



Feminist Insights from Gārgī and Maitreyī in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad – A Philosophical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Vedic period, in Indian history, is recognized for providing significant opportunities for women's intellectual engagement, as evidenced by the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, a seminal text of the era. Within this text, the sage Yājñavalkya emerges as a paragon of enlightenment, engaging in profound dialogues with two learned women, Maitreyī and Gārgī. These dialogues serve as the most compelling evidence of women's scholarly participation during the Vedic period. Maitreyī, as Yājñavalkya's wife, and Gārgī, as a philosophical interlocutor, demonstrate keen intelligence and a deep commitment to exploring the nature of the self and Brahman. This study, which adopts a feminist analytical framework, highlights the theoretical contributions made by these women within the predominantly male philosophical milieu of the time. By examining their dialogues, this research seeks to illuminate how Maitreyī and Gārgī's intellectual pursuits shaped the metaphysical and ethical discourse of the Upaniṣads. Furthermore, their efforts to assert their scholarly presence amidst structural constraints offer insights into the women's intellectual tradition in ancient India. These pioneering figures not only laid the groundwork for future female scholars but also provide a psychological framework for contemporary women to navigate and challenge the structural barriers still present in society today.

Key Words: Feminism, Gārgī, Maitreyī, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Yājñavalkya

INTRODUCTION

In Indian history, the Vedic period marks a significant milestone in the evolution of Indian thought, characterized by extensive theoretical investigations and knowledge production across diverse subjects such as the human mind, the soul, the cosmos, and the divine. Traditionally, intellectual and spiritual pursuits in Indian society were predominantly attributed to men. Nevertheless, during the Vedic era, women were afforded substantial opportunities to engage in scholarly activities, enjoying a higher social status than in later periods. This period is notable for the composition of hymns by twenty female Rishis, evidencing the intellectual involvement of women. Although the societal structure largely relegated women to domestic and caregiving responsibilities, they were nonetheless encouraged to participate in intellectual endeavors. Their contributions were significant, marked by a clarity and beauty of expression (Yasin, Hina, 2023: 721; Rout, 2016: .42). However, the post-Vedic Puranic texts and epics reveal a marked decline in the status of women, portraying them as subordinate and increasingly viewed as the possessions of men. Despite this later subjugation, women in the Vedic period played a vital role as contributors to both the family and society (Kapur, 2018: 21; Afrin, 2021: 17; Pechulis, 2004: 20).

The *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* stands as the foremost epistemological text of this period. As the final instalment of the principal ten Upaniṣads, it comprises six chapters that explore rituals of worship and spiritual truths related to human actions. These insights were imparted by the sage Yājñavalkya, who is regarded as the pinnacle of Vedic scholarship. Within this text, Maitreyi and Gārgī, two women of exceptional intellect, engage in profound scholarly dialogues with Yājñavalkya. They exemplify how women, during the Vedic period, were afforded opportunities to attain elevated levels of learning and spiritual enlightenment. Although the intellectual contributions of Maitreyi and Gārgī are recorded in the Vedas and Upaniṣads, the richness, vigor, and distinctiveness of their ideas, as well as the significant impact they had on subsequent philosophical thought, have not been fully acknowledged.

Research Problem

The intellectual contributions of Gārgī and Maitreyī in the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* challenge the patriarchal norms of Vedic society. Their philosophical dialogues with Yājñavalkya represent early forms of feminist resistance, yet their role in shaping intellectual discourse remains underexplored. This study examines their engagement with metaphysics, ethics, and

epistemology to highlight their strategies for asserting intellectual agency in a male-dominated tradition.

Research Questions

1. How do Gārgī and Maitreyī's philosophical dialogues contribute to metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology?
2. In what ways do their intellectual engagements challenge traditional patriarchal structures?
3. How can their contributions be understood as early forms of feminist resistance and connected to contemporary feminist thought?

