



June 2023

Established 1985

Issue 6/2023

In South Africa June is a significant month. On 16 June we commemorate Youth Day to honour the contribution of youth in the struggle for liberation. On 26 June 1955, the Freedom Charter was adopted at the Congress of the People by the generation that resisted the harsh brutalities of apartheid and endured imprisonment.

With 29 years of democratic government we now are sadly in "ineptocracy". Living in a crisis with the crashing of basic services, be it electricity or water or sewer or health or education caused by blatant mismanagement. We have an economy in decline, unabated corruption, and moral decay. To find meaningful answers to the crisis in society we go to the manual for humanity - the Vedas and look more deeply into our history in the Arya Samaj in South Africa.

Women shape the future generations. The focus in this issue is on the status of women and the legacies our mothers left. We hope that youth will find useful lessons from the articles assembled to shape the future.

In this issue, we present a feature article on the "Status and Prestige of Women in Vedic Literature: Reflections on Today's Society" a lecture delivered by Ms Oosha Chirkoot-Lalla at the Back to the Vedas Lecture Series on 15 March 2023. "A Tribute to the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj" salutes the organisation for reaching 80 years. Veda Niketan congratulates the Samaj on this achievement and places on record our deep gratitude for the contributions made on Deep Daan by the organisation. In our series "Views from Our Priests", Pt Shobana Singh, inspired by the Sanskrit word in the May Issue, has written an article "Shraddha Leads to the Path of Spiritual Perfection".

Your contributions and comments are welcome. Please see the last page for the criteria for articles.

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Arthi Shanand, Karuna Mohan, Kirun Satgoor, Ressma Rambaros, Shobana Singh, Sudhira Sham



ओम सा नो भूमे प्र रोचय हिरण्यस्येव संहृशि मा नो
द्विक्षत कश्चन। Aum sā no bhūme pra rocaya
hiraṇyasyeva saṁhṛśi mā no dvikṣata kaśvna. Atharva
Veda 12.1.18

**May my motherland grant me lustre of gold; may she
purge hatred from my heart!**

This mantra reflects on a bright future and an end to hatred. The generation who adopted the Freedom Charter of 1955 and the youth of 1976 in South Africa (the land of gold) struggled for change. These generations ended apartheid. They forgave those who practiced apartheid and set up a government of National Unity with them.

Mother Earth produces gold, used for currency, jewellery and in electronics. Mother Earth also produces the food for humans and animals. All countries need to shine with the lustre of gold. All need to share the resources and ensure that there is no room for hatred.

Pondering further on the history of the Arya Samaj we get a glimpse into why the women who were settled in South Africa organised themselves in the era of apartheid. As the first generation and even second generation after indenture they saw the country of their birth as the motherland. They reared their children and shaped a future for them against great odds.

Published by Veda Niketan, Arya Samaj SA

The Status and Prestige of Women in Vedic Literature: Reflections on Today's Society

Vedic Literature is a huge body of hymns, philosophy, rituals, sacrifices, and spiritual practices contained in texts such as the Vedas, Brahmana, Aranyaka, Upanishads and Vedang. The Vedic Age can be split into two periods: the Early or Rig Vedic Age (1500 to 1000 BCE) and the Later or Epic Age (1000 to 600 BCE).

During the Vedic Era women were considered superior to men and occupied first place in all matters. The Vedas are often referred to in the feminine, for instance, Shrimati Rigveda Samhita. Whilst the Gayatri Mantra, the holiest prayer of Hindus in the Vedas, is symbolically referred to as "Devi" in classical Hinduism. In later periods the Vedic concept gave rise to the male-female divine pair, such as, *Radha-Krishna*, *Sita-Raam*, *Uma-Mahesh*, *Lakshmi-Narayan*, in which the female is usually addressed first.

The feminine forms of the Absolute and the popular Hindu Goddesses are believed to have evolved in the Vedic Era and represent the feminine qualities and energies of Brahman. The Vedic philosophical concept of "Nari Shakti", the principle of female energy, was also a product of the Vedic age. However, one must bear in mind that in the Vedic Age and subsequently the Arya Samaj acknowledges and accepts that God has no form. In other words, God is formless.

Women make many sacrifices throughout their lives, and the one who sacrifices anything for others, ought to be respected and honoured. Although Hinduism recognizes both the masculine and feminine attributes of Divinity, where the feminine is not honoured, one cannot claim to know God in its entirety.

In the woman are found all the highest qualities that distinguish humans from other creatures. Qualities of patience, tolerance, compassion, tenderness, forgiveness, sympathy, and the like. If the entire universe is filled with wonder and beauty, then a woman is that beauty personified. She is the one who fills multiple roles.

As mother she is the core of family life

As creator she produces off-springs and sustains the human race

As educator and protector she is "the wind beneath the wings of her children" constantly striving to nurture and instil good values and morals in them so that they may excel and become honest and compassionate human beings

As daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, aunt, and niece, she is the mentor and role model in her extended family

As a career woman, she shows great intelligence, skill and resilience and has excels in every field of endeavour and is on par with men

The Early/Rig Vedic Age may be called "the Golden Age of Womanhood in India" during which time women were treated with the highest respect, equality and dignity and enjoyed a high status and great prestige in society.

The first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, said this:

"The status of women depicts the social, economic and mental condition of a nation."

And, Samora Machel of Mozambique had this to say in March 1973:

"The emancipation of women is not an act of charity, the result of a humanitarian or compassionate attitude. The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the Revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the precondition of its victory."

No other culture has given women a higher status than the Vedic culture. The writings of the Vedic Era suggest that women were accorded full status in society as full and equal citizens. They shared an equal standing with the menfolk. Women could attend the popular assemblies and Vedic texts contain references to women publicly attending festivals, dances, and feasts. Women were treated with honour, dignity, and prestige.

In the Grihastha Ashrama (household life) the role of a woman is equal to that of a man. Both husband and wife are expected to live based on equality and contribute to the greater good of family and society. In all religious ceremonies she participates with her husband.

Women were considered superior to men. In Manusmriti 11.145, Manu has said that “the father is ten times greater than the teacher and more significantly, the mother is a hundred times greater than the father.” And in Manusmriti “*Yatra naryastu puhyante ramante tatra devatah*”- where women are respected, there dwell men of divine quality.

The Vedas advocate gender equality and do not encourage gender bias in any form in relation to a woman. In every field a woman played an equal role with men. The question of whether women had the freedom to educate themselves did not arise, simply because, education for women was considered important.

Young girls had equal right to education. They could be educated by means of *Brahmacharya* or *Upanayan*. Women had a choice to study the scriptures or be householders. If women so desired, they could undergo the sacred thread ceremony or “*Upanayana*” (a sacrament to pursue Vedic Studies).

In this period there was the custom of “*Swayamvara*” where a girl, usually from the upper class of society, had the freedom to choose her husband from among eligible bachelors invited to her house for the occasion.



After marriage the girl became a “*grihini*” (wife) and was considered “*ardhangini*” or one half of her husband.

A woman was “*Samrajni*” that is the queen or mistress of the household, and she had an equal share with her husband in the performance of religious rites. However, women were not independent persons in the eyes of the law and had to remain under the protective care of their male relatives.

During the Early/Rig Vedic period:

There were no child marriages.

The marriageable age appears to have been after puberty i.e. 16 to 17 years.

Monogamy was generally practiced, that is, one man could marry only one woman at a time, whilst polygamy was prevalent amongst Royalty and the noble families.

After the death of her husband a woman could choose to live the life of a Sanyasin (Hermit).

There was no practice of divorce in this period

The custom of Sati did not exist.

Two mantras of the Rig Veda (1.179.1 and 2) are attributed to significant females in the Vedic period. There were women scholars such as, Ghosha, Sikata, Nivavari, Apala an Visvavara.

The Upanishads contain examples of women scholars and sages who were deep thinkers, skilful debaters, and renowned academics, such as, Gargi, Lopamudra, Ghosa and Maitreyi, etc. who contributed to the composition of the Vedas.

Women were allowed to study the scriptures and elevate themselves to the highest position as Rishi. The Rig Veda mentions about thirty Women Rishis. Though few, these women Rishis contributed much to the cause of Society and the Vedas.

Throughout the many years of Vedic culture women have always been given the highest level of respect and freedom but also protection and safety. In the Manusmriti there is a saying that translates to “where women are happy, there will be prosperity”.

The Vedas contain certain prescriptions that empower women:

Rig Veda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> women should be given the lead stage for ruling the nation (Rig Veda 10.85.46), in societal work (Rig Veda 10.85.46) and in Government organisations (Rig Veda 10.85.46), they should have the same right as a son over the father's property (Rig Veda 3.31.1)
Yajur Veda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> women should: be valiant (Yajur Veda 10.03) and participate in War (Yajur Veda 16.44)
Atharva Veda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> women should: earn fame (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be scholars (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be illuminating (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be prosperous and wealthy (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be intelligent and knowledgeable (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), take part in the Legislative chambers (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be protector of Family and Society (Atharva Veda 14.1.20), be provider of wealth and food (Atharva Veda 11.1.17), be provider of prosperity (Atharva Veda 11.1.17) and ride on Chariots (Atharva Veda 9.9.2).

- After the age of 18, remarriage of a widow was permitted under certain conditions. (Atharva Veda 9.5.27). For example, a widow could marry the brother of her deceased husband - known as Niyoga.
- Unmarried girls had a share in their fathers' property, but married girls did not.
- Prostitutes or *Devadasies* were much a part of this later Vedic period
- The girls were married to God in a temple and expected to spend the rest of their lives serving men in the society.
- They were allowed to make a living, but their lives were regulated by a Code of Conduct.

The opportunity for education though was not completely denied in this later Vedic period. For instance, in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad there is a high-level dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Gargi that proves that women were highly educated.

With the passage of time the position and condition of woman worsened and became compromised in the Middle Ages. Through the influence of Mughal conquerors the Purdah was introduced. The custom of Sati was being practiced. Women were no longer considered first and were now being considered as secondary, just good for domestic chores and bearing children. Child marriage became common. Birth of the daughter was considered inauspicious, whilst that of the son was an occasion for celebration. Polygamy was common amongst the nobles.

Divorce was uncommon amongst Hindus but permitted for Muslims. Due to marriage of young women to older men there were many widows in society. Women in the Mughal period were not allowed to remarry. Over time the high level of respect, freedom, protection, and safety as well as the great status and prestige women enjoyed during the Vedic age, was slowly but surely being eroded and women were being subjected to unequal treatment.

