

# Women are neither inferior nor superior to Men An Advaitic Reflection

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## ABSTRACT

*In a few s̄āstraic sections, it appears that an important word, i.e. "women," is sometimes regarded as inferior to "men" or merely explained as either "an object of lust", purely dishonored, not qualified to study the Vedas or to gain Brahmavidyā [Self-Knowledge], etc. Hence, certain objections should be addressed.*

**Key Terms:** Women, Desire, Lust, śūdra, Adi Shankaracharya, Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya, Vivekachudamani, Swami Chinmayananda

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## I. Introduction

Why should Self-Knowledge [*ātmajñāna, brahmavidyā*] per se, even empirically knowledge [*laukika-jñāna*] be restricted to a particular gender? Does that make any common sense?

For example, is it reasonable to assume that the knowledge of "1 + 1 equals 2" should be limited to men alone? If that simple understanding is available to all, hence not restricted upon any gender or culture, why should Self-Knowledge [*ātmajñāna*], the highest of human aims, be limited?

From the highest point of view, [as it were, *pāramārthika dṛṣṭi*], it is completely irrelevant, as Ātman/Brahman pervades everything, in fact, "That" appears as both, man and women because no second 'otherness' exists at all.

तथा अन्यत्रापि ब्रह्मप्रक्रियायामेवायमर्थः प्रपञ्च्यते — 'त्वं स्त्री त्वं पुमानसि त्वं कुमार उत वा कुमारी । त्वं जीर्णो दण्डेन वञ्चसि त्वं जातो भवति विश्वतोमुखः'  
(श्वे. उ. ४ । ३) इति,

Similarly, elsewhere also, when dealing with Brahman Itself, this very idea is elaborated:

त्वं स्त्री त्वं पुमानसि त्वं कुमार उत वा कुमारी । त्वं जीर्णो दण्डेन वञ्चसि त्वं जातो भवसि विश्वतोमुखः - Sv. IV.3

You are woman, you are man, you are a young man or even a maid; you are old tottering about with the help of a stick; having taken birth, you have your face everywhere. (Sv. IV. 3)

### **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 2.3.43**

द्विधा कृत्वाऽत्मनो देहमर्धेन पुरुषोऽभवत् । अर्धेन नारी तस्यां स विराजमसृजत् प्रभुः ॥ ३२ ॥

*dvidhā kṛtvā'tmano dehamardhena puruṣo'bhavat  
ardhena nārī tasyāṃ sa virājamasṛjat prabhuḥ*

Having divided his body into two halves, with the one half, the Lord became Male, and with the other half, Female; from her he produced Virāj.

### **Manusmṛiti 1.32**

There were plenty of women saints and sages throughout history among different traditions. Famous examples of female *Brahmavādins* were **Gārgī** [*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.8] and **Maitreyi** [*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.4]

त एवैते इति स्मृतिप्रसिद्धेः । यथा हि सुलभा नाम ब्रह्मवादिनी जनकेन विवदितुकामा व्युदस्य स्वं देहम्, जानकं देहमाविश्य, व्युद्य तेन, पश्चात् स्वमेव देहमाविवेश — इति स्मर्यते ।

For instance, it is stated in the Smṛti that a woman discourses on Brahman named Sulabhā, who wanted to have a discussion with Janaka, gave up her body, entered the body of Janaka, and having finished the discussion with him re-entered her own body.

### **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 3.3.32**

रैकवाचक्रवीप्रभृतीनामेवंभूतानामपि ब्रह्मवित्त्वश्रुत्युपलब्धेः

Such cases being met with in the Upanisads"; for Vedic texts are noticeable which speak of the possession of the knowledge of Brahman by Raikva (Ch. IV. i. iii) Vacaknavi (or Gargi) (Br. III. vi. I), and others who were in similar circumstances.

