

SHIFT IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN ORATORS IN INDIA

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Abstract “A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult.” – Melinda Gates

It is a general notion that there are not many good women speakers. However, on careful scrutiny, one can find that there have been impactful and wonderful women speakers since time immemorial. The world history is a testimony to this fact. Undoubtedly in Hindu mythology ample respect is given to women consorts; people take the name of a Goddess before the name of God which is why people say ‘Radha-Krishna’, ‘Sita-Ram’, ‘Gauri-Shankar’ etc. Importance of women can be seen in ‘Mahabharata’ where ‘Draupadi’ had an important role to play. Undoubtedly the power of women is quite known to all of us; how they manage and organise everything so well. In the day to day life also, a lot of attention is given to women in every field, many beautiful adjectives are used for describing them. They are the centre of attraction all the time. But it is very surprising that when the discussion on the topic of rhetoric is done only a handful of people are able to remember the names of the women orators. In this context, it is imperative to analyse the following questions:

1. Why do people not remember the names of any woman orator?
2. Are there lesser number of women speakers?
3. Is there gender inequality in this field?
4. Do we have more strong male orators than the female orators?
5. Is it because males are better speakers than females?
6. How different are men and women when it comes to speaking in public?

Keywords Rhetoric, Persuasion, Chauvinism, Patriarchal approach

INTRODUCTION

Indian women, who have been the epitome of strength and dignity and worshipped as a deity, have had a huge impact in the areas of politics and oratory. This impact is more pre-eminently felt in the post-independence India, which witnessed a surge of women orators.

Rhetoric in Greece and India

In the context of Greek history, it was assumed that women were absent from the history of rhetoric and that there was no record of them as any important public speakers. This assumption was successfully challenged in the last two decades by women who have shown that, although not prominent, they will not be ignored. They proved that there have indeed been women speakers and teachers of rhetoric at the time of Plato, and even before that. In the seventeenth century, women became more active in the fields of politics and art. By the late eighteenth century, discourse took a turn and became formal, with its own set of

rules. Women developed the art of conversation; mastered it and entered into the realm of public speaking. Scudéry’s “On Conversation”² is especially an important document in the history of women’s rhetoric. By the end of 19th century, there was a firmly established women’s tradition of rhetorical theory which was even devised by them.

In India, the art of rhetoric is linked with the position and power of the chiefs. Leaders utilise their art of persuasion more than any other force to control their people. Within the field of rhetoric, the contribution of the female rhetoricians has often been overlooked. Many research articles have been reviewed on the topics related to ‘public speaking’, ‘rhetoric’, or ‘oratory’ and it has been observed that many authors invariably use ‘he’ for the speakers mentioned in their writings. They have only male speaker in their mind when they were writing or may be the ingrained male chauvinism which is deeply rooted in the culture. These are some of the research articles where the author uses ‘he’ or ‘his’ for speaker.

1. Even admitting what is seldom true, that the speaker has a thorough knowledge of the conditions which

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produced the speech and will, therefore, profit from it as an example, the fact still remains that if it is ever necessary to do it, to learn how it is done, he will not acquire the ability to get results in speaking much more rapidly by mouthing over the utterances of great men than he will learn to swim by sitting on the bank of a river and executing the breast stroke and the scissors kick in the air.³

2. By extensive study and extended self-training one gets beyond the danger of a little knowledge, so that he may not so often rush in where he might better fear to tread. And every institution that purports to teach public speaking should have a teacher-or teachers-with a complete knowledge, so far as can be, of what he is trying to teach. His knowledge may not mean much to a great many, but it will mean a great deal to a few.⁴

The possible reasons for ignoring women speakers with in the Indian context are:

1. **Rural background:** In India 75% population that is more than two-thirds of the total lives in villages and 25% resides in urban areas.⁵ Out of the 121 crore Indians, 83.3 crore live in rural areas while 37.7 crore stay in urban areas, said the Census of India's 2011 Provisional Population Totals of Rural-Urban Distribution in the country, released by Union Home Secretary R.K. Singh.⁶ Women from rural area are not exposed to modern environment and they don't enjoy freedom of speaking in the public. They have a very limited role within the public life as they cannot attend, speak, or vote at political assemblies and very few women hold a position of political responsibility. No doubt they participate in mythological plays and dramas but their number is very less as compared to men, therefore, very less women public speakers exist from rural background.