Looking at the current society, there are generally some who follow the path of righteousness, meditation and spiritualism and others who do not but tend to yield to materialism and the pleasures of the senses. The attitude and mindset of the latter group is influenced by the outside material world often leaving them very restless and dissatisfied.

During the Later or Epic Vedic age (1000 to 600 BCE) the position and condition of women deteriorated:

- Aitareya Brahmana says that the daughter is the source of misery, but son is protector of the family.
- Maitrayani Samhita says that there are three evils Liquor, dice, and women.
- According to Shatapatha Brahmana a woman was not to eat out and was to eat only after the husband had finished eating.
- As per Brahmana literature a man would get the same punishment for killing his wife as for killing a Shudra.
- Women were deprived of the Upanayan Sanskar.
- Women could not attend the Tribal Council or Assembly
- Married women in the Upper Class had to tolerate the presence of rival wives and
- the custom of Sati was being practised.

Furthermore, the current society judges' man by his material progress and ranks him accordingly on society's status-ladder. Man is constantly chasing his desires for possessions and material success which results in him becoming highly strung, stressed, and impatient. Such a man, when frustrated with life often turns to substance abuse and to domestic abuse and violence which he inflicts on those around him, namely, his wife and children.

To exacerbate the situation, there are some cultures in rural communities with a patriarchal mindset where the women are illiterate, unemployed, and subservient. These women are then taken advantage of and are treated by their menfolk and families with disrespect, inequality and with no respect for a person's human rights. In such a toxic environment, women are given no status and prestige and endure all kinds of violence committed against them.

With the escalating violence, governments in some countries have attempted to manage the situation to prevent violence against women. Most democratic Governments have enacted a Bill of Rights enshrined into their Constitutions and have followed this with the enactment of a plethora of protective legislation and creation of institutions to protect and enforce those rights, but this has not yielded much success. Some of the underlying causes for failing to prevent violence, inter alia, are:

- ✚ Government paying lip service or treating the issues with rhetoric,
- ✚ Lack of funding by government to maintain the upkeep of shelters for women
- ✚ Difficulty in changing the perception and attitude of perpetrators towards women whom they do not respect and do not treat as equals.
- ✚ On the other hand, educated females employed in huge cities who are self-supportive receive a better deal as they are respected, recognized, and treated equally and have some degree of status and prestige as their fundamental rights are being protected.

According to the 2021 General Household Survey more than half (51%) of South Africa's population are women. South Africa has a Bill of Rights enshrined in its Constitution, 1996, in which women are entitled to equality and their human rights are protected.

In the latter half of the 20th century, political and economic developments presented new opportunities and challenges for women in South Africa. During the first decade of democracy the new government embarked on significant law reform and creation of policies and institutions to correct the ills of apartheid and protect and enforce the laws.

South Africa has begun empowering women but largely in the political arena. In 2015, in local government, of the 278 municipalities in South Africa 106 municipalities had a female mayor. Due to the ANC policy of 50% women representation in Parliament, South Africa now has 46% women represented in Parliament.

Yet these women have not spear-headed policy against gender-based violence. The roles of Public Protector and the National Director of Public Prosecutions are occupied by females. In sport, South Africa has a national all-women team for soccer and for cricket.

In 2019 President Cyril Ramaphosa disclosed that violence in South Africa was a national crisis. Every year approximately 200 000 women report some form of violent physical attack against them to the SA Police. South Africa has some of the highest global rates for Gender Based Violence which includes rape, female homicide, and domestic abuse.

The female rate of homicide is approximately 24 per 100 000 persons which is almost six times the global average. In 2012 the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that monthly approximately 60 000 women and children are victims of domestic abuse. This is highest reported rate globally.

Another study discloses that one out of five women are victims of domestic abuse which is the most common and wide-spread human rights abuses. The rate of sexual violence is amongst the highest in the world. Police statistics show that between 2019 and 2020 the rate of reported sexual offences increased by an average of 246 incidents per day, of which 116 cases were of rape. Human Rights Watch has dubbed South Africa "The Rape Capital of the World".

Despite women being accorded some degree of status and prestige, women still suffer prejudice and discrimination in the workplace: women are paid salaries which are not on par with men for the same position, and women are not the first choice for promotions, which often goes to men.

In India too there has been progress on the empowerment of women in senior leadership positions which were previously reserved for males, such as, in the Army, Navy, Aviation and Politics. In 1966 India had its first female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. The current President of India, Draupadi Murmu, is from a Tribal community of Uparbeda Village in Odisha State. She is India's 15th President, the second woman to hold this prestigious office and the youngest person to do so.

In 2021 a flight with an all-women flight crew created history when they operated the longest commercial flight for Air India from San Francisco to Bengaluru over the North Pole. The cities are at opposite ends of the world and the direct distance between them is 13993 kms with a time zone change of almost 13.5 hours.

Despite the great efforts to empower women, the enactment of a Bill of Human Rights, numerous protective legislations, and creation of institutions to manage violence and abuse, India also still faces challenges with violence against women especially in the rural belt. Women in the rural belt still face acts of domestic violence at the hands of their spouses.

India has various forms of violence and abuse against women, such as, dowry deaths, honour killings, trafficking, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, online abuse, and caste-based violence et cetera. In India 70% of women face domestic violence annually. On female foeticide MacPherson estimates that 100 000 abortions are performed annually in India solely because the foetus is female.

When compared to the respect, equality, high status, and prestige accorded to women in the early Vedic period one cannot help but feel utterly ashamed and disgusted at the level to which today's society has sunk and the horrific violence that women in South Africa, India and elsewhere endure.

From Vedic Literature we glean that there was an equal status and great prestige given to women. In the Early Vedic Age it was at a high level because of the respect, dignity, equality, and liberties were accorded to women. Women were even considered superior to men. This was "The Golden Age of Womanhood in India". The prestige and status of women waned and declined to some extent in the later Vedic Age. And, then during the Medieval Age the prestige, status and position and condition of women worsened and was compromised.

In current times we see that some women who are privileged have some degree of status and prestige but others who are disadvantaged and are part of the patriarchal community have very little or no status or prestige and suffer violence at the hands of their partners and spouses. Despite governments' efforts to try to prevent violence against women, governments still face huge challenges and struggle to control, prevent and combat the rising tide of violence against women.

Perhaps a social revolution to root out the current social evils against women is needed to reinstate the respect, dignity, prestige, and equal status that women enjoyed during the Early/Rig Vedic Period as disclosed in Vedic Literature. This will need true, honest, and uncorrupted leaders who are committed to removing the illiteracy, poverty, prejudice, inequality, and the con-comitant scourge that it brings against women.

If each one of us assumes the responsibility whenever we witness abuse against women in our families, neighbourhood, in the workplace or in our communities by asking ourselves the question: "What can I do to support women in my family, my community, my society or my nation we will be contribute towards the much-needed reform to improve the plight of women and truly liberate women everywhere." If one can do this, then one is a true Aryan or Noble Person.

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Author: Oosha Devi Chirkoot-Lalla

This speech was delivered to the Back to the Vedas lecture on 15 March 2022

Tribute to the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj

In keeping with the commitment of the Arya Samaj to develop and educate women, and to deliver equal status in society, the President of the Veda Dharma Sabha, the Late Mr. F. Satyapal, initiated the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj. This followed on from the establishment of the first women's organisation in Arya Samaj South Africa in 1942, the Arya Stree Samaj in Durban.

This move began a process of the Arya Samaj movement in Pietermaritzburg giving women the space to be independent and to organise themselves. As the women of Pietermaritzburg built the movement, they included non-Arya Samaj organisations in their programmes and in this way developed unity in the Hindu community of Pietermaritzburg.

In this tribute to the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj, we acknowledge the efforts of women who built, maintained, and sustained the organisation.

The world was in the throes of World War 2 in the early 1940's. Women in the frontline countries had left their homes to work in factories to support the war effort while men were on the battlefield.

The ANC in South Africa had created a Bill of Rights based on the Atlantic Charter drafted by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1943. The ANC Women's League was formed in 1943. Women were thus officially admitted as ANC members.

The NIC had formed the Indian Service Corps to provide transport, medical, hygiene and ambulance services in support of the war effort. Resistance to the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act (Pegging Act) was building in the community.

Within this context the formation of a women's organisation in Pietermaritzburg to mobilize and build the confidence of Indian women in the social and religious space was commendable.

In 1951 there were 20 710 Indians in Pietermaritzburg constituting 5% of the Indian population in South Africa. Six out of ten were under the age of 21 years and seven out of ten adults were married. Just over 81% of the people lived in the Borough of Pietermaritzburg. ¹

¹ K Mohan, The Entry of Indian women Workers into the Shoe factories of Pietermaritzburg (1970 – 1990): aspects of

Experience and the Shaping of Consciousness, University of Natal, 1991

During the 1950s Indian women of Pietermaritzburg who were wives, sisters, and daughters of: property owners, the Christian priests and Arya Samaj leaders, smaller traders and men who were active in religious, welfare and cultural organisations, participated in a women's organisation, the Pietermaritzburg Indian Women's Association (PIWA). Members of PIWA were active in welfare-orientated groupings.²

PIWA was formed in 1933 by Kunwarani Maharaj Singh, the wife of the Agent (the appointed representative of India to South Africa) to address the need for White and Indian women to come together to develop a better understanding of each other, and to organise Indian women to break down the barriers of language, religion, and caste.³

Experience gained in PIWA helped Indian women to participate in community organisations. The close contact with White women had given Indian women skills and confidence to work in organisations.⁴

On 9 May 1943, the Hindu Stree Samaj of Pietermaritzburg was launched. Mrs Sushila Manilal Gandhi was the keynote speaker.



Mrs R B Maharaj, First president of the Samaj

Mrs. R. B. Maharaj was elected as the President, Krishnawathee Jugmohan Singh as Secretary and Saraswathee Bramdaw as Treasurer. This team of leaders

shaped the aims and objectives of the Samaj, to foster unity and create a bond of togetherness amongst women. They created a platform where women's ideas were harnessed and used for the betterment of society and advocated a culture of human rights.



Members of the Stree Samaj after formation

For a good part of the 80 years of existence the Samaj developed innovative traditions and were trail blazers in social, religious, and cultural activity. But perhaps the most poignant in the Samaj's history was the fact that several women leaders of the Samaj were single women, who devoted their lives to the upliftment of society. Some were young professionals in the teaching field, others were talented in arts and crafts.

Both young and old women made up the base of the organisation. They worked together to be a self-sufficient organisation. The Samaj assisted women to be actively involved in the public sphere. The members of the Samaj proudly wore a uniform of pink sarees.



Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj members rendering items at a function

The survival of any organisation for 80 years is due to the dedication and commitment of its officials who diligently, faithfully and with much enthusiasm developed the organisation.

² ibid

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

We pay tribute to the various officials of the organisation who have passed on, and encourage the current leadership to continue with the legacy that has been left.

We recognise the names of past Presidents: Mrs R B Maharaj (wife of the first President of the Veda Dharma Sabha Pt R B Maharaj), Mrs Kunthie Maharaj, Mrs Makhan, Miss S. B. Nohar, Mrs B. D. Nohar, Miss Roshnee Rajkumar, Mrs R. Ramlall and Pt. V. Satgar; past Secretaries: Mrs Krishnawathee Jugmohan Singh (wife of Pt Jugmohan Singh and the eldest daughter of Mr F Satyapal, past President of the Veda Dharma Sabha), Miss Dharam Ramcharan, Mrs Bimla Ramesar, Miss Shama Ramcharan, Miss Ruby Rajkoomar; and past Treasurers: Mrs Saraswathee Bramdaw (wife of the founder of the Leader newspaper), Mrs R. Mohan (sister-in-law of past President of Veda Dharma Sabha Pt B Bookhan), and Mrs Devika Ramesar.

The leadership of the Samaj undertook special efforts to welcome into their fold new brides who married into families of Pietermaritzburg and thus grew the organisation.

At the same time due credit goes to the men who encouraged and supported the women to participate in public life.

The relationship between the Veda Dharma Sabha and the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj continued and become a pillar of unity in diversity and mutual support.

The Veda Dharma Sabha Hindi School teachers were all members of the Stree Samaj. When the Veda Dharma Sabha celebrated its Diamond Jubilee in 1969, the members of the Stree Samaj were part of the teams that made the function a success.

The Samaj meets at the Longmarket Street Vedic Mandir. The male members of the Veda Dharma Sabha provided support to the women of the Stree Samaj on skills they lacked such as driving, financial accounting and the heavy tasks that required muscles.

While the 40's, 50's and 60's were devoted to the base of the organisation, of finding means to build the Samaj, the 70's, 80's and 90's were a period of consolidation where members became a tight knit group of close friends.

During this period several members were moved into the new group area designated for Indians. They formed new organisations and the membership resident in the city centre slowly dwindled.

Despite this, the members continued to meet in the Longmarket Street Mandir, and the activities continued. Members excelled in singing with weekly practice sessions in the home of Mrs R Mohan during the decades of the 70's and 80's. These efforts led to the ladies of the Stree Samaj earning the title of "nightingales".



Officials and members of the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj 1959
 Back row: Mesdames, S Rajkoomar, P Maharaj, B Ramcharan, V Satyapal, D Ramcharan, J B Nohar, R Singh, B Smajhawan, S Ramcharan
 Middle row: Mesdames, K Maharaj, Gobind, R Mohan, V Satgoor, A E Maney, S B Nohar, I Dookie, R Rajkoomar, S Swcharan, R Ramlal, Soodew, G.M Singh, B Bookhan
 Front Row: Medames, H Makan, DS Nohar, Mungroo, R Rajkoomar, M Sewpaul, T Baijoo, F Satyapal, B Sewpaul, J Mathadeen, Ramcharan



Members of the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj in the decade of 60's



Members of the Stree Samaj participating at a concert. Left to right: Mrs T Ramkelowon, Ms Indira Bookhan, Ms Roshnee Rajkumar and Mrs R Mohan

Some innovations implemented by the Stree Samaj are shared below as these distinguished the organisation making it a popular and renowned organisation capable of an outreach, commanding the respect of all.

The Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj was the first organisation in Pietermaritzburg, in the Midlands region, and within the Arya Samaj to celebrate the festival of Holi from the 1950's, which was observed by all without any distinction of caste, creed, status, or sex.

People forgot all enmity and embraced each other with warmth and love and renewed their friendship. By the 1960's, the ladies of the Gujarati Society joined in, followed by members of Veda Dharma Sabha and later, members of the Shri Vishnu Temple, making the initiative of women a true community event.

The lower end of Longmarket Street was filled with joy and fun and children enjoyed themselves after Hindi School playing with colour water sprays.

Each year, together with members of the sister organisations, the Stree Samaj arranged for busses to transport families to an annual picnic.

This was an innovative way of ensuring that the community spirit was built, and children and families had fun despite apartheid. The writer's very first visit to the beach on the South Coast was as a baby on one of these picnics.

During the early 1960's, the Samaj hosted a baby competition, which was immensely popular.

For many years, the Stree Samaj meetings were conducted in Hindi. This was a concept introduced by the late Miss S.B Nohar, a past President.



Ms SB Nohar (Ruth)

During her tenure as President the Samaj grew in both stature and popularity amongst the Pietermaritzburg community.

It was her affable personality that built and sustained many strong relations within the Samaj and with other organisations.

Another tradition developed was to celebrate members' birthdays in the current month and ending each year with a grand sit-down dinner.



This idea was the brainchild of late Miss Roshinee Rajkumar, another former President who led the organisation for 19 successive years. She was a primary school teacher who kept the records, administration, and governance of the Samaj intact for many years.

To sustain the organisation and build up a financial base the Stree Samaj held two major fund-raising projects each year.

