

Women Scholars in Indian Knowledge Systems: Contributions, Challenges, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent an integrated epistemological framework developed over millennia in the Indian subcontinent, encompassing philosophy, metaphysics, medicine, astronomy, linguistics, aesthetics, governance, and ethical thought. While dominant historiography has largely privileged male sages and philosophers, textual, oral, and cultural traditions reveal that women actively participated in intellectual production and transmission. This paper critically re-examines the contributions of women scholars—particularly Vedic Rishikas, Upanishadic interlocutors, custodians of oral knowledge, and practitioners of applied sciences—within the broader framework of IKS. Drawing upon feminist historiography, postcolonial critique, and gendered epistemology, the study interrogates the structural processes that marginalized women’s intellectual agency. It further situates this recovery within contemporary educational discourse, especially in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. By foregrounding women’s epistemic authority, the paper argues for a gender-inclusive reconstruction of Indian intellectual history that is both historically grounded and pedagogically transformative.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Feminist Historiography, Rishikas, Gendered Epistemology, Indigenous Knowledge, NEP 2020

Introduction

Indian civilization sustains one of the most enduring and philosophically sophisticated intellectual traditions in world history. What is now referred to as Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompasses a multidimensional corpus of inquiry that integrates metaphysics, ethics, science, governance, art, medicine, and spirituality. Unlike the compartmentalized disciplinary frameworks of modern Western academia, IKS embodies an interconnected epistemology in which knowledge is inseparable from ethical life and social responsibility.

However, the historical construction of Indian intellectual heritage has been deeply gendered. Canonical narratives foreground male sages such as Yajnavalkya, Shankara, Chanakya, and Patanjali, while women’s intellectual agency remains marginal within mainstream accounts. This marginalization raises important questions: Were women excluded from knowledge production, or has historiography selectively erased their presence? What structural transformations contributed to their diminished visibility? And how might a gender-conscious reinterpretation reshape our understanding of IKS?

This paper argues that women were active participants in early Indian intellectual traditions and that their gradual exclusion was a socio-historical development rather than an intrinsic feature of IKS. By combining textual analysis with feminist theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to recover women’s intellectual presence and reposition it within contemporary educational discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Historiography and Epistemic Justice

To reconstruct women's intellectual contributions, this paper draws upon three interrelated frameworks:

2.1 Feminist Historiography

Feminist historians challenge androcentric narratives that universalize male experience as normative. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti argue that Brahmanical patriarchy systematically regulated women's access to knowledge and property, thereby shaping social memory (Chakravarti 34). Re-reading classical texts through feminist lenses enables scholars to detect silences, absences, and narrative framing that obscure women's agency.

2.2 Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker's concept of "epistemic injustice" is particularly relevant here. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers (Fricker 1). Women scholars in Indian traditions often experienced testimonial injustice—their authority as intellectual agents was diminished due to gendered prejudice. Applying this framework allows us to interpret historical marginalization as structural injustice rather than mere omission.

2.3 Postcolonial Critique

Colonial Indology often reinforced reductive narratives about Indian women's passivity. Postcolonial scholars caution against accepting colonial interpretations of ancient texts as objective truth. Reassessing indigenous knowledge traditions thus requires disentangling colonial epistemology from indigenous historiography. Together, these frameworks provide analytical tools to reassess women's roles within IKS and to interpret their marginalization as historically contingent rather than ontologically fixed.

3. Conceptualizing Indian Knowledge Systems

Indian Knowledge Systems are not limited to sacred or theological discourse; they encompass diverse disciplines including:

Nyaya (logic)

Vedanta (metaphysics)

Sankhya (cosmology)

Ayurveda (medicine)

Jyotisha (astronomy)

Vyakarana (linguistics)

Natya Shastra (aesthetics)

Arthashastra (statecraft)

A distinctive feature of IKS is its ethical orientation. Knowledge (Jnana) is linked to duty (Dharma) and liberation (Moksha). As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observes, Indian philosophy integrates speculative inquiry with moral purpose (Radhakrishnan 21). Within this epistemic structure, participation in philosophical discourse signified intellectual authority. The presence of women interlocutors in Vedic and Upanishadic texts suggests that early intellectual culture permitted women access to metaphysical inquiry, though such access may have been limited to specific social strata.

4. Women in Vedic Intellectual Traditions

The Rig Veda contains hymns attributed to women seers known as Rishikas. Lopamudra, Apala, Ghosha, and Vishvavara are traditionally recognized among them (Altekar 148). Their hymns demonstrate theological reflection, poetic sophistication, and ritual knowledge.