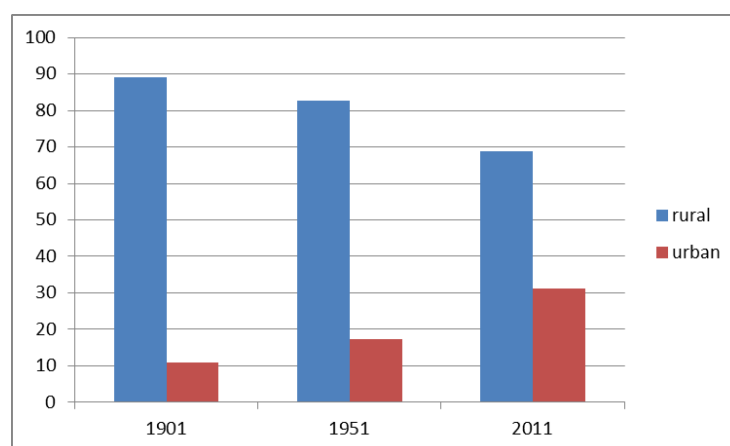


Fig. 1: Trends in Rural-Urban Distribution of Population in India

Source: http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf (retrieved Web on 4 June 2016)

2. **Cultural Shift:** We have come a long way today yet our culture yet our cultural past imposes upon us. No matter how modern Indians have become but there are still few unsaid things in our culture. Females in this culture, talk in a low pitch, in a polite manner and are hesitant in crossing their moral boundaries. It doesn't mean that those who speak in the public are not cultured. Time is changing and there are many famous female speakers in India but still their percentage is quite less as compared to the male speakers.
3. **Patriarchal Society:** The Indian society is a male dominated society which does not give complete permission to its women to speak loudly in the public. Despite this, women are crossing the threshold of their houses, entering into the field of men and persuading people through their magical words, but all this is happening at a very low pace.

Indian society is based on the patriarchal approach which means it is a male dominated society. Men have dominating role in the social process; they listen to women only in the rare cases, not always. The bubble ego of a man is unable to handle a female speaker more powerful than him.

4. **Educational Context:** In some parts of India, people don't send their daughters to schools. Their role is limited only to the household chores. Lack of education makes them less confident and they do not inculcate speaking skills in themselves. Public speaking is a dream for them, as they are not allowed to raise their voice in their own house in front of even their family members. Therefore, they cannot speak in the public in most of the cases.

5. **Historical Context:** If one sees the history of rhetoric which starts from Greece, one can realise there were very few women orators. There were teachers who used to address people and teach them rhetorical skills but 99% were men and hardly 1% were women.
6. **Mythological Context:** When we discuss the Indian mythological texts, we find many good speakers and their powerful speeches like Lord Krishna's speech during the '*yuddh*' of Mahabharata, Lord Rama's speech during the making of '*setu*', speeches of Parshuram etc. but we don't find any good speech given by any of the women mythological characters.
7. **World Literature:** In English Literature also there are many famous actors-cum-orators famous for their speeches:
 - a. Jacques speaks from 'As You Like It': 'All the world's a stage'
 - b. King Henry speaks in 'Henry V': This day is called the feast of Crispian.
 - c. Marc Antony speaks in Julius Caesar': Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;

- d. Othello speaks in 'Othello': Her father loved me; oft invited me;
- e. Othello speaks in 'Othello': It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,
- f. Shylock speaks in 'The Merchant of Venice': To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else,

These speeches have been appreciated by the common public but the fact remains the same that these famous speeches are being delivered by male actors only.

TRANSITIONAL SHIFT IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN ORATORS

In spite of so many bottlenecks, there have been many powerful women speakers in India. India has progressed a lot in every field but if one wants to witness her real progress then rhetoric is the most happening field where Indian women have shown their potential and art. Rhetoric is directly linked to the concept of leadership and everybody knows that women are better leaders as compared to their male counterparts.



Fig. 2: Comparison between Women Leaders and Male Leaders

Source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/study-women-are-better-leaders-2014-1?IR=T>

Because of the large sample size for this study the difference shown here is statistically significant and does not occur by chance.⁷

Not only in India, but one can find many powerful women public speakers and rhetoricians all over the world.