On Good Friday, the women held a bazaar, where the ladies made and sold delectable samoosas, bhajia and breyani to the public. The bazaar was a popular place for visitors from surrounding areas of Pietermaritzburg. A visit to the stall of the Stree Samaj at the bazaar was a must for all who attended the festivities in Pietermaritzburg. Year upon year, families patronized the Samaj for lunch and afternoon tea.

The other annual event initiated by the Stree Samaj, was the tying of Rakhee on Raksha Bandan Day, which was the brainchild of the Late Mrs. Jugmohan Singh, the first Secretary, together with the assistance of pioneer members Mesdames Shakhunthla Nohar, Dharam Ramcharan and Shama Ramcharan.



Mrs Krishnawathi Jugmohan Singh

The Indian businesses in the lower end of Church Street looked forward to these annual visits of the Stree Samaj. This effort also had an inter-faith focus to it, as all the businesses regardless of religion were visited and gave generously to the Stree Samaj.

With the proceeds derived from the annual bazaar and Rakhee drive, the Samaj gave generous donations to the Community Chest, Deepavali Cheer Society, Tape Aids for the Blind, Deep Daan for Veda Niketan, and many other organizations.

Whenever a death in the family of members occurred, the Samaj, assisted financially and rendered cottage services. All these programmes glued the Stree Samaj members to be one big family.

Over the years the Samaj remained young at heart by continually learning new skills and being willing to adapt and change as the world changed.

Among the numerous activities were weekly satsang services conducted at both Nohar Road and Longmarket Street Veda Mandirs, attendance at all religious functions of various organisations. Members of the Samaj wrote the Veda Niketan Examinations, and practiced mantras and the Gita Shlokas under the late Pt Vinaychand, trained in Gurukul Kangri in India.

Regular monthly meetings with talks and demonstrations to teach members finer skills in embroidery and sewing and to share cooking recipes were held. The Samaj regularly fed the inmates at the Pietermaritzburg Aryan Benevolent Home and the Rainbow Haven. The occupants of the homes were given Vedic literature, toiletries, and

motivational talks. The Samaj was a hub of bustling activity.

During the decade of the 1980's the leadership and members of the Samaj joined other organisations in paying for the placement of full-page newspaper advertisements in the Natal Witness calling for an end to apartheid.



Members of the Samaj in the 2000's
Front row: left to right 4th Mrs R Mohan (Treasurer), Ms Roshnee Rajkoomar (President), Ms Sharma Ramcharan (Secretary)

In 2016 Mrs Devika Ramesar was ordained as a Purohit, followed by five other members who were ordained as Yajaks in 2017, under the tutelage of Pandit Kirun Satgoor. This was a proud moment for the Samaj.

When the youngest member Ms Prashantha Ramesar was chosen to represent South Africa in a Leadership Programme for emerging leaders from the African Continent, as part of the Washington Mandela Foundation, initiated by former President Barack Obama, the efforts of the founders and past leadership had paid off. Prashantha Ramesar is the first Indian female to represent South Africa at this very prestigious programme.



Members of the Samaj with the Guest Speaker Ms Ela Gandhi at the 75th anniversary

The current leadership of the Samaj in the 80th year of existence are Pt Devika Ramesur (President), Anusha Sookdiyal (Secretary) and Sumintra Maharaj (Treasurer).

Although the membership has declined with natural attrition, the younger women are the hope for the future.

The current leadership is actively reaching out to the daughters of former leaders and members to keep the *Jyothi* of fostering unity and creating bonds of togetherness alive.

After 80 years, the platform created to harness women's ideas is still needed. The conditions have changed. However the need to use the rich history and legacy to continue to work for the betterment of society, to advocate a culture of human rights and environmental protection and to develop an ethos of Dharma remains relevant.

This article would not be possible without a detailed account written and delivered by the late Ms Sharma Ramcharan to the 75th Anniversary of the Samaj in 2018.



Sharma ji was born into the Stree Samaj, just like the author. Her mother was a founding member, her aunts, sisters, and nieces were active leaders and members of the Samaj.

She served as the Samaj Secretary for over 45 years and maintained strong links between the Samaj and the Arya

Pratinidhi Sabha during her tenure as secretary.

I am deeply grateful to her foresight, dedication and for being the backbone of this organisation as I observed this for most of my life. She and all the women who have departed are dearly missed.

The Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj is an organisation run by women to build a family of women that is rooted in the community.

Author: Karuna Mohan

The Veda Jyoti Editorial Committee expresses gratitude to the Bramdaw Family for publishing the Veda Jyoti in the Leader for many years.



Mrs Saraswati Bramdaw (1915 – 1977) First Secretary of the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj

In these times of increasing struggle in South Africa, each passing day reveals stirring examples of the resourcefulness, enterprise, and talent of women who, despite the worst excesses of apartheid, were able to come through adversity in a manner that richly demonstrates the indomitable spirit of women.

The will to survive, the determination to meet the challenge, to overcome the odds, to strive for success; are qualities that were not to be denied.

This was the experience of the Black peoples of South Africa and, among the countless instances that can be recorded, is the remarkable story of what was The Leader Group, a printing and publishing enterprise, whose development is inextricably linked with the struggles of Saraswati Bramdaw.

Her efforts, over five decades, personify the qualities that provide an outstanding example of what it takes to triumph over adversity.

Having been in the first class of Black female matriculants in South Africa at the Anglican-established St. Peter's High School in South End, Port Elizabeth, she was later to marry Dhane Bramdaw who was a student at Fort Hare University.

In her early married life, Saraswati Bramdaw was the first Treasurer of the Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj and the Secretary of the Pietermaritzburg Indian Women's

Association and embarked on numerous social-upliftment campaigns; notably going door-to-door to implore orthodox Indian families to educate their girl children, who for the most part was denied educational opportunities.

She was also on the Council of the Aryan Benevolent Society in Pietermaritzburg, one of only a handful of women who served in such capacity in the organisation, which was founded in 1914 and continues to look after the indigent to this day.

Dhane Bramdaw's lasting achievement was the establishment in 1940 of *The Leader*, a weekly newspaper. Launched during the height of the War years with all its shortages and restrictions, it was indeed a miracle that it was able to get off the ground at all. But it soon found favour and had continued publication for more than 60 years, achieving wide recognition for its contributions in the field of journalism.

Dhane Bramdaw passed away in 1952 on board the Union Castle Line en route to England to visit his children, leaving his widow Saraswati to complete the journey alone, and to break the news to her 6 children, before heading back home to Pietermaritzburg.

On her return, she was confronted by a hostile takeover of her husband's company by her in-laws. Not fazed, she mounted a successful legal challenge and maintained ownership of Bramdaw Publications.

Saraswati, then just 37-years-old, had taken over the reins and in a feat remarkable for a woman at a time when few were to be seen and indeed accepted in the world of business, ran the paper for 37 years until her retirement in 1989. She also completed the unfinished work of her husband in bringing out the fourth edition of the South African Indian Who's Who.

She was then to be confronted by forced removals and dispossession and much of what she had striven for and had painstakingly built up through her labours were severely ravaged under the racist laws of the apartheid regime.

In 1959 she was joined by their eldest son, Sunil and together they faced the challenge of maintaining continuity of *The Leader* after the assets of the Bramdaw estate, designed to provide a means of financial support, were systematically reduced under the Group Areas Act.

Despite the setbacks, Saraswati Bramdaw, out of a sense of commitment and righteousness, took up the onerous

task of continuing to publish, when others had thrown in the towel. But a struggle it was all the way. And it is something of a miracle of sorts that the paper was able to grow in stature although faced with difficulties on all sides.

Saraswati steered *The Leader* on the path of emancipation and democracy and aligned it with the broader Congress struggle for liberation when there was no other media available to struggle activists.

She was ahead of her time and in so doing had often encountered raids on her business premises and residence by the Security Branch, with them frequently arresting her son Sunil.

A major step not without its own problems, was the establishment of a printing company in 1965. The company started off with letterpress system and a three-stage metamorphosis saw it eventually acquire a web-offset press, dedicated to newspaper production in 1984, becoming the first Black-owned printing company to be thus equipped.

It has been said of Saraswati Bramdaw, that she represents a shining example of a woman that pulled herself up by her own bootstraps. Her achievements were accomplished almost entirely through her own efforts, without any financial handouts or aid from a fairy godmother floating in the wings. Her accomplishments were won by dint of her own hard work.

On her passing in 1997, then President Nelson Mandela hailed her "courageous efforts in supporting justice and democracy".

In 2002, Durban author Aziz Hassim also paid tribute to her fearlessness in his award-winning debut novel "The Lotus People", based on life in "Durban's Casbah".

The will to survive, determination to seek justice, and to strive for success are the qualities that had made her succeed against all odds.

Author: Nirode Bramdaw

Views from our Priests

Shraddha Leads to the Path of Spiritual Perfection

Shraddha is that internal light which points towards the eternal truth. It is the force that urges a human to realise that truth, by moving forward on the path of spiritual perfection. It is one's aspiration to gain wisdom of the soul i.e. to know one's true nature. One's interests and inclinations in doing things, and one's endeavour in accomplishing various temporal and spiritual goals is greatly influenced by one's beliefs and faith.

When one's inward and outward energies are directed toward the fulfilment of a revered ideal, he is said to be truly *shraddhavaan*, full of faith.

Shraddha shapes one's basic character and behaviour. Bhagavad Gita reveals that man is of the nature of his shraddha, he is what his shraddha is. In other words, whatever his faith is, he is that only.

To attain any objective one must have full faith in the underlying idea of that objective. The first step on the path of spiritual perfection is to develop a firm belief in the transcendental reality of the Divine Who pervades everything and supports all.

Shraddha is the means of realising one's individual reality and developing his relationship with the cosmic reality. Shraddha is not only to believe in the Divine, but also to have full faith in one's own capacity to attain Him. Shraddha is not only the faith in God, but also the belief in oneself.

True shraddha impels one to tread the path of unity with the Divine. The more one is established in shraddha, the more he becomes free from doubt and scepticism.

Shraddha is essential for gaining spiritual wisdom. But shraddha does not imply blind faith. Instead of impulsively following the sayings of a teacher or writings in a scripture, the one endowed with shraddha wants to understand and experience the truth himself.

Shraddha helps one to grow in knowledge step by step and ultimately unravel the highest spiritual secrets. When one pursues divine knowledge sincerely and with full faith, he experiences the wisdom in his own self.

Direct wisdom of the soul, unlike intellectual knowledge, is gained not through statistical data and logical inferences, but by faith and self-control. True shraddha

enables one to grow into reality of the self and enjoy the blessedness of the soul.

After inwardly experiencing his changeless nature, one is not worried about outward miseries, which are transient and do not last for ever. By overcoming his worldly fears, one is freed from all sorrow.

Depending upon their own nature, different people worship God in different forms. No matter which divine form one worships, so long as his faith is firm and worship is sincere, he surely makes progress on the path of self-realisation. What is important is the firmness of the faith and not the form worshipped, because all divine forms are forms of one *Ishvara*, the Supreme Lord. Through constant shraddha and sincere worship, one realises the ultimate truth.

Based on prayers one offers to the altar he chooses to worship, shraddha has been held to be of three kinds. The one who worships the spirits and ghosts, to destroy others, has only *tamasik-shraddha*. The one whose worship is for the accumulation of more and more wealth and power displays a *rajasik-shraddha*. But the shraddha of the one who worships for the purification of his heart and for gaining the love and trust of the Supreme Lord, is *saatvik*. This kind of shraddha elevates one spiritually to higher and higher levels.

In the Gita Sri Krishna revealed that those who constantly follow His teachings with profound faith and without any cavil, and accordingly offer all their works to Him they are released from the bondage of works. Thus, a *shraddhavaan* person attains to the freedom of soul.

Shraddha is one of the most loved baby girl names, its meaning is veneration

Shraddha not only defines the purpose of life, but also provides the wherewithal for the fulfilment of that purpose. It determines the goal, enlightens the path of spiritual perfection, and inspires one to gladly tread that path. True shraddha empowers one to achieve whatever he honestly believes in, and sincerely strives for.

Author Pt Shobana Singh

Message from the President

Dear Readers

Namaste

My June message is to the youth of our country. The future is in your hands. Just as the youth of the 70's and 80's brought about change you too can bring about change. Our Arya Samaj Principles provide a sound base to guide you to work towards developing a better society.

Our generation delivered an end to apartheid, our parents and grandparents set up and sustained organisations in the Arya Samaj ethos. You have opportunities that we did not have to freely interact with all race groups, the freedom to choose who you marry, where you live, what work you do. With all these freedoms, comes a responsibility of active citizenry.

As young parents, you develop the future generations. The role of young mothers in shaping values and righteous behaviour in children cannot be underplayed. Today conditions have changed, both parents work and with gender equity, both parents play a critical role in bringing up children and shaping values.

We have commenced on a series of webinars that focus on "Growing Happy Families" your participation in this will help to develop a programme in the Arya Samaj on this key aspect of shaping the future.

The pandemic of Gender-Based-Violence requires us to act. We look forward to youth coming up with solutions to end this pandemic.

As householders young couples have a responsibility to ensure that our environment is protected, that neighbourhoods are free of crime and grime and that intercultural and non-racial harmony is built.

The Vedas as a 'manual' for life, provides knowledge for every aspect of life and creation - from simple rules for daily household life, to national and international governance; from material wealth and prosperity, astronomy, algebra, geometry and science, progressing to the highest level of spiritual realisation.

Pt Arthi Nanackchand Shanand

Sanskrit words explained

स्नेह

Sneha

Maternal love

Affection

Tenderness

Kindness

Viscosity (cohesiveness)

Moisture

Maternal love is an instinct but can be nurtured with support from family members. While women display *Sneha* naturally, men too can display kindness, tenderness, and affection.

Sneha is a popular name for the girl child.

BACK TO THE VEDAS LECTURES



Topic: Arya Samaj and its role in current struggles in the world?

Speaker: Swami Vedanand Saraswati

Wednesday 14th June 2023 7pm to 8pm (GMT+2)

Join Zoom Meeting

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Passcode: back2vedas

Announcements

You are invited to send articles to the editorial committee for publication. Please email your submissions to admin@aryasamajsa.org

Acceptance conditions:

1. All submissions must be in word for the attention of the editorial committee.
2. All Sanskrit words must be in Italics.
3. Photographs submitted must be in high resolution.
4. All references must be cited.
5. The limits for articles will be as follows:
 - 5.1. Short articles & messages three hundred words,
 - 5.2. Current issues and social justice up to nine hundred words
 - 5.3. Feature articles 1500 to 3000 words,
 - 5.4. Secondary articles up to 1500 words.
6. The acceptance of articles will be considered based on the following criteria:
 - 6.1. Vedic teachings,
 - 6.2. Principles of the Arya Samaj,
 - 6.3. Social justice and social action,
 - 6.4. Relevance to current issues.

To contribute to projects of the Arya Samaj contact admin@aryasamajsa.org
Please send your comments and suggestions to admin@aryasamajsa.org

Rig Veda 9.63.5

कृण्वन्तो विश्वामार्यम् "Krinvanto Vishwam Aryam" Make the World Noble

Yajur Veda 36.18

मित्रस्याहम् चक्षुषा सर्वाणि भूताननि समीक्षे mitrasyāham chakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtānani samīkṣe May we all live in friendly cooperation and mutual trust

मित्रस्याहम् चक्षुषा समीक्षामहे "mitrasyaaham chakshushaa sameekshaamahe" May we look at all with an Equal and Friendly Eye

Veda Jyoti Founding Editors were Pt Nardev Vedalankar (1913-1994) and the late Manohar Somera



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www.aryasamajsa.org PBO No. 18/11/13/2971