Objectives of the Research

1. To critically examine the philosophical contributions of Gārgī and Maitreyī in relation to metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.
2. To analyze their dialogues with Yājñavalkya as a form of intellectual resistance against patriarchal norms.
3. To explore the feminist dimensions of their discussions and assess their relevance to contemporary feminist philosophy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sadia Afrin's (2021) study, employing a distinctive historical methodology, uncovers the persistent marginalization of women during a period when they made notable scholarly contributions in early Indian history. Although it is widely acknowledged that women in the Vedic era were afforded greater educational opportunities and participated in intellectual pursuits alongside men, their status later diminished. Radhika Kapur's (2018) dissertation seeks to elucidate the status of women in ancient India, highlighting that, during this time, women activists attained a higher social standing. Women from upper-class families were granted access to education and decision-making roles, as well as participation in governance and political affairs. However, subsequent texts such as the Puranas, Itihasas, and Dharma shastras reflect an increasing dominance of male roles, marking a decline in women's societal position. Brereton's (2006) analysis of Maitreyi's dialogue in the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad offers a feminist interpretation, emphasizing its sociocultural relevance. Similarly, Buchta's (2010) research examines the Brhadāranyaka Upanishad's dialogue between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya,

arguing for Gārgī's intellectual superiority over her interlocutor. This analysis re-examines the contributions of Indian women scholars from a Western perspective. Lindquist's (2008) research on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* contends that the female characters therein oscillate between legendary and historical roles, though their significance has been largely overlooked. This study conducts a thorough examination of the roles of these women, the significance of the discussions in which they engage, and the perspectives they articulate, within the broader socio-historical context. In one of the chapters of Shyam Ranganathan's work (2024), the author critically examines Gārgī's experiences as a woman engaging in philosophical discourse, a domain predominantly occupied by men. Gārgī's participation in these debates is portrayed as a radical act that challenged and transcended the established norms of her time. Another chapter is devoted to Maitreyi's philosophical dialogue with Yājñavalkya, through which both Gārgī and Maitreyi are recognized as two prominent female philosophers who played significant intellectual roles during the Vedic period.

The literatures reveal Gārgī and Maitreyi's intellectual prominence in Vedic philosophy and emphasizes their marginalization in later texts. However, a gap remains in exploring their individual philosophical contributions based on their interactions with male figures. This oversight stems from the fact that their contributions have not been subjected to sufficient scholarly scrutiny. In addressing this issue and the existing gap in scholarly research, this study seeks to critically examine the distinctive intellectual contributions of Gārgī and Maitreyi, extending beyond the established traditions of their time. By analyzing their philosophical ideas, this study aims to assess the extent to which they shaped the intellectual landscape of ancient India. Moreover, it investigates the strategies employed by these pioneering women scholars to establish themselves within a rigidly structured society, highlighting the enduring influence of their methodologies on subsequent generations. Through this examination, the study aspires to offer insights into how contemporary women might navigate similar socio-structural barriers.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology with a focus on textual and interpretive analysis, emphasizing the in-depth examination of primary sources. The primary texts central to this study are the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, particularly the dialogues between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī, as well as Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī. These texts are subjected to close reading and critical analysis, aiming to uncover both their philosophical content and their feminist

implications. The selection of these dialogues is based on their significance in representing the intellectual agency of women in Vedic thought, as well as their potential to challenge patriarchal norms. The analysis of these primary texts is guided by hermeneutical and interpretive methodologies, allowing for an exploration of the philosophical themes such as metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology, as articulated by these women philosophers. The feminist dimension is incorporated by employing a gender-sensitive lens, where the focus is on how Gārgī and Maitreyī's dialogues subvert, negotiate, or reinforce the gender roles prevalent in ancient Indian society. Special attention is given to the dialogic form of these encounters, which allows for the examination of their contributions as active participants in philosophical discourse, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and historical commentaries on ancient Indian philosophy, supplement this analysis. Historical commentaries provide context, while contemporary feminist interpretations offer insights into how the intellectual contributions of Gārgī and Maitreyī resonate with modern feminist thought. The research employs a comparative analytical approach, situating the dialogues within broader discourses of gender and philosophy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analyses of Gārgī's dialogues and their Feminist and Philosophical Implications

The dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī occurs within the context of a scholarly discussion on Brahman and the soul, held during the Rajasuya Yajna conducted by King Janaka of Videha. At this event, attended by Brahmins from the Guru-Panchala region, a competition was announced to identify the most knowledgeable scholar on Brahman. The prize for the winner was a thousand cows, each adorned with ten gold coins attached to their horns (Arsha Bodha Center, 2023: 71; Swami Madhavananda, 1950: 96; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.1.1-2). In addition to Yājñavalkya, Gārgī was the only woman among the eight scholars who participated in the competition. She is mentioned in Sanskrit Vedic literature as Gārgī Vācaknavī, and was born as the daughter of the sage Vācaknu, belonging to the Karka lineage. Her period is estimated to be between 800 and 500 BCE. Gārgī is recognized as one of the foremost natural philosophers of her time (University of Alabama Astronomy, 2012: 27; Raveh, 2017: 9; Lindquist, 2008: 3). The discussion centers on the fundamental nature of existence and the ultimate reality that transcends the manifest universe. Specifically, it seeks to comprehend the concept of Brahman, which underpins the existence of all entities within the

cosmos. Dissatisfied with Yājñavalkya's initial explanations, Gārgī endeavors to elicit further clarification, which can be viewed as a form of intellectual debate (Glucklich, 2008: 62). This debate holds significant historical importance, as it highlights a critical intellectual confrontation between two figures representing distinct social strata. Yājñavalkya, a distinguished male scholar from the upper echelons of a patriarchal society that claimed intellectual authority, is challenged by Gārgī, a woman relegated to the lower social strata, who had been afforded limited opportunities for scholarly engagement. Her critique of his explanations underscores the insufficiency of his responses from a feminist perspective (Penaluna, 2023: 204; Pechulis, 2004: 19). Notably, this debate is observed to have taken place on two distinct occasions (Ranganathan, 2024: 55).

- Gārgī engages Yājñavalkya by posing a series of questions aimed at testing his ideas. This interaction is intended to be more of a dialogue than a debate. While Yājñavalkya responds directly to her inquiries, he also critiques her approach on one occasion, bringing the initial discussion to a close. Dissatisfied with his responses, Gārgī presses on with further probing questions, to the point of becoming confused and distressed. She ultimately desists, having been cautioned that continuing in this manner could lead to unintended consequences (Raveh, 2017: 5).
- Gārgī modifies her approach based on her previous experience. She seeks to demonstrate that the fundamental issues addressed by Yājñavalkya are either insufficient or incomplete. Notably, before resuming the dialogue, Gārgī informs the assembled audience that she intends to pose two questions, and if these are answered satisfactorily, she will refrain from further inquiries (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.8.1).

Although Yājñavalkya criticizes Gārgī's approach, cautioning that persistent questioning of Brahman will inevitably result in confusion and disillusionment, and that the fundamental reality of Brahman cannot be comprehended beyond certain limits (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.13), Gārgī remains undeterred in her pursuit. Despite his warnings, Yājñavalkya does not provide a definitive answer, nor does he succeed in silencing her inquiries. Their discussion ultimately concludes with the acknowledgement that the ultimate truth they are seeking cannot be fully comprehended. Although Gārgī does not attain the expected result—complete understanding of Brahman—her intellectual pursuit represents a revolutionary moment in theoretical discourse. She challenges the long-standing tradition of accepting authority figures' proclamations as the ultimate truth, instead initiating a process of critical inquiry by questioning everything. Regardless of the outcome, her efforts highlight the importance of

persistence in the pursuit of knowledge, a principle widely recognized in the philosophical tradition as the hallmark of true seekers.

In the initial discussion between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya, which commences with Gārgī's probing question, "If this world is established in water, then upon what is water established?" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1), the dialogue sets a contemplative tone. Following a brief intermission, the second discussion resumes, culminating in a series of final questions and responses that drive the discourse towards deeper metaphysical considerations.

Gārgī inquires: "Everything above the sky, below the earth, everything between the sky and the earth, as well as what people differentiate as past, present, and future, all function in a connected and interdependent manner. Upon what is this entire cosmos supported, and upon what does it ultimately rest?" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.8.2).

Yājñavalkya responds: "Know, O Gārgī, that everything above the sky, below the earth, between the sky and the earth, and what people refer to as the past, present, and future, is suspended within space." (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.8.3).

Gārgī inquires: "I commend you, Yājñavalkya, and I accept your answer. Now, to my second question—what is the ultimate foundation of the entire sustaining universe? What binds together time and space? Is it something material in nature?"

Yājñavalkya responds: "That which you ask of, O Gārgī, is the Imperishable—utterly ineffable, beyond the grasp of human understanding. It is the answer to all inquiries yet transcends thought and speech. This perfection is not physical; it cannot be touched, seen, or measured. It possesses neither qualities, dimensions, nor colors, and it relies upon nothing. It is the highest form of intelligence, transcending both time and space. It is not the cause of anything, but from it arises all that is. By its power, the sun and moon remain fixed in their positions, and heaven and earth are held in their place. This is what is known as Para-Brahman—the source of all, the encompassing essence of all existence" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: 3.8.9-11).

