

Indian Knowledge System and Gender Perspective: Revisiting Women's Intellectuality from Antiquity to the Present

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) — the vast, plural corpus of philosophy, science, arts, and epistemology that has developed on the Indian subcontinent over millennia — is increasingly being institutionalised through policy instruments such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This renewed interest offers an opportunity to examine IKS through a gender lens: to ask who produced knowledge, whose knowledge was preserved, and whose was silenced. This article traces women's participation in Indian intellectual traditions from the Vedic period through the Bhakti movement, the colonial rupture, and into the present policy moment. It argues that Indian intellectual history contains genuine, textually attested instances of female scholarship — women such as Gargi Vachaknavi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra — even as later social codification narrowed women's access to knowledge production. The article further examines persistent contemporary gender gaps in Indian STEM fields, academic publishing, and health leadership. It evaluates the promises and limitations of NEP 2020's gender-equity provisions as they intersect with IKS revival. It concludes that a gender-just engagement with IKS requires neither uncritical glorification nor wholesale rejection of tradition, but a historically honest, critically reflexive recovery of women's intellectual agency alongside sustained structural reform.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, gender, women scholars, Vedic period, NEP 2020, STEM, academic publishing, Bhakti movement

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Indian Knowledge System" (IKS) has, in the last few years, moved from a specialised area of Indological and philosophical scholarship into mainstream educational policy. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly calls for embedding indigenous epistemologies rooted in the Vedas, Upanishads, and other classical and folk traditions into

contemporary curricula, and institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University have since established dedicated centres for Sanskrit and Indic studies as part of this effort (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). IKS is understood not as a single, monolithic doctrine but as a plural and interdisciplinary field spanning architecture, linguistics, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and the arts, with contemporary scholars arguing for its integration into digital learning platforms and interdisciplinary research addressing present-day social challenges (Khan and Sharma, 2024 in Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities, 2024).

Any serious revival of a knowledge tradition, however, must confront the question of gender: who was permitted to produce, preserve, and transmit knowledge, and on what terms. Gender inequality in Indian society has deep historical roots, and discrimination against women has been documented across family structures, ritual access, education, and employment, producing what researchers describe as a continuum from child marriage and female foeticide to restricted access to education and paid work (A Study of Gender Inequality in India, 2024). Yet the historical record is not one of uniform exclusion. Vedic literature preserves the names and philosophical contributions of women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi, indicating that intellectual participation by women was, at least in some periods and contexts, recognised and respected (Gargi Vāchaknavī, Wikipedia, 2026; Maitreyi, Wikipedia, 2026).

This article undertakes a gendered reading of IKS across four broad moments: (a) the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic period, in which women scholars are textually attested; (b) the medieval Bhakti movement, which offered women renewed avenues for spiritual and literary expression even as classical social codes narrowed their formal access to Vedic learning; (c) the colonial encounter, which reshaped and often flattened indigenous gender arrangements; and (d) the contemporary policy moment defined by NEP 2020, in which IKS revival and gender-equity commitments coexist, sometimes uneasily. The article closes by examining present-day gender gaps in Indian scientific and academic knowledge production and by offering recommendations for a historically honest and structurally reformist engagement with IKS.

2. CONCEPTUALISING THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

IKS is best understood as a family of interconnected epistemic traditions rather than a single canon. It draws on the Vedas and Upanishads, the six classical darshanas (schools of philosophy), Ayurveda and other medical systems, mathematics and astronomy, grammar and linguistics (notably the work of Panini), architecture and town planning, and a vast body of regional, oral, and folk knowledge maintained largely outside elite Sanskrit institutions (Khan and Sharma, 2024 in Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities, 2024). Contemporary policy framing, particularly under NEP 2020, positions IKS as a resource for holistic education that can be woven into disciplines ranging from engineering to the arts and humanities, with dedicated IKS divisions established at the university and national level (Netto et al., 2025; Wikipedia contributors, 2026).

A gender perspective on IKS asks three linked questions. First, a question of authorship and voice: which texts and traditions record women as originators of knowledge rather than merely as subjects or recipients of it? Second, a question of access: which social groups and genders were permitted entry into formal learning institutions such as the gurukula, and under what conditions? Third, a question of memory and selective transmission: how has later historiography — including colonial-era scholarship and subsequent nationalist and religious reinterpretation — chosen to remember, forget, or reshape the gendered dimensions of Indian intellectual history? Each of these questions is explored in the sections that follow.

3. WOMEN AS KNOWLEDGE-BEARERS IN VEDIC AND UPANISHADIC INDIA

The Vedic corpus, conventionally dated across the second and first millennia BCE, preserves an educational culture organised around the concept of vidya, in which learning combined intellectual inquiry, ethical formation, and spiritual practice, typically imparted through the gurukula system in which students resided with their teachers (Sunday Guardian, 2026). Within this corpus, several women are named as composers of hymns (rishikas) and as participants in philosophical debate. Scholars commonly cite around two dozen women associated with individual Rigvedic hymns, including Lopamudra, Ghosha, Vishvavara, Apala, and Sikata (Examrace, n.d.).

