharmānāham gṛhapatistava."—*Atharvaveda*, 14.1.51.
64. "Samañjantu viśve deva samāpo hṛdayāni nau  
sam mātarīsvā samu dhātā samu deṣtrī dadhātu nau."—*Rgveda*, 10.85.47.
65. "Jāyāpatyorna vibhāgo vidyate. Pāṇigrahaṇādadhi sahatvañ karmasu. Tathā puṇyaphaleṣu ca. Dravyaparigraheṣu ca."—*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 2.6.14.16–19.
66. *Rgveda*, 4.16.10; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 7.18; *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, 1.7.19.
67. *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, 1.7.19.
68. *Rgveda*, 10.85.47; *Atharvaveda*, 7.3.6.1; *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa*, 1.3.9.
69. *Atharvaveda*, 12.1.12.
70. *Rgveda*, 1.124.7, 4.55.5.
71. *Rgveda*, 1.167.3.
72. *Rgveda*, 10.85.26–27.
73. "Patnīva pūrvahūtiñ vāvṛdhadyā."—*Rgveda*, 1.122.2.
74. "Samhotrañ sma purā nārī samanāñ vāva gachhati."—*Rgveda*, 10.86.10.
75. Pischel, Quoted in *Vedic Index* Vol. II, A.A., Macdonell, A.B., Keith, p. 473. (Hindi Translation by Ramkumar Rai) Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan, 1962.
76. *Rgveda*, 10.27.12; 10.85.4.
77. *Rgveda*, 1.116.15.
78. *Yajurveda*, 5.10.12.
79. "Suddhā pūtā yoṣito yajñīyā imāḥ."—*Atharvaveda*, 11.1.17.18.
80. "Strī hi brahmā bahūvitha."—*Rgveda*, 8.33.9.
81. "Paro divā para enā pṛthivyāḥ."—*Rgveda*, 10.125.8
82. *Rgveda*, 10.151.1.
83. *Rgveda*, 10.59.6; 10.167.3.
84. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 120.
85. *Rgveda*, 10.146.1.
86. *Rgveda*, 10.64.9, 10.75.1, 2, 4, 5, 6.
87. *Rgveda*, 10.123.5.
88. Clarisse Bader, in Preface to her *Women in Ancient India* (trans.) Mary E.R. Martin, Varanasi: Chowkhambha, 1965.