

Vedanta and Gender Justice: A Conceptual Analysis

Dr. Ghazala Rizvi

ICSSR Post Doctoral Fellow

Centre for Philosophy

School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Email: ghazalarizvi99@gmail.com

Abstract

As a matter of fact, Vedanta philosophy underlies the vision of gender justice by recognizing that men and women and all beings are divine in their essential nature. It states that Brahman is the only reality and the individual souls are non-different from Brahman. Furthermore, it encompasses men and women who are essentially the ever-pure, gender-free self and sexless Atman. This view provides the value of freedom, equality, dignity and the sacredness of entire humanity irrespective of men and women. However, women's dignity is frequently violated on grounds of gender or sexuality and is situated in different historical, religious, cultural and political contexts across the world and India is no exception from it. Moreover, the conflict between cultural practices and the violation of women's rights has been prevalent as a social phenomenon. Now the question is- What types of philosophical vision are required in the socio-cultural pluralistic societies like India where women's subordination is legitimated by socially and legally? How far do Vedantic principles play an appropriate role in promoting gender justice? In order to address these questions to attain gender justice, the paper attempts to identify the causes of unequal treatment in a country where rich philosophical and mythological traditions accord a status of absolute equality to women. Finally, the paper analyses the role of Vedanta namely, the Upanishad, the Brahma-Sutra, the Gita and the Neo-Vedanta philosophy of Vivekananda in promoting women's rights, autonomy, agency and capabilities to substantiate the notion of gender justice.

Keywords

Vedanta, Gender Justice, Brahman, Atman, Dignity, Agency, Autonomy, Capability, Upanishad, Brahma-Sutra, Gita, Neo-Vedanta, Mahabharata, Women.

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Dr. Ghazala Rizvi

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“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing”

- Swami Vivekananda

Introduction

Vedantic philosophy underlies the vision of gender justice by recognizing that men and women and all beings are divine in their essential nature. It has originated from two Sanskrit words – *Veda* (wisdom) and *Anta* (end) which means ‘end of wisdom’ and ‘supreme wisdom’¹. The special feature of Vedanta is that it is free from all sectarian and limited ideas and for that reason, it has scope for infinite tolerance and human equality irrespective of gender, class and social status. It encompasses *Brahman* as the only reality and the individual soul which includes men and women is non-different from *Brahman*. In another way, it recognizes men and women are essentially the ever pure; gender-free self and sexless *Atman*. Furthermore, it provides the value of freedom, equality, dignity and the sacredness of human beings irrespective of gender, caste, social and class discrimination, etc. In this way, Vedanta philosophy gives us an insight into gender justice by recognizing that *Atman* or Soul has no sex or gender. However, human women’s dignity is frequently violated on grounds of gender and majority of women who are situated in different historical, religious, cultural and political contexts across the world fail to enjoy the legal, political, social and economic status enjoyed by men. The discrimination and the deprived situation of women are due to cultural traditions and practices that mold their lives. The conflict between cultural practices and the violation of women’s rights has been prevalent as a social phenomenon. Then the question arises– are we going to minimize gender discrimination and bring gender equality under the purview of human rights (*Adhikara*) and human duties (*dharma*) either, or let the cultural tradition decide their lives? Why after so many years of modernization and its principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, gender justice still appears to be an unresolved agenda? What types of philosophical vision are required in the socio-cultural pluralistic societies like India where women’s subordination is legitimated by socially and legally? What sort of support do women’s capacities demand from society? Can Vedantic ideals serve the very foundation of a gender-just society? How far Vedantic conception of *Atman* addresses gender discrimination and ensures equality for women? In order to address these questions to attain gender justice, the paper attempts to identify the causes of unequal treatment in the country where Vedanta and its philosophical traditions accord a status of absolute equality between men and women. The Vedanta philosophy emerges out of the *Prasthanatrayi* which consists of three sacred texts, namely:

1. The *Upanishads*
2. The *Brahma-Sutras*
3. The *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Upanishads* are dialogues that deal with the great question concerning human existence, of why we are here, what is our goal in life, what is the meaning of everything around us, what is the power that energizes all of us, our minds, our hearts, our bodies and which permeates the entire universe². It is also known as Vedanta because they come chronologically at the end of the Vedic collection which is called as *Jnanakanda*, the way of wisdom, the high watermark of knowledge and focuses on the truth underlying the core of spiritual wisdom. Traditionally there were supposed to be 108 Upanishads which represent in some ways the high watermark of our cultural and spiritual traditions. The important ones that have come down to us upon which Adi Shankaracharya has written his commentaries are ten: the *Isha*, the *Kena*, the *Katha*, the *Prashna*, the *Mundaka*, the *Mandukya*, *Taitiriya*, *Aitereya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyakya* which represents the major Upanishads.

The *Brahma Sutras*³ of Badarayana is one of the foundational texts of Vedanta which systematizes the philosophical and spiritual ideas of Upanishads. It is also called as “The Vedanta-Sutra which consists of 555 aphoristic verses or sutras” which are concerned with the nature of human existence and the universe on the one hand and the concept of Ultimate Reality i.e. the *Brahman* on the other. Furthermore, its purpose is to remove the erroneous identification of the soul with the body which is the root cause your sufferings and miseries, which is the product of *Avidya* (Ignorance) and help you in the attainment of the final emancipation through knowledge of *Brahman*⁴. The erroneous identification of the body with the Pure Atman is that when one can identify oneself with the body and say, I am a man, I am a woman, I am a Brahmin, I am Kshatriya, etc.

The *Bhagavad-Gita*⁵ underlies the essential teachings of Lord Krishna in terms of dialogue through a series of questions and answers that brings Arjuna to an understanding of certain fundamental metaphysical concepts such as the distinction between body and the soul or between matter and spirit. Further, it also discusses the principle of Nishkama Karma, virtues and various forms of discipline and meditation (*yoga*), knowledge (*Gyana*) and devotion (*bhakti*) in pursuit of the spirit. For example, “Lord Krishna explains the nature of God and the purpose of human existence”⁶. It may point out that, *Bhagavad-Gita* consists of 700 verses in 18 chapters and appeared as an episode in the Sixth Section of the *Mahabharata* and that’s why it is called as the *Gitopnishad*. It is in this sense, my aim is to

describe briefly the systems of thoughts contained in Vedantic philosophy and to see if they lend any countenance to the notion of justice in general and gender justice in particular.

Status of Women in Pre-vedantic Tradition

The *Upanishadic* literature forms the core of Vedanta Philosophy and there have been many examples showing that *Upanishadic* society was well aware of justice, and equality in terms of autonomy and rights. For example, the conversation of Sage *Yājñavalkya* and *Maitreyî* of *B[hadaranòyaka Upanishad* on absolute self appears to have taken place in ancient times gives us an insight into pre-*Upanishadic* thinking of justice or Vedantic conception of justice.

“The great Master *Yājñavalkya* speaks to *Maitreyî*: “I am going to retire from the life of a householder and enter into the fourth order of life, and therefore am now intending to arrange the division of property between you and *Kâtayâni* before taking to the final stage of life, the life of renunciation. Wise *Maitreyî* queries if you speak of entering the fourth order of life, embracing a new perspective of living altogether, and therefore you propose to divide the property between the two of us here, so that we may be comfortable and happy. Is it possible for us to be happy, ultimately, through property? Is it possible to be perpetually happy by possession of material comfort and property?”⁷

This episode on the one hand gives us an insight into justice in terms of equal distribution of secular property based on sense of fairness between two wives namely *Maitreyî* and *Kâtayâni* and on the other it shows women’s capability and rights to have material possessions to live a state of satisfaction and immense comfort. Furthermore, *Upanishadic* dialogue also shows how women were capable to raise questions regarding *Atman* (self) and *Brahman* (the Absolute Truth) and knows how to realize the essence of Absolute Truth. During the Vedic period, women were given every right in the society; no gender discrimination was there during the early Vedic period. All kinds of social, religious, and individual rights were given to women equally to men. Even it’s written in Veda that no religious ceremony can be performed without the participation of women. S. Vats and Shakuntla Mudgal have rightly pointed out the status of women:

“In the Vedic age, women enjoyed a higher status in home as well outside. The Rigveda shows abundant evidence pointing to the fact that women were fully the equals of men as regards access to and

capacity for the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma”.⁸

Discrimination on the basis of gender was not prevalent at this period and even society was more prosperous and people were living prosperous life compared to any other period. “Some scholars agree that women in the epics and *Puranas* are generally subordinated to men, nevertheless claim that women are usually honored, have equal status to men in some spheres, and even more powers than men in a few spheres”⁹. But gradually during the later Vedic period, the scenario began to change and women’s positions started declining. Moreover, gender discrimination was visible in the later Vedic period and various evil practices and belief emerges in society. In fact, women’s freedom was confiscated and various rights were snatched and many restrictions were imposed on women. However many “feminist critique argues that in this period woman totally lost her human dignity and internalized her subordination to the extent that she did not protest or question it”.¹⁰ Hence women’s condition became more deteriorated and was suppressed as many evil practices or taboos on women came into existence in society such and as the Sati system, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc. These rituals fastened the Indian women under a narrow mindset and made their condition worse in the society. Indian women’s condition became worse in the medieval period and they were suppressed most compared to any other time period.

“Women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later the status of women began to decline with the Smiritis and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Empire and later Christianity curtailing women’s freedom and rights”.¹¹

It may be pointed out that, the status of women in India has been subject to many changes over the past few millennia. The status of women from equal status with men in Vedic times through the low status of the later Vedic to medieval times and finally constitutional provisions raise the equal status of women vis-vis men in the Indian society. However, despite of various constitutional measures, the continuous process of marginalization and deprivation of women has exposed the limits of the patriarchal attitude of men towards women. So it is very important to analyze how the *Upanisadic* tradition of womanhood is considered as nearer to divinity and has been worshiped with high respect in our history, still, in reality, this contemplated equality has remained a myth.

Gender Inequality in Today's Society

Vedanta underlies the vision that all human beings irrespective of their gender are born free and equal in dignity and rights. However, inequalities based on gender are prevalent as a social phenomenon whereby men over women enjoy a disproportionately large share of some valued good related to education, health, political liberty and participation, employment, self-respect, and the life itself which undermine Vedantic ideals as unequivocally says:

*Samaani va Aakootihi Samaanaa Hridayaanivah
Samaanamastu vo Mano Yathaa Vah Susahaasati*¹²

“Let there be oneness in your resolutions, hearts and minds; let the determination to live with mutual cooperation be firm in you all”. On the other hand, *Rig Veda* has also pointed out that:

*Ajyesthaaso Akanisthaasa Yete
Sam Bhraataro Vaavrudhuh Soubhagaya*¹³

“No one is superior or inferior; all are brothers; all should strive for the interest of all and progress collectively”. Despite of rich philosophical ideals concerning human dignity, gender affects a broad range of inequalities throughout the world and India is a country of paradox is no exception in the following way:

1. Firstly, throughout the world, women's bodies are vulnerable to a range of violent assaults that include domestic violence, rape, honor killing, trafficking and forced prostitution, female infanticide, and sex-selective abortion, etc. Statistics continue to show that globally the sex ratio stands at around 984 but in India, it was 940 in 2011.¹⁴ For example, India's total population is around 1.37 billion and the sex ratio in India is 52% of men and 48% of women.
2. Secondly, gender affects in relation to women's education and statistics show that across the world, around 65 million girls are not schooled and two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults are female. Moreover, in the case of India has been severe because the female literacy rate in India is lower than the male literacy rate and as per Census Report 2011, the literacy rate of India is 74.04% while the male literacy rate is 82.14% and female literacy rate is 65.46%.¹⁵
3. Thirdly, the role of gender also affects on religion because certain religious practices reserve the right to interpret the holy books and practices only for men. For example, in “Shani Shignapur Temple-Bombay”, “Sabarimala Temple- Kerala”, and “Haji Ali Dargah-Bombay” women were not allowed to enter because of certain cultural practices.

4. Fourth and the most important type of inequality can be found in personal laws as a set of laws in India that govern various aspects of a person's life such as family, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and maintenance, etc. were left to be governed according to an individual's faith. However, such religious systems of family laws- Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, and other, may severely limit women's agency in terms of marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, succession, guardianship and adoption. Such gender-based inequality within family laws raises various questions concerning gender justice and provides a stable system of legal structure in dealing with the personal matters along with uniformity framework.

In order to address various forms of gender inequality, Vedantic and Neo-Vedantic principles such as *Brahman* and *Atman* have been increasingly influential to understand how one can establish a gender-free society because *Brahman* permeates every being and there is unity and equality in diversity. Furthermore, Swami Vivekananda and his Neo-Vedanta philosophy concentrate on absolute equality between men and women by emphasizing that a bird needs both the wings to fly, with one wing birds cannot fly so both the wings are equally important. Similarly, in a society, both men and women have equal importance and if one is lacking behind in terms of autonomy, rights and capabilities then the prosperity of society is not possible.

Status of Gender Justice in Vedanta

The idea of 'gender justice in Vedanta' is based on the "principle that the *Aman* animates both women and men; so women are capable of pursuing the same paths as men"¹⁶. In other words, the Vedantic principle implies that, men and women possess the same *Atman* which recognizes that both of them have the same capabilities to live a flourishing life. In this sense gender justice with respect to Vedanta's philosophical underpinning deals with the status of women who deserve dignity to fulfill their basic rights in a truly human way. However, women's dignity is frequently violated on grounds of gender or sexuality which poses several questions concerning gender justice: What does it mean to respect the dignity of a woman as a human being? What sort of support do women's capabilities demand from the world? How should we think about care and concern when we encounter differences of gender or sexuality? What types of legal and political treatment are required to treat women as dignified and equal in a multicultural pluralistic society like India? Is it necessary to address gender-based discrimination and bring gender justice on the basis of the collective consciousness of the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, women's capabilities as a political entitlement, or let the culture decide their lives?

To speak of gender justice is to speak about a society where the ideal situation would be that both men and women are treated fairly concerning their rights, needs and choices, but, women have been ill-treated and discriminated against on the basis of gender. The term 'gender' refers to the social meaning given to being a woman or a man. In other words, gender suggests a person's roles, characteristics, behavior and activities, which are seen as appropriate for men and women in a given context. More importantly, gender provides norms and practices through which biological differences may result in perceived social differences. However, the term 'sex' describes the biological distinctions between men and women and not determining the life situations of women and men rather it is often dictated by social understanding and expectations of what it means to be a woman and man. As Nicholas argues that, so long as one views the world in terms of distinctions of caste and gender, one remains tied to an inferior perception of reality which is designated as *avidya* (ignorance)¹⁷. Gender plays an important role in structuring social hierarchy in contemporary Indian culture and has been invoked to legitimate inequitable distributions of wealth and power, discrepancies in rights, divisions of labor and hierarchical notions of inherent worth. It may in fact be even more fundamental than caste as principle of hierarchy and can shape opportunities and barriers to the well-being of both females and males in the fulfilment of their human capabilities.

Gender analysis in Vedantic and Neo-Vedantic frameworks is essential for designing sound and just interventions in relation to the lived realities of women and men. It may point out that, the *Sulabha's* debate with the King *Janaka* in the Ancient Epic- the *Mahabharata*, where *Sulabha* demonstrates by her own example that a woman may achieve liberation by the same means as a man on the one hand and recognizes that there is no gender difference between men and women on the other in the following way:

1. The body is gendered but the *Atman* (Universal Self/Spirit is not gendered).¹⁸
2. The body acquires its gender at a certain stage in the womb, and the body changes constantly, so even the body is not always gendered in the same way, that is, even bodily gender is not a fixed or static thing.
3. The *Atman* is one and the same in all beings, regardless of the body's gender.
4. The *Atman* is neither the property of anyone nor under the control of anyone, and the *Atman* does not really act.¹⁹

These philosophical premises concerning *Atman*, the *Mahabharata* explains the *Atman* animates both women and men so women are also capable of pursuing the same capabilities as men and goes on to highlight how a truly wise person who has

realized the oneness of the *Atman*, will not try to judge anyone on the basis of gender, caste and irrespective of any differences. Moreover, *Atman* is not the property of anyone, so just a person realizes that to ask a woman to whom she belongs is meaningless. It can be argued that the Vedantic notion of *Atman* underscores the basic bond of human dignity and equality between men and women and goes to the extent that men and women have been created from the same soul. Hence neither man nor woman can be proved to be superior to one another. Man and woman are given their natural forms to coexist in harmony. It can be argued that Swami Vivekananda has interpreted the Vedantic conception of *Atman* during the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of modern thought and applied it in practical life which is called as Neo-Vedanta. Vivekananda argues that, although there are lots of differences between men and women, but in terms of soul and eternity there is no difference:

“Atman- the soul has no sex, no caste, and no imperfection”.²⁰

(Swami Vivekananda)

In the light of the above Neo-Vedantic description of Vivekananda, *Atman* clearly expresses that when the human soul does not have any differences then classification in terms of caste, creed, race, sex etc is unfair. In other words, he wanted to follow the theory of all humans are equal and should not be classified on any basis in terms of gender, class and caste etc. It can be argued that, Vedantic ethos is based on the core belief of human dignity by recognizing that all human beings are divine and their real nature is the *Atman* which is gender-free, eternal, blissful and identical to Brahman. For example, *Upanishadic* aphorism- *Tat Tvam Asi* “You are That” (i.e., *Brahman*) and “I am *Brahman* or (*Aham Brahmasmi*)” can be used as a benchmark to address gender disparity that persists in our society. Furthermore, another aphorism like *Aham Brahmasmi* interpreted as ‘You are That’ which means ‘You are spirit’, ‘You are Brahman’ used to bring gender equality because the former can be interpreted as gender neutral *Atman* and spirit which is the same in all human beings. The latter explains about the Brahman and its divinity can be shared by all human beings irrespective of gender. These aphorisms and Vedantic principle of human dignity lay down the value system of the society where each individual has to be embedded in the ‘idea of the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*’ on the basis of ‘*Chetna*’ – the collective consciousness to ensure gender justice in contemporary Indian culture.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper argues that Vedanta philosophy underlies the vision of gender justice by recognizing that men and women and all beings are divine in their essential nature. It states that Brahman is the only reality and the individual souls

(Atman) are non-different from Brahman. In other words, it recognizes that, all human beings irrespective of gender are divine and their real nature is the *Atman* which is gender-free, eternal, blissful and identical to Brahman. It is in this sense, men and women are fundamentally gender-free selves and one can say that sexless Atman. This view provides the value of equality, dignity and the sacredness of entire humanity irrespective of men and women. However, women's dignity is frequently violated on grounds of gender or sexuality across the world and India is not an exception from it. Often gender plays an important role in structuring social hierarchy in contemporary Indian culture and has been invoked to legitimate inequitable distributions of wealth and power, discrepancies in rights, divisions of labor and hierarchical notions of inherent worth. Further, inequalities based on gender have been prevalent as a social phenomenon whereby men over women enjoy a disproportionately related to education, health, political liberty and participation, employment etc. Now it is very important to address question concerning gender discrimination and tries to revive the original position of the women in Indian civilization. Since, the status of women from equal status with men during Vedic times through the low status of the later Vedic to medieval times and finally constitutional provisions raise the equal status of women vis-vis men in the Indian society. Despite of various constitutional measures, the continuous process of marginalization and deprivation of women has exposed the limits of the patriarchal attitude of men toward women. For this, one can analyze how *the Upanisadic* tradition of womanhood is considered as nearer to divinity and has been worshiped with high respect in our history, still in reality this contemplated equality has remained a myth. Therefore, it is very important to revisit the Vedantic principle of human dignity and lays down the basic *Samskaras* or the value system of the society where each individual has to be embedded in the 'idea of the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*' on the basis of '*Chetna*' – the collective consciousness. In this way, collective consciousness ensures that women must be treated in a dignified manner. For example, women should allow for having self-creativity in terms of their thoughts, emotions and imagination, including practical reasons to live truly well in a human way. More importantly, women's voice needs to be heard and to secure the physical, intellectual, social, economic and political capability of women who have been marginalized, suppressed and socio-economically deprived in different historical, religious, cultural and political contexts across India.

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Footnotes

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