Gargi Vachaknavi is the most frequently cited example. According to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Gargi participated in a philosophical assembly convened by King Janaka of Videha, where she questioned the sage Yajnavalkya on the nature of the atman (self) and Brahman (ultimate reality) with a persistence that reportedly silenced other learned participants (Sunday Guardian, 2026; The Famous Female Figures of Vedic India, 2019). Her name appears in the Ashvalayana Grihya Sutra alongside other women scholars, and she is recorded as having engaged male philosophers as an intellectual equal in debate (Gargi Vāchaknavī, Wikipedia, 2026). Maitreyi, wife of the same sage Yajnavalkya, is remembered for a philosophical exchange in which she is said to have chosen the pursuit of spiritual knowledge over material inheritance, and she remains commemorated today, including through an educational institution named in her honour in New Delhi (Maitreyi, Wikipedia, 2026). In this exchange, recorded in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.3), Maitreyi is offered her husband's entire estate before his renunciation. She responds with a question that has become one of the most quoted lines in Vedic philosophical literature: "येनाहं नामृता स्यां किमहं तेन कुर्याम्" (yenāhaṁ nāmṛtā syāṁ kimahaṁ tena kuryām), which may be rendered as "that by which I should not become immortal, of what use is that to me?" (Swami Krishnananda, n.d.; Wisdomlib, 2018). Her subsequent request, "यदेव भगवान् वेद तदेव मे ब्रूहि" (yad eva bhagavān veda tad eva me brūhi) — "whatever you know, my lord, tell that to me" — is read by scholars as a direct textual instance of a woman initiating and directing a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the self (Wisdomlib, 2018). Lopamudra, associated with hymns in the first mandala of the Rigveda, is remembered both as a poet-seer and as a partner in intellectual dialogue with the sage Agastya (Cultural Heritage of India, 2024; Examrace, n.d.). A recent Hindi-language study of women's

education from ancient to modern India, published in the Journal of Multidisciplinary Knowledge, similarly documents that women in the Vedic period possessed equal educational rights and studied the Vedas, Upanishads, and shastras, and cites the examples of Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra as proof of the high status accorded to women's learning in this period (Ruhela and Singh in Journal of Multidisciplinary Knowledge, 2026).

These examples should not be read as evidence of a uniformly egalitarian ancient society. Historians caution that the Vedic corpus does not depict a society free of hierarchy, and that the visibility of a small number of named women scholars coexisted with less-documented labour and constraint experienced by women more broadly (Sunday Guardian, 2026). Nonetheless, the textual record complicates any assumption that Indian intellectual traditions were, from their inception, wholly closed to women. Contemporary scholarship frames Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra as evidence that, in at least some Vedic contexts, formal philosophical inquiry and religious authority were accessible to women on terms of intellectual parity with men (Women in Vedic Education, n.d.; Women Scholars in Ancient India, 2025).

The foundational scholarly treatment of this subject remains Altekar's historical survey of women's position in Hindu civilisation, first published in the 1930s, which examined four thousand years of source material on women's education, marriage, religious participation, and property rights, and which is widely regarded as the earliest comprehensive historical study of Indian women's status (Altekar, 1956/2014). Altekar's study, along with later regional research such as Salawade's (2012) study of women's status in the Vedic period published in the Indian Streams Research Journal, documents that upanayana (the sacred-thread initiation marking entry into formal Vedic study) was, in the early Vedic period, available to at least some girls, particularly those from priestly households, and that categories of women scholars such as the brahmavadinis (women who chose lifelong study over marriage) were formally recognised within the tradition (Salawade, 2012).

Over the course of the later Vedic and subsequent classical periods, however, most scholars agree that women's formal access to Vedic study narrowed considerably. Legal and social codes compiled in the classical and early medieval periods reflect a more restrictive view of women's education and ritual authority than is found in earlier Vedic and Upanishadic material, a shift that historians attribute to a combination of social, economic, and institutional changes rather than to any single cause (Sunday Guardian, 2026). This decline is documented in some detail in the Manusmriti (Manava Dharmashastra), a Sanskrit legal and social text composed roughly between 200 BCE and 300 CE, which contains verses that both idealise women's dignity within family life and prescribe significant restrictions on their independence, religious authority, and access to formal learning (Vajiram & Ravi, 2026). The text's own internal contradiction is often illustrated through two frequently cited verses. The first, Manusmriti 3.56, states: "यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः। यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः॥" (yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ, yatra itāstu na pūjyante sarvāstatrāphalāḥ kriyāḥ) — "where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; where they are not honoured, all rites are fruitless" (Wisdomlib, 2018). The second, Manusmriti 9.3, offers a markedly more restrictive vision of

women's social position: "पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने रक्षन्ति स्थविरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति॥" (pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane, rakṣanti sthavire putrā na strī svātantryam arhati) — "the father guards her in childhood, the husband guards her in youth, the sons guard her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Wisdomlib, 2018). Traditional commentators such as Medhatithi and modern apologetic readings have argued that this second verse is best understood as enjoining protection rather than denying autonomy outright. At the same time, critical scholars maintