

Women and Family Roles in the Purāṇas: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

The Purāṇic texts (written between 300CE-1100CE) are one of the most important collections of ancient Indian religious texts and social texts. These texts teach values, ideas and rules of society that everyone must follow and behavior of the family. The study examines the representation of the woman in the Purāṇic literature as it considers women in the roles of wife, mother, daughter and widow in the family. It explores five main Mahāpurāṇas (Viṣṇu Purāṇas, Matsya Purāṇas, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇas, Agni Purāṇas and Bhāgavata Purāṇas) to illustrate the evolution of the concept of ideal woman, who was given specific duties and restrictions, while having specific areas of freedom. The analysis reveals that, there are two perspectives from the literature: the one is that women are superior and other is that women are inferior, and they are endowed with spiritual power however are constrained in the society.

Keywords: *Purāṇas, Women in Ancient India, Family Structure, Gender Roles, Hindu Scriptures, Social History, Patriarchal Society, Socio-cultural Analysis*

As scholars study about the ancient texts of India, they are confronted with a dilemma because women are worshipped as goddesses on one page, and lose rights on another page. This happens because there are two conflicting aspects. The situation demonstrates how society constructs gender roles by maintaining a patriarchy structure. The basis for this gender construction is the Purāṇas, which were written by upper-varna men for the purpose of teaching their social instruction to others.

The Purāṇas have developed more pluralistic and expansive subject matter that addressed diverse castes and classes (Saxena, 2018). They gave a lot of authority to form opinions about what women should do. The Purāṇas were available to people by three means – recitation, narration by storytellers and performing rituals. The paper introduced women in a four forms, chaste wives, loyal mothers, bad widows, and fallen women. These literary choices made by the paper are used to establish social norms. In Shalini Shah's citation's case in Rai (2021), one can see how women of said textual traditions live through their “doubly-veiled” speech: They seem to be talking but they're expressing what is approved by men.

The study covers the period of time from 300 CE to 1100 CE and encompasses the bulk of the studied period of the five Mahāpurāṇas. The role of wife (patni/bharya), mother (mata),

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daughter (putri/kanya) and widow (vidhava) are the four major thematic elements that set the structure of the paper. Women's rights to participate in rituals and their property rights are explored in the final section, as the Purāṇic texts exhibit a number of conflicting perspectives on each of these issues.

Textual Sources and Methodological Notes

The five Purāṇas selected for the purpose of this paper are Viṣṇu, Matsya, Mārkaṇḍeya, Agni, and Bhāgavata because they discuss social norms and the organization of the family to the greatest length. The general dating and most common social issues that they have in relation to this study are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Five Mahāpurāṇas examined

Purana	Approximate Date (CE)	Social Themes	Scholarly Work
Viṣṇu Purana	300–500 CE	Dharma that brings a distinction between wife and husband in the home along with varna responsibilities for males forms a framework that disintegrates these classes.	(Rocher, 1986; Doniger, 2010)
Matsya Purana	300–500 CE	The objective of marriage from law perspective is to put women in a position of ritual participant to whom the obligation of fasting falls upon.	(Rocher, 1986; Hazra, 1936; Dimmitt & van Buitenen, 1978)
Mārkaṇḍeya Purana	250–700 CE	The combination of Devī Māhātmya and maternal imagery and female power display the feminine strength.	(Rocher, 1986; Coburn, 1985; Balkaran, 2022)
Agni Purana	800–900 CE	The people perform their daily observances in their sacred way and their ceremonies of śrāddha.	(Rocher, 1986; Hazra, 1936; Kāne, 1941)
Bhāgavata Purana	c. 900–1100 CE	The Devahuti story illustrates devotional women's practice of bhakti in relation to God.	(Rocher, 1986; Bryant, 2005; Gupta, 2020; Sheridan, 1986)

Historical content analysis research method is used by the researchers in their research on Garuda Mahāpurāṇas as cited by Adhikari & Adhikari (2024). This method involves systematically reading through the text so that the researchers could identify the common themes and standardised statements and story-construction that indicate social organisation. Quotes from well-known academic translations and commentaries of the texts are included in the paper.