### **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 3.4.36**

[Note: An interesting read: **Michael Karl Witzel. Female Rishis and Philosophers in the Veda.** <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/9886300/FemaleRsis-UNICODE%20copy.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>]

## **II. Objections**

**Objection 1:** Why are women in certain texts associated with desires/objects of lust [*viśayakāma*]?

**Reply:** The word "women" has been used more or less indicative because "lust" is nothing but another desire [*kāma*]. Therefore, the purpose of using indicative expressions is for the sake of instruction [*upadeśa*] hence **never to degrade or set women "equal" to objects of lust** [*viśayakāma*].

Considering many students were men, using "women" as a metaphorical expression for "desires or lust" makes in this context more sense if one reflects upon men's natural stimuli. Similarly, a group of female *adhikāris* [eligible students] could also use "men" as an indicative expression for lust/desire [*viśayakāma*].

Generally, lust commonly experienced as "pleasure" is undoubtedly an obstacle, according to Advaita Vedānta, as it distracts the mind, which further produces a sense of attachment for sensual experiences. That is the whole purport because an agitated mind means less concentration.

**Objection 2:** "śūdra has no right" as Adi Shankaracharya stated in Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 1.3.38.

**Reply:** The context is always more important than looking at one sentence and make judgments.

Secondly, "*śūdraḥ*" does not equate to women per se, as it is considered "A person of the fourth or the last ['caste'] related to the traditional [ancient] system of four castes] ... and his principal business was to serve the three higher castes - Apte".

Thirdly, Adi Shankaracharya Bhagavatpada also declared concerning śūdras:

शक्यते चायं शूद्रशब्दोऽधिकृतविषये योजयितुम्

On the contrary, this word Sudra can be construed with someone already having the competence.

### **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 1.3.34**

येषां पुनः पूर्वकृतसंस्कारवशाद्विदुरधर्मव्याधप्रभृतीनां ज्ञानोत्पत्तिः, तेषां न शक्यते फलप्राप्तिः प्रतिषेद्धम्, ज्ञानस्यैकान्तिकफलत्वात् । 'श्रावयेच्चतुरो वर्णान्' इति चेतिहासपुराणाधिगमे चातुर्वर्ण्यस्याधिकारस्मरणात् । वेदपूर्वकस्तु नास्त्यधिकारः शूद्राणामिति स्थितम्

"But in the case of those Sudras like Vidura and Dharmavyadha, in whom knowledge of the Absolute arises through the power of the impressions of good deeds performed in previous births, nothing can prevent such knowledge from bringing its due result. For knowledge brings its results inevitably and without exception.

Moreover, the text from Smṛti, '— read it out to all four castes' (Vyasa, M.Bh.XII.327.9) declares that all four castes have the right to instruction in the Epics and Puranas.

**Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 1.3.38**, *The Method of Vedanta*, Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati, A.J. Alston

**Objection 3:** In the Vivekachudamani, śloka 2 - जन्तूनां नरजन्म दुर्लभमतः पुंस्त्वं ततो विप्रता तस्माद्वैदिकधर्ममार्गपरता विद्वत्त्वमस्मात्परम् । आत्मानात्मविवेचनं स्वनुभवो ब्रह्मात्मना संस्थिति - मुक्तिर्नो शतकोटिजन्मसु कृतैः पुण्यैर्विना लभ्यते - a well-known treatise attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, the advantage of being a male [पुंस्त्वं, पुंस्त्वम्] is clearly stated.

**Reply:** The word "puṁstvām" does not only mean "male, guy" but also human being Lit. MBh. or a servant, attendant.

Another explanation taught by Swami Chinmayananda in his commentary:  
*Then why this special preference is shown to the masculine sex? At this juncture, we must bring our discriminative capacity to understand that when these qualifications were given out, they were not given out with reference to the body. With the body, no sādhana can be undertaken as explained in Vedanta. The main practices in Vedanta are reflection and meditation, which are to be undertaken by a healthy "mind" and a keen intellect. So, it means that the feminine qualities of "mind" and intellect are to be eschewed.*

**OM TAT SAT**

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