In the second section, it becomes evident that Gārgī employs remarkably decisive strategies in her approach. Firstly, she asserts herself with boldness and places herself at the forefront—a radical departure from the conventional roles traditionally imposed upon women. Yājñavalkya's engagement with her on equal terms, coupled with her assertive tone and willingness to embrace intellectual challenges beyond the limitations often ascribed to her gender, underscores the potential for women to articulate fresh and insightful perspectives. The

second discourse begins with Yājñavalkya stating that he will pose only two questions and will acknowledge Gārgī's intellectual standing should she provide satisfactory responses to them (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 3.8.1). I present two challenges to you, akin to Kashi, the renowned warrior or Prince of Videha, who, with unwavering determination, enters the battlefield with an unstrung bow, selects two sharpened arrows, and prepares for combat. His declaration, "Answer me both," (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 3.8.2), demonstrates his intense eagerness to engage in discourse and his resolute pursuit of truth, abandoning the comfort of convention and perceived passivity. It may also be noted that, after initially being cautioned and forced to temper his emotions, his mind, unprepared to concede the first debate, instigated the second argument in a markedly revolutionary manner. Specifically, Gārgī, a woman of the Brahmin class, adopting the persona of a man from the Kshatriya class, signifies her willingness to confront challenges from all present. In this instance, Gārgī's inquiries are not superficial but deeply focused on the transcendent nature of the universe. Her probing questions are designed to critically test the validity of the responses provided, thereby deepening her own understanding. Ultimately, this intellectual rigor culminates in the revelation of Brahman.

Furthermore, the moderating influence of Gārgī's role in the discourse is evident in the nature of her questions. Her ability to effectively seize control of the dialogue, direct its course, and engage meaningfully demonstrates that a representative of a traditionally marginalized group possesses the capacity to guide and influence those who are considered part of the scholarly elite. These observations confirm that Gārgī's intervention with Yājñavalkya was indeed successful. This is particularly evident when contrasted with the experience of the other members of King Janaka's assembly, who, as depicted in the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, attempted to challenge Yājñavalkya only once and failed. By the conclusion of the second debate, Gārgī acknowledges Yājñavalkya's wisdom, announces her acceptance to the assembly, and thereafter remains silent (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 3.8.12). His unwavering confidence in his intellectual capabilities reflects a philosophical commitment to the pursuit of truth, demonstrating the resolve to persist in inquiry until full comprehension is attained. Additionally, his approach—avoiding confusion by refraining from irrelevant questions, refraining from seeking personal validation through displays of intellectual prowess, and concluding the discourse once satisfactory explanations are provided—along with his acknowledgment and admiration of the other party's scholarship, reveal a genuine dedication to the search for knowledge. This conduct underscores his focus on intellectual discovery rather than the pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

Their dialogue begins with the assertion that all things originate in water, ultimately culminating in the conclusion that Brahman is the foundational source of the entire universe. Beyond Brahman, nothing exists; it is self-sustaining, the ultimate cause of all existence, growth, and evolution. Gārgī's words express the finality of this understanding, affirming that there is nothing further to seek beyond Brahman. Gārgī concludes that "Yājñavalkya is the one capable of imparting clear knowledge about Brahman, and none present can dispute him or gain further insight beyond this." It is important to recognize that declaring the ultimate truth is a hallmark of Indian philosophical tradition. Furthermore, another noteworthy aspect of Gārgī's statement is its broader implication. The interaction can be comprehended fully as a dialogue between the two. What distinguishes Gārgī from the others who engaged Yājñavalkya in debate are two unique characteristics that set her apart. Firstly, Gārgī herself confronted the challenge twice. The second aspect, however, is even more significant: Gārgī did not challenge Yājñavalkya alone; rather, she extended her challenge to all the other scholars present. Consequently, the events in King Janaka's assembly were not merely a competition between two individuals but a contest involving multiple participants. Her declaration that "if Yājñavalkya can provide a satisfactory answer to my questions, akin to striking a target with an arrow, no one else in the assembly will be able to defeat him" (Lindquist, 2008:418) reflects her acknowledgment of Yājñavalkya's intellectual supremacy over everyone else in the assembly. Gārgī's assertion before the assembly, positioning herself as the one qualified to evaluate Yājñavalkya's scholarship, merits particular attention. In this instance, she transitions from being a mere contestant to assuming the role of an authoritative figure delivering the final verdict (Buchta, 2010: 361). Gārgī was the sole individual to address the others in the assembly during this intellectual exchange (Black, 2007: 150). Her belief that "if I cannot defeat him, then no one else can" reflects her resolute mindset. Voicing such an opinion in an assembly dominated by male scholars should be recognized as a profound expression of Gārgī's deep conviction and intellectual confidence.

Furthermore, Yājñavalkya's method of silencing Gārgī during the debate appears questionable. Gārgī's inquiries ventured beyond the limits of her knowledge, yet Yājñavalkya's warning that her position would become pitiable is unsatisfactory from a scholarly standpoint. Such a tactic falls short of intellectual reasoning. However, Gārgī's willingness to reassert herself despite the warning reveals her deep confidence in her intellectual abilities. Consequently, Yājñavalkya was compelled to respond to her questions. The fact that her second question, in the second round of discussion, was met with a satisfactory answer dispels the notion that Yājñavalkya's

warning was a legitimate attempt to silence Gārgī due to any inadequacy in her responses during the first round. While the debate between the two scholars may initially appear as a straightforward competition, it is evident that one scholar was reluctant to acknowledge the other's competence. Gārgī, having been defeated in the first instance, rouses the assembly with a cautionary reminder to prevent a recurrence of the same outcome. Her support for the assembly's intellectual engagement is a notably prudent action. Moreover, her comparison of herself to a battle-ready prince, with her questions likened to arrows wielded by a hero, illustrates her refusal to accept any form of disrespect without a full acknowledgment of her inherent capability and scholarly acumen. This dynamic underscores the necessity for an individual to be recognized for their true nature and intellectual talent.

Analyses of Maitreyi's dialogues and their Feminist and Philosophical Implications

Maitreyi stands as a prominent female scholar of the post-Vedic period in ancient India. Her significance is evident in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, specifically in the second and fourth chapters (2.4.1-14, 4.5.1-15), where she engages in some of the most critical philosophical dialogues of the text. These dialogues occur between the sage Yājñavalkya and Maitreyi, as he prepares to renounce worldly life (*sannyasa*) after completing the first three stages of life. Before embarking on this final stage, Yājñavalkya seeks to divide his wealth between his two wives, Maitreyi and Kātyāyanī. However, Maitreyi, disinterested in material riches, raises a more profound philosophical inquiry:

'If I were to possess all the wealth in this world, would it grant me immortality?'
(*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.2)

This inquiry reflects her deeper quest for knowledge and spiritual fulfilment, transcending the material concerns of her time belong to women. Moreover, this inquiry marks Maitreyi's initial question, which reveals her inherent philosophical inclination. In response, Yājñavalkya asserts, 'Wealth can be utilized for pleasure and comfort in life, but it does not confer immortality.' Maitreyi then asks, 'What value does wealth hold if it cannot grant immortality?' (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.3). Yājñavalkya proceeds to offer an explanation concerning the nature of immortality and the soul, urging Maitreyi to pursue the knowledge related to these deeper metaphysical truths. This positions Maitreyi as a remarkable figure, one who seeks knowledge and ultimate truth beyond the socially prescribed roles for women in worldly life. Through her profound inquiry, Maitreyi is revealed as a woman of keen insight and intuition, who transcends the limitations of her era. She exemplifies that the pursuit of spiritual

enlightenment and the quest for ultimate truth are not confined by gender, demonstrating that such intellectual and philosophical endeavors' can be equally accessible to both men and women.

A pertinent question arises: 'Does merely posing a few questions suffice to characterize Maitreyi as a philosopher or suggest a meaningful contribution to philosophy?' To this, the following observations may be offered. Maitreyi's inquiries, though few, are subtle and incisive, providing Yājñavalkya the opportunity to expound profound philosophical concepts. These questions reveal her philosophical disposition, showing a desire to explore deeper metaphysical truths rather than pursue material wealth. This curiosity affirms her as a philosopher (Ranganathan, 2024: 87; Brereton, 2006: 328). Yājñavalkya asserts, 'nothing in this world is loved by individuals for its inherent nature; rather, things are loved according to the disposition that resides within the minds of individuals' (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5). This reflects Maitreyi's intellectual pursuit of wisdom. Yājñavalkya's words, 'You have always been my beloved, but now you have become even more beloved' (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.4), emphasize the reverence sages hold for those who seek wisdom (Brereton, 2006: 333), affirming her dedication to knowledge and renunciation of worldly pleasures for intellectual and spiritual fulfillment.