FAMOUS WOMEN ORATORS IN THE WORLD

1. **Aspasia (c. 410 BC):** She was popular for her art of rhetoric and for teaching political theory to her people.

She impressed Plato by her intelligence, wit and use of words. People said that she used to teach the Socratic methods to Socrates and was a trainer of many ancient orators like Pericles etc. However, Robert W. Wallace did not accept that Aspasia taught Pericles how to speak or help him in becoming a master rhetorician or philosopher.

2. **Hortensia (1st century BC):** She gave a speech in 42 BC and explained the authorities why it was wrong to levy tax. Her speaking in the public was not held in high esteem by many people as it was not respectable for a woman to address public but her art of rhetoric was supported by many women.
3. **Julian of Norwich (1343-1415):** The Church dominated European life during the medieval period and people were involved in religious discourses. Among the different orators, a few women also contributed towards the rhetorical theory and art by voicing their views. At this time when very few people could read and write either Latin or English, Julian of Norwich presented her theology in front of her audience.⁸ She was a very bold speaker who challenged the teachings of medieval Christianity for assigning an inferior role to the women in the realm of religion.
4. **Saint Catherine of Siena (1347 -1380):** She was a powerful speaker, a scholastic philosopher and theologian. She also worked to bring the papacy of Gregory XI back to Rome from its displacement in France and to establish peace among the Italian city-states. She raised her voice to support her people and got success in establishing peace and love everywhere with the help of her rhetorical skills.
5. **Christine de Pizan (1364-1430):** She received her education in many languages and was very proficient in speaking skills. She shifted her interest towards writing in order to earn money and became an intellectual writer very soon. In 1401-1402 she participated in a literary debate and presented her rhetorical skills very effectively in front of the public. She was influential as a writer, rhetorician and critic during the medieval period and was Europe's first female professional author.
6. **Laura Cereta (1469-1499):** She learnt religious principles, reading, writing, and Latin. Furthermore, in her public lectures and essays, she explored the history of women's contributions to the intellectual and political life of Europe. She argued against the same issues that are relevant even today centuries are discussing topics like slavery of women in marriage, rights of women to higher education, etc.
7. **Margaret Fell (1614-1702):** She was known as the "Mother of Quakerism" but was persecuted and imprisoned for sharing her thoughts and speaking in public. She was attached to the Quaker church which brought more freedom for women in religious, social, and political areas.
Her upper class standing, radical sectarian views, and mastery over her subject, empowered her to speak in the public. She must be acknowledged as an innovative and crucial voice in the rhetorical tradition of manuals on preaching.⁹ She has been addressed as a Quaker writer and a feminist pioneer on the basis of her speaking skills as well as her 1666 pamphlets.
8. **Mary Astell (1668-1731):** She was an English feminist writer and rhetorician who secured the title "the first English feminist." She did a lot in the field of women's rhetoric like she proposed equal educational opportunities for women in the world, etc. She was a highly accomplished practitioner of rhetoric and her various works are models of rhetoric in argumentation, structure, accommodation of the audience, and style. She had a great reputation for eccentricity and was a noted figure in the intellectual world of London, engaging in politics and promoting the cause of women in the early part of 18th century.
9. **The Grimké Sisters –Sarah Moore Grimké (1792–1873) and Angelina Emily Grimké (1805-1879):** They were the first female public speakers in the United States. They first spoke in the "parlor meetings," which consisted of women only and where interested men frequently sneaked. The sisters were from a wealthy planter family and attracted larger audiences both men and women. Firstly they shocked as well as surprised people by speaking for the anti-slavery movement at a time when there was widespread disapproval of this; many male public speakers on this issue were criticised by the press. Secondly, they were criticised for speaking in the public, as public speaking was not considered suitable for women.
10. **Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879):** She touched the heights of success as she was an Afro-American domestic servant who became a teacher, journalist, lecturer, abolitionist, and women's rights activist. She was known as the first American woman to speak to a mixed audience of men and women, whites and black, she was also the first Afro-American woman to make public lectures, as well as to speak about women's rights and make a public anti-slavery speech.¹⁰ She also became the first Afro-American woman to make public anti-slavery speeches. She was also one of the first Afro-American women to make public lectures for which she used the word "speeches" instead of

“sermons” though their tone was religious and many Biblical quotes were used by her.

