

# Knowledge and Women

February 20, 2017

## Abstract

Since ancient times, women have been held at an esteemed position in terms of knowledge. This paper tries to address the role of women who have raised the scientific levels to great heights both from the Western and Indian Perspective. From the western viewpoint, there has been evidences of Greeks and Romans worshipping Goddess Athena and Minerva, respectively. On a similar note, Indians have regarded Goddess Saraswati as the mother of knowledge and wisdom. The intellectual calibre of Indian women has been explicitly stated in the epics and puranas. For example, there is a mention in Mahabharata indicating the managerial capabilities of Draupadi. These characters, albeit mythological portray the essence of the limitless capabilities of women.

Starting from the historic times, the western world has seen women professionals. Some of them are Merit-Ptah the first known physician from Ancient Egypt, Agamede the first female healer from Greece, Hypatia first known woman mathematician, Charlotta Frolich first female historian, Marie Curie first woman to win a nobel prize, Laura Bassi first woman to earn a university chair (18th century), Ada Lovelace first woman programmer, Grace Hopper woman who invented first compiler and Mary Anning Paleontologist.

A few remarkable Indians are Avvaiyar, who was one of the greatest poets of all times, Gargi and Maithreyi, who are mentioned in the Upanishad texts, the saint poet Mirabhai, Leelavathi, the mathematician and astrologer, Razia Sultana a monarch, the south asian physicians Kadambini Ganguly and Anandhi Gopal Joshi, the meteorologist Anna Manni, Sarla Takral who was the first woman to fly an aircraft and in the present scenario Dr. Shantha, who is heading the Adayar Cancer Institute.

This paper explores the effort and dedication put forth by the aforementioned personalities with a hope that it will create an inspiration to the present generation female individuals

## 1 Introduction

## 2 Case-Studies

### 2.1 Historical Period

In Vedic period, three Goddesses namely, Illa, Saraswati and Mahi has been quoted for the purpose of acquiring knowledge as [1]:

“May Bharati come speeding to our sacrifice and Ila hither awakening our consciousness in human wise, and Saraswati, — three goddesses sit on this blissful seat, doing well the Work.” The image of Goddess (Figure 1) portrays a musical instrument called Veena holding in two hands, a book in one hand and a tiny garland in another hand. These represent music, knowledge and inner bliss, respectively.



Figure 1: Goddess Sarawati

The Vedic period has seen intellectuals like Gargi and Maithreyi. Gargi Vachnaknavi, who lived during 700 BC was honored as a great philosopher [1]. The debate between Gargi and Yajnavalkya has been specified in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, in which Gargi puts forth a series of thought provoking questions to Yajnavalkya. A few such questions from this debate is given below.

*Yajnavalkya , “ said she, “if all this is pervaded by water, by what, pray, is water pervaded?”*  
*“By air, O Gargi.”, replied Yajnavalkya.*  
*“By what, pray, is air pervaded?”*  
*“By the sky, O Gargi.”*  
*“By what is the sky pervaded?”*

These questions clearly indicate scientific thought process of Indian Women.

On a similar front, in the Indian Epic Mahabharatha, there are instances of women empowerment. Draupadi is known to have managed the people and wealth in the palace [2].

In South India, around First or Second Century A.D. there was a Tamil Poet called Avvaiyaar. She can be considered as one of the pioneers in Science also, because she specifies about the information of energy of atom in one of her poems as:

*“aNuvaith thuLaiththu Ez kadalai puguththi”*  
*Energy of seven seas within a pierced atom*

## 2.2 Medieval Period

## 2.3 Modern Period

## 2.4 Current Era

## 3 Analysis

## 4 Conclusion

## References

- [1] Ahuja, M.L. 2011. Women in Indian Mythology Rupa Publications
- [2] Kisari Mohan Ganguli The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translation from original Sanskrit Text <http://sacred-texts.com/hin/maha/index.htm>