Yājñavalkya, after expressing that Maitreyi has become even more beloved to him, continues with the statement, 'If you wish to know the means of attaining immortality, I shall explain them to you' (15, *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5). In his discourse, he elucidates that the soul (atman) and Brahman are fundamentally one and the same, illustrating through various examples that immortality is achieved by realizing this unity. However, despite these explanations, Maitreyi ultimately responds, 'Thus far, you have bewildered me with your words; I do not fully comprehend any of it' (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.14), indicating her continued struggle to grasp the profundity of his teachings. Yājñavalkya concludes the dialogue by affirming, 'I am certainly not uttering anything perplexing; the soul, known as the Self, is indeed unchanging and imperishable.' This passage emphasizes that while wealth may serve as a means to procure physical pleasures in worldly life, it holds no value for those who possess no intrinsic desire for material gain. Furthermore, religious practices and rituals offer no pathway for the soul to realize its true essence. Instead, it is the pursuit of pure knowledge that leads to such realization. This pursuit reveals that individuals who comprehend the true nature of the soul, and who live in accordance with its connection to the Supreme Being, are capable of attaining ultimate happiness.

Maitreyi is distinguished for her engagement with theoretical matters, while Kātyāyanī is depicted as insignificant due to her preoccupation with familial concerns. This differentiation illustrates that, within the Vedic tradition, women who devoted themselves to intellectual and educational pursuits were held in high regard. It further underscores that the relegation of women to the roles of domestic laborers and mere possessions of men, a practice that emerged later, was not reflective of their earlier status in society. Maitreyi is referred to as Brahmvādīnī while Kātyāyanī is identified as Strīprajñā. The term Brahmvādīnī denotes an individual who engages in profound inquiries into Brahman and possesses extensive knowledge of the scriptures. Conversely, Strīprajñā is a feminine designation denoting a woman of knowledge, particularly in the context of being the wife of a Brahmin engaged in religious activities. It signifies her awareness of the appropriate timing, quality, and requirements necessary for the conduct of such rituals, alongside her ability to smoothly fulfil her daily duties as a Brahmin woman (Black, 2007: 165). This serves as further evidence that women were accorded a respected place in the Vedic tradition, valued for their inherent qualities and abilities.

CONCLUSION

At a time when Western traditions depicted female figures as embodiments of evil—such as in the narratives of the apple's temptation and Pandora's box—it is particularly remarkable that Gargi and Maitreyi articulated a vision of the universe sustained by an ineffable energy that transcends material confines. This intellectual achievement is especially noteworthy given the prevailing negative portrayals of women in their era, which often cast them as morally and spiritually inferior. Gargi and Maitreyi, through their profound dialogues, demonstrated that female intellect could engage with and advance complex metaphysical concepts, thus challenging these reductive views and transcending societal constraints. Gargi's intellectual journey reflects the Vedic tradition's connection between knowledge and material wealth. Her participation in King Janaka's assembly, where scholars were rewarded with cows, illustrates the practice of honoring intellectual achievement with material gifts. The dialogues between Yājñavalkya and Gargi highlight society's appreciation for intellectual and spiritual pursuits, showing her role in balancing material and intellectual goals. In contrast, Maitreyi rejects material wealth, seeking ultimate truth. Her dialogue with Yājñavalkya marks a shift from Gargi's focus on wealth through knowledge to Maitreyi's dedication to spiritual enlightenment over material concerns. Gargi and Maitreyi emerge as symbols of female scholarship in the Vedic period, each embodying distinct approaches to wisdom. Gargi's pragmatic engagement with intellectual and material rewards contrasts with Maitreyi's transcendent quest for truth.

Their dialogues challenge prevailing negative portrayals of women and highlight the significant role women played in shaping philosophical and spiritual thought. Their legacy continues to inspire contemporary discussions on the nature of knowledge, the interplay between material and intellectual pursuits, and the quest for transcendental understanding.

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