For instance, Lopamudra's hymn engages themes of desire and asceticism, revealing philosophical engagement with household and renunciatory ideals. Such compositions challenge simplistic assumptions that women were confined to domestic silence.

The presence of female composers in the Vedic canon indicates that women were recognized, at least in early periods, as legitimate contributors to sacred knowledge. However, later codification and institutionalization of Brahmanical authority increasingly restricted women's participation in Vedic learning (Chakravarti 52).

5. Gargi and Maitreyi: Philosophical Authority in the Upanishads

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad presents Gargi Vachaknavi as a formidable philosopher who publicly challenges Yajnavalkya during King Janaka's intellectual assembly. Gargi's metaphysical

interrogation concerning the substratum of reality reflects advanced ontological reasoning. Her participation in royal debate demonstrates recognition of intellectual competence.

Maitreyi, in dialogue with Yajnavalkya, probes the nature of immortality and the Self. Her insistence on spiritual knowledge over material wealth illustrates philosophical depth rather than domestic subordination. As Radhakrishnan notes, such dialogues reveal the seriousness of metaphysical inquiry in early Indian thought (Radhakrishnan 83). From a feminist epistemological perspective, these women function not merely as narrative devices but as authoritative voices engaging in philosophical discourse. Their representation complicates assumptions of total exclusion.

6. Women in Applied, Embodied, and Community-Based Knowledge Systems

While textual traditions provide explicit evidence of women philosophers in Vedic and Upanishadic discourse, a comprehensive understanding of women's contributions to Indian Knowledge Systems must move beyond canonical texts. Knowledge production in India historically functioned through both written and oral traditions. Consequently, confining intellectual authority exclusively to textual authorship reproduces the same epistemic hierarchies that marginalized women in the first place.

Women have historically functioned as custodians of applied knowledge systems, particularly in domains such as Ayurveda, midwifery, agricultural practice, ecological preservation, ritual performance, music, and dance. These fields, though frequently categorized as "folk" or "domestic," represent vital components of IKS. The transmission of herbal medicine, childbirth practices, dietary knowledge, and seasonal ecological rhythms was often mediated through women's experiential expertise.

MadhavGadgil and Ramachandra Guha argue that traditional ecological knowledge in India has been sustained through community-based practices rather than centralized institutions (Gadgil and Guha 112). Within such community structures, women played central roles in preserving biodiversity, seed selection, and medicinal plant knowledge. Feminist scholars have emphasized that this form of embodied knowledge constitutes a legitimate epistemic domain rather than informal skill (Shiva 45).

Vandana Shiva's critique of Western developmental epistemology underscores the gendered nature of knowledge hierarchies. She argues that women's ecological knowledge has been systematically devalued under colonial and postcolonial modernization processes (Shiva 58). When applied to IKS, this critique reveals how colonial scientific paradigms privileged codified textual knowledge while dismissing orally transmitted, community-centered expertise often associated with women.

Thus, expanding the scope of IKS to include embodied and community-based epistemologies enables a more inclusive reconstruction of intellectual history. Women were not peripheral participants but integral contributors to knowledge systems that sustained everyday life.

7. Institutionalization, Patriarchy, and Gradual Marginalization

The historical marginalization of women within Indian intellectual traditions was neither immediate nor uniform. Rather, it emerged gradually through processes of institutionalization, canon formation, and socio-religious regulation.

Uma Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy demonstrates how control over women's sexuality, property rights, and education became central to maintaining social hierarchy (Chakravarti 28). As Vedic rituals became increasingly codified and lineage-based transmission gained prominence, access to sacred learning narrowed. Education shifted from relatively open dialogic assemblies to hereditary scholastic institutions dominated by male Brahmins. The Dharmashastra literature, particularly texts such as the Manusmriti, reinforced restrictive gender norms that limited women's autonomy in education and public life. While earlier texts depict women participating in philosophical debates, later prescriptive texts increasingly idealized domestic confinement.

From the perspective of epistemic injustice, this transformation constitutes both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 147). Women's credibility as knowers diminished, and interpretive frameworks for recognizing their contributions became constrained. Consequently, even when women continued to produce knowledge in informal settings, their work lacked institutional validation. It is important, however, to avoid homogenizing historical experience. Regional variations and heterodox traditions, including certain Bhakti movements, allowed women poets and saints—such as Andal, AkkaMahadevi, and Mirabai—to articulate spiritual authority. Although these figures fall outside strictly Vedic contexts, they demonstrate that intellectual agency persisted in alternative spaces despite structural constraints.