The Wife

The pativrata encompasses the full ideal of the woman that appears in all the five Purāṇas. Its meaning is exact, being the combination of two words: "pati" (husband), and "vrata" (vow). According to Viṣṇu Purana a woman's husband is her deity, teacher and her highest dharma (Virtue) which she has to abide by (Viṣṇu Purana 3.11).

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This is not a secondary duty in conjunction with other religious duties. It states the predominant religion of a married woman. Her ritual practice of fasting and worship become meaningful due to her focus on the health of her husband rather than on God.

In the Agni purana, it is shown that a good wife is obligated to carry out many responsibilities. A wife should get up before her husband for his worship, she should eat only when her husband has finished eating and she should never address her husband with disrespect whatsoever, even at night when he is sleeping. The text makes it clear that a wife who fully fulfils her duties towards her husband on account of her religious endeavours of serving him, obtains spiritual merit (Agni Purana 153.4–6).

The Bhāgavata Purana does not convey the duties of wife by laying down rules but in story telling language. The same is elaborated in great detail in the story of Devahuti, the wife of the sage Kardama. Devahuti gave a lot of years to her husband that led her to suffer physically for many years. For surrendering herself into his embrace, Kardama is rewarded with indescribable pleasures and she becomes the mother of the sage Kapila who has a high significance in the Bhāgavata Purana (3.22-23). It is a story that gives rewards to her for having lived her entire life for her housekeeping commitments. According to Gupta (2026), Devahuti learns about spirituality in this passage through her search for spiritual development and freedom.

The Mother

The role of the wife in the Purāṇas is inferior, but the mother clearly holds the superior position. The mother throughout all five texts studied is venerated at all times making it the most esteemed or honoured figure. The Devī Māhātmya is one of the most precious Purāṇas in Hindu tradition, available in this Mārkaṇḍeya Purana which speaks of the Divine power in women. As a cosmic mother, all existence comes from Durgā: " By you this universe is borne, by you this world is created" (Devī Māhātmya 1.78, Mārkaṇḍeya Purana 81.78). Scholars like Saxena (2018), Kumari (2025) laid the foundation of the concept and study of the feminine divinity which led to a direct impact on society that in turn influenced the perception for mothers. According to Purāṇas, the mother embodies and carries with her a part of the sacred-energy and śakti of the goddess.

A particular order of authority is established in the Matsya Purana with mother taking precedence over her father. According to the Matsya purana the mother is ten times better than the father (197.3). The view that has prevailed from the Hindu law, as well as the religious texts based on it, only reinforces the idea that a mother incurs an unspeakable debt from her activities of conceiving and delivering, and afterwards breastfeeding a newborn.

Motherhood benefited society, since it was linked to the need for male descendants. This is acknowledged openly in the Purāṇas. A woman who gives birth to sons has done her basic duty in society. In the Agni Purana and the Viṣṇu Purana, both sons and daughters, are born in the highest moment of the woman's life, in which she becomes freed from all types of sin and social responsibilities. The comparative analysis between the five Purāṇas and their evaluation of the spiritual worthiness of motherhood is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Motherhood and Merit

Purana	Textual Reference	Motherhood	Merit Assessment
Viṣṇu Purana	Viṣṇu Purāṇa 1.9	Lakṣmī's birth is associated with 3 generations enrichment.	Family Generational wealth
Matsya Purana	Matsya Purāṇa 214.21	Mother has special status than the father because she bears the child	Household authority provides social and moral regulation over family members
Mārkaṇḍeya Purana	Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa 81–93; Devī Māhātmya 4.9–10, 5.7–10	Goddess as cosmic mother embodiment of divine wisdom	Rising to spiritual level through divine identification.
Agni Purana	Agni Purāṇa 158.61–69	At birth of child, there are ritual consequences for parents	Reproductive sexual practices are used as a means of eliminating karmic attachments.
Bhāgavata Purana	Bhāgavata Purāṇa 3.33.1, 3.33.26–33	Devahuti becomes liberated by instruction of Kapila	Maternal responsibilities bring spiritual freedom to the mother as parents.

The Daughter

In Purāṇic literature place of daughter is a transitional one. The daughter will serve as property of the natal family till she gets married, on the day of her marriage she will create another family with her husband. The women's condition of being "temporary" prevents their discussion. There are briefly mentioned until they are "allotted" as a spouse to a man. According to Viṣṇu purana the birth of a daughter is the source of joy as well as anxiety to father (Viṣṇu purana 3.10). In making actual emotional attachments with their fathers, daughters bring social stressor in terms of being expected to be safe until the wedding day after which, hopefully, they are parted by their father giving them to the man they are wed to. The term kanyādāna, or giving of the virgin daughter, is the most charitable gift a father can give (Viṣṇu Purana 3.10.17). In this context the daughter is seen as an autonomous person who independently chooses her life. She is a sacred object which operates from family to family. The essence of her value is in her purity, which can only be safeguarded against any dangers that could compromise her purity.

The Matsya Purana lays down some age criteria for daughter's marriage. Therefore, the ideal age to marry is before puberty, and after that age, the father incurs sin for each year gap following the girl's marriage (though he keeps her in his house) (Matsya Purana 154.19–21). How the society was uncomfortable with the physical appearance of the girl and how the dealing of a girl was to be handled ceremoniously from both the Purāṇic and Dharmashastra literature is discussed.

Partially, this is answered in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purana. In her unmarried, independent aspect, Kumārī (the eternal virgin and warrior) is described as one who slays demons without the help of husband or father in Devī Māhātmya (89–90). The daughter is a free agency in the divinely created heaven, and it is said that a divinely-magical idea is not a thing that can be

fixed as a problem. Gender construction in the Purāṇas is fundamentally a conflict between the restricted but enticing life of the human being, and the untampered life of the daughter.

The Widow

It is true that none other woman is treated in the Purāṇas as ambiguously as the widow and is usually given a negative description. When a woman's husband dies, she ceases to have her principal role in society. Now she is not a wife anymore. As her children grow up her active motherhood is over. She doesn't have a definite place in society.

In both the Agni Purana and the Viṣṇu Purana widows are described as such that they need to master their desires absolutely, have only one meal a day, lie on the ground and refrain from putting on any ornament or pleasure (Viṣṇu Purana 3.12; Agni Purana 154). Most of them are single and have to abide by this rule as they have to concentrate on rites that will help the souls of their deceased husbands through religious activities and self-denial.

Sati, wherein a widow burned herself to death on her husband's pyre is described in some of the Purāṇas, but does not get the support from all five. Both the Viṣṇu Purana and the Agni Purana mention the practice as a good practice, and one of the highest paths that a widow can take (Viṣṇu Purana 3.12.21). The Bhāgavata Purana presents a more limited view on this matter because of its later composition which incorporated influences from the bhakti movement that created new options for female religious practices.

Mandal (2025) showed that the ancient Indian legal texts as well as the Dharmashastras had far more elaborated guidelines with regards the remarriage of widows than the Purāṇas could do. Some law schools permitted the remarriage of a widow under certain conditions. All of these conditions related solely to the young widow who had not completed her marriage ceremony. The Purāṇic śāstras, however, illustrated that the widow, who never remarries, is more meritorious than the remarried widow.

The Garuda Purana is not one of the five main texts used in this study, nor does it receive as much attention in this study as it deserves, but it also has some importance and should be mentioned. Adhikari & Adhikari (2024) have explained in detail the Preta Kalpa section in it and concludes that the ritual, proceeding the death of the ancestors were performed by only male member of the family, namely Sapiṇḍīkaraṇa and śrāddha ceremonies. Because daughters were not deemed as valid participants, their participation in the rituals was not allowed. For a widow without sons, there was an impending threat due to the fact that husbands were the only ones that could carry out her husband's afterlife ceremonies that would bring her peace.

Ritual Agency and Property Rights

An examination into women's role in ritual practices gives clues of the complex natures of Purāṇic scriptures which have not been unearthed by other field of scriptural studies. The general assumption was that women were predominantly absent from the Vedic ritual. The Purāṇic evidence throws some light on this.