11. **Margaret Thatcher (1925 – 2013):** It is known to everyone that she used her rhetorical skills to secure her political career. She made her voice heard in the male dominating world with the help of her public speaking. People followed her and learnt the art of speaking from her. She mesmerised everybody with her magical words.
12. **Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007):** Her use of political language and her powerful voice made her a very effective public speaker. Her speech influenced the public greatly. She used to speak in English and used her political discourses to control the minds of her people. She was very blunt, candid, to the point and did not use any flowery language. Her body language and paralanguage reflected confidence in front of Pakistani audience through the use of powerful gestures and punctuation.
13. **Queen Elizabeth II (1926):** The Queen is the most admired person in the United Kingdom. Internationally she is the 17th most-admired person in the world. Her speaking skills are very strong, royal and people admire her rhetorical skills very much. Her speeches demonstrate good oratory skills and declare her a great public speaker because of her ability to use clear words and correct tone.

POWERFUL WOMEN ORATORS IN INDIA

1. **Razia Sultan (1206-1240):** She was a brave sultan who belonged to the slave dynasty and was the first Muslim woman to rule India and the only woman to occupy the throne of Delhi. She had been praised for her bravery, her leadership qualities; her undaunted spirit and her powerful words. People were impressed by her bold and candid way of speaking.
2. **Maharani Jind Kaur (1817-1863):** She was a woman abounding with energy, intelligence, and a burning ambition to keep the throne. Though she was eventually dethroned by the British, and spent her last years in Kensington, she managed to control a powerful warrior empire and a disordered army of 80,000 men for several years essentially through the help of her inspiring, persuasive speeches.
3. **Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949):** Her strong candidness in her speech made her a renowned Indian poet as well as a speaker in the world. She is popularly known as the Nightingale of India and she became an active freedom fighter in the struggle for Indian Independence under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. She was the first Indian woman to become the President of the

Indian National Congress. She was a great patriot, an efficient politician, a good orator and a wonderful administrator. She is one of the top world famous personalities of the 20th century. On the podium, she was the most enchanting spellbinder in an era of veritable spellbinders. It was the heyday of Indian political oratory.

4. **Indira Gandhi (1917-1984):** She entered politics at a very young age and became the first women Prime Minister of India. People considered her among the best speakers of the world. She set an example not only for women but men also for her dictatorship and leadership qualities. Indira Gandhi was the most powerful Prime Minister of the country and her speaking skills were appreciated by everyone. People used to listen to her speeches for hours and followed her blindly.
5. **Medha Patkar (1954):** She is a social activist, reformer turned politician and an effective speaker. Over the last quarter of a century, Medha Patkar has come to symbolise the voice of people struggling for a just, sustainable and peaceful society. Medha has been one of the leading voices that have shaped the discourse in India regarding development-induced-displacement and exposed the structural violence of such actions. In this 25th year of AID, Medha Patkar is an ideal speaker to not only reflect on AID's journey so far but also give directions and ideas for the future of an organisation like AID.
6. **Barkha Dutt (1971):** She is an Indian television journalist as well as a powerful speaker- She has twice been named on the list of 100 “Global Leaders of Tomorrow” compiled by the World Economic Forum (2001, 2008). In 2005, she was among 50 Indians (below 35) who were listed for their achievements and impact on society. She won many Awards and accolades and is a very bold orator.
7. **Smriti Irani (1976):** She has risen to a powerful position, undoubtedly due to her oratory skills. She can take on her political opponents with great ease in parliament. She gets connected with people very easily because of her eloquent oratory.
8. **Priya Kumar (1973):** She is an Indian motivational speaker, a corporate trainer, a columnist, a radio jockey and an author. She stepped into the field of public speaking at the very young age of 24 and became the youngest motivational speaker in India in 1998. She faces audience not only within India but across the world also. Her areas of expertise are corporate training, leadership, motivation, team-building, and she has authored seven books out of which three are non-fiction and four are fiction. She has written four inspirational fiction books, two biographies, and a

non-fiction tale of her adventures with the shamans. She is one of the best motivational speakers of India.

9. **Anita Mahindru:** She is the founder of Mindskills and has a varied and an all-encompassing experience of over 10 years at various corporate like Bharti Airtel, ICICI Prudential, Max New York Life Insurance and Cipla. Because of her passion for communication and zeal to make young generation more confident and impressive, she makes public speaking as a powerful means to impart her deep knowledge and experience to them.
10. **Abha Maryada Banerjee:** She is India's first woman motivational speaker of international praise, rated as one of the Top Ten Life, Business and Success Coaches in Asia Pacific. An expert at Leadership and having spoken at prestigious forums across Asia, she has coached and consulted top CEOs, media personalities, sports stars, business professionals, leaders in the making etc. and has been closely associated with the spiritual aspect of leadership as well.
11. **Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma):** She is a Hindu spiritual leader and teacher, people consider her as a saint and respect her for her humanitarian activities. Her way of speaking is so gentle and polite that one can listen to her for hours. She is sometimes referred to as "The Hugging Saint". She cures people by touch therapy and motivates them to perform good in life.
12. **Anandmurti Gurumaab:** She is also known as Gurumaa and is a very intelligent spiritual guru. People from different faiths including Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Sufism, etc. respect her a lot. Her message transcends gender, religious, political, geographic, and material boundaries. She claims to be well versed with varied subjects like Zen, Buddhism, Art, Upanishad, and Yoga and fuses scientific aptitude with ancient wisdom which enables her to take a pragmatic approach to life and its varied shades. She has also started a mission called Shakti to empower girl child in India and stop female feticide. Shakti supports the education of the girls from poor and needy families until 12th standard. Shakti gives financial support for education without any color-caste-creed discrimination.

Women are endowed with some special qualities which can help them in developing better soft skills and eventually become good orators.

1. **Care and love in attitude:** Being a mother, a woman has to understand every condition or state that her babies are going through only by observing their facial expressions, gestures, postures, movements and voice (tone and pitch) since babies can't communicate

verbally like experienced or trained persons. This act has transformed them into excellent care-takers over millions of years.

2. **Imaginative and dreamers:** They unconsciously use brain's both prefrontal hemispheres to process emotional and para-linguistic data. They have more complex connections between both the hemispheres of their brain which can absorb more information quicker. They imagine beyond everything so they persuade their listeners easily.¹¹
3. **Empathetic:** Understanding others and responding to them properly are the basic traits of females. They understand others completely, therefore, can convince others easily.
4. **Physical frailty:** Men are physically strong and can resolve their issues by force but women are unable to win their case by using physical powers so they win with the help of arguments. Despite so much advancement, women will remain dependent on men for security, resource sharing, and rearing children, etc.
5. **Good time management:** Women have to control their household activities, make plans for the career of their children, develop the habit of prioritizing things in their life, therefore, they manage their speaking skills also.
6. **More social, expressive, diplomatic as well as sensitive:** They maintain more harmonious social relations and persuade people effectively with the support of their rhetorical skills.
7. **More adaptable:** Female leaders are more transformational than male leaders because they are nurtured like that. Their social skills help in developing values and ethics in them.
8. **Emotional:** Their peoples skills and soft skills are very strong. They make people emotional by speaking politely to them. The manner of speaking is also very soft and people get convinced easily.
9. **Expert in Small Talk:** Women are more comfortable than men in dealing with strangers; they can be friends with and convince a stranger also very efficiently.

According to Hoffman (1977), girls since 1 year of age show a greater concern for sad looks and vocals. More women than men also report frequently sharing emotional distress of their friends. They are also more likely to comfort a stranger than men do.¹²

CONCLUSION

Women are blessed with many spiritual qualities; they are more expressive, manipulative, melodramatic, very

creative, polite as well as courteous, farsighted, talkative, and impressive. At times they can take advantages of their gender, their personal touch, use of their looks, positive body language but the expressions of women are noble and natural as by nature they are very caring and loving. They have the unique ability to easily read and interpret the non-verbal cues of anyone. When they indulge in a discourse; their discourse is clear and fluent; there is a style and delicacy in their manner of speaking; a wonderful coherence is always there between their eyes and their words. They are born teachers and expert in the art of persuasion. They know what to say; what to hide and how to mask their feelings. No doubt they are born orators. However, there is much to be achieved and women orators are constantly in a state of transition, evolving everyday and working towards perfection.

The debate between male and female is an endless one; however both the genders are interdependent and supportive of each other. Eventually thus, with the help of one another we work towards finesse.

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