8. Colonial Indology and the Reinforcement of Gendered Narratives

The colonial encounter introduced new epistemic frameworks that reshaped the interpretation of Indian intellectual traditions. Orientalist scholarship often approached Indian texts through philological analysis detached from lived cultural contexts. While such scholarship contributed to textual preservation, it also reified selective interpretations. Colonial narratives frequently portrayed Indian women as uniformly oppressed and intellectually passive, thereby legitimizing colonial “civilizing” missions. As Lata Mani argues, debates around women in colonial India were mediated through scriptural interpretation rather than women’s lived realities (Mani 89). This textualist bias further marginalized recognition of women’s non-canonical knowledge contributions.

Moreover, the privileging of written Sanskrit texts over oral and vernacular traditions reinforced existing hierarchies. Women’s embodied knowledge—particularly in rural and indigenous communities—was rendered invisible within colonial archives. Thus, colonial epistemology compounded preexisting patriarchal exclusions. Postcolonial scholarship has sought to interrogate these inherited narratives. By re-reading classical texts and recovering marginalized voices, contemporary researchers challenge the assumption that intellectual authority in India has always been exclusively male.

9. Feminist Recovery and Contemporary Scholarship

Recent decades have witnessed a significant expansion of feminist engagement with Indian intellectual history. Scholars have emphasized interdisciplinary methodologies that integrate textual analysis, anthropology, oral history, and gender theory.

Geraldine Forbes highlights the importance of recognizing women not only as subjects of reform but as active agents in shaping intellectual discourse (Forbes 12). Applying this insight retrospectively encourages scholars to treat figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi as philosophers in their own right rather than symbolic exceptions.

Similarly, contemporary gender theorists emphasize that reclaiming women’s intellectual heritage requires rethinking the very definition of knowledge. If knowledge is restricted to elite textual authorship, women’s contributions remain marginal. However, if IKS is understood as a holistic epistemic framework encompassing ritual, ecological, aesthetic, and healing traditions, women emerge as central participants.

Digital humanities initiatives and manuscript preservation projects have also opened new possibilities for recovering neglected texts. Archival digitization enables broader access to regional manuscripts, some of which contain references to women scholars and practitioners. This feminist recovery is not merely additive—placing women into preexisting male narratives—but transformative. It requires restructuring the historiographical framework itself to accommodate diverse epistemic voices.

10. Contemporary Relevance: NEP 2020 and Gender-Inclusive Knowledge

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift in India’s educational philosophy by emphasizing holistic learning, interdisciplinary integration, and the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems into curricula (Government of India 4). The policy also underscores gender inclusion and equitable access to education.

Integrating women scholars into IKS curricula aligns directly with these objectives. First, it corrects historical imbalance by presenting students with a more representative intellectual heritage. Second, it provides role models that challenge gender stereotypes in academic and scientific domains. Third, it reinforces the ethical dimension of education by promoting epistemic justice.

Incorporating discussions of Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, and women custodians of ecological knowledge into textbooks and research programs can foster gender-sensitive pedagogy. Furthermore, interdisciplinary research centers dedicated to IKS can actively foreground women’s contributions through conferences, publications, and curriculum design. Such inclusion is not symbolic but structural. By recognizing women as historical knowers, contemporary academia affirms their legitimacy as present and future producers of knowledge.

11. Conclusion

The intellectual history of Indian Knowledge Systems is more complex and inclusive than conventional narratives suggest. Evidence from Vedic hymns, Upanishadic dialogues, oral traditions, ecological practices, and aesthetic disciplines demonstrates that women actively participated in knowledge creation and transmission.

The subsequent marginalization of women scholars resulted from processes of patriarchal institutionalization, canon formation, and colonial reinterpretation. Through the lenses of feminist historiography and epistemic justice, this marginalization can be understood as a structural injustice rather than an absence of contribution.

Reclaiming women's intellectual agency within IKS is therefore both a historiographical necessity and a contemporary imperative. It enriches academic scholarship, supports inclusive educational reform under NEP 2020, and advances broader commitments to gender equity. A gender-inclusive reconstruction of Indian Knowledge Systems ensures that India's intellectual heritage remains dynamic, representative, and ethically grounded.

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