Fasting observances or vratas are mentioned in Matsya Purana and Bhāgavata Purana which were specifically set up for and executed by the women. Vratas were the integral part and important components of the religious practices carried out in households. A wife who observes the proper vratas was thought to render merits for her husband, save her children from harm, and prolong her husband's life. The study of the Matsya Mahāpurāṇas by Tyagi

(2014), concludes that the vrata tradition was one of the most significant 'spaces' in which women gained genuine agency in their religious practices. The texts she reads demonstrate that women are intentional in their acts of engaging in vratas, working out with the texts' normative acts and in some cases challenging them.

There is one story in the Bhāgavata Purana with Draupadi that is associated with her strong moral values and her expression before the people through speaking. The Bhāgavata Purana makes reference to this Mahābhārata incident in which Draupadi suffers, but also has moral strength/power (Bhāgavata Purana 1.15.50).

Limited information is available about property rights in the Purāṇic texts. The texts acknowledge the notion of strīdhana, personal goods acquired by a woman as the gift of her husband, but they distinguish it from "ancestral property," which women could not inherit. Exploring the history of Hindu law, Halder & Jaishankar (2008) found that the Purāṇic era laid groundwork that continues to affect Hindu women's rights to ownership, giving them only wedding gifts but not the land itself. Table 3 below illustrates all the women's property rights and ritual rights found in the five Purāṇas.

Table 3: Women Ritual and Property Rights in 5 Mahāpurāṇas

Domain	Viṣṇu Purana	Matsya Purana	Mārkaṇḍeya Purana	Agni Purana	Bhāgavata Purana
Independent vrata observance	Permitted	Permitted and detailed	Permitted	Permitted	A devotional framework enabled religious practices.
Household ritual participation	Both husband and wife complement each other as their life partner.	Both husband and wife complement each other as their life partner.	Both husband and wife complement each other as their life partner.	Both husband and wife complement each other as their life partner.	Both husband and wife complement each other as their life partner.
Direct execution of ancestor veneration	Not permitted	Not permitted	Not permitted	Not permitted	Not addressed directly
Strīdhana possession	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ancestral property and land rights	Not recognized	Not recognized	Not recognized	Not recognized	Not recognized

DISCUSSION

Four elements are responsible for the recognition of women types in the family – the pativrata ideal, Mārkaṇḍeya Purana goddess image, mother and vrata observance in the family. This is a subject of immense value throughout history. The requirements have clear implications that an individual must act correctly when carrying out their respective tasks, that includes contact with men and a 'patriarch' family. The social deterioration of a woman

who goes against the pativrata standard relates to suffering the loss of her honor, and in turn gaining a spiritual defense.

This is referred to as a process of ‘conditioning’ by Jayan & Sankaranarayanan (2017) whereby women are prepared to see their value in terms of their compatibility with the set norms implemented by men. Goddess shows her divinity with wild and free behavior, whereas women behave differently in the human dimension. According to Sharma (2024) women's status suffered since the Vedic period and throughout the history due to the formation of the formalized social norms through texts that generally framed norms in a normative way.

Kumar & Bhosale (2026) show that the Purāṇas are given a generous interpretation, attributing an Ardhanārīśvara theory to Purāṇic theology, where Shiva and śakti are two aspects of the same god, and thus complementing each other. The accepted restrictions on women do not reflect an overall rejection of her; rather it was a social system in which male and female roles are complementary.

CONCLUSION

In the Purāṇas, women are important players in sustaining social frameworks and cosmic order; however, the notion of women's centrality does not allow them liberty to move and to make their own decisions. The wife must be served, the mother must give birth to sons, the daughter, the widow must renounce. Because the social groups that produced the texts employed them in a way to serve their particular agenda, these elements are an integral part of the texts. The Purāṇas are multi-layered text with multiple forms of their content. In the Agni and Viṣṇu Purāṇas, there are strict rules laid out for women's behaviour and how to practice their faith. Women may thus be able to take part in their spiritual pursuits using the Bhāgavata Purana, whose Bhakti system repudiates those limitations. The Devī Māhātmya of Mārkaṇḍeya Purana insists on divine feminine power which transcends any type of male power. For ordinary women the vrata literature offers a recognised space for religion. The study should focus on the dissemination of the Purāṇic texts in different regions as the context of reading the text differs depending on the context. The study would have benefited from an analysis of the women's interpretations of these texts since there were traces of such interpretation.

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Conflict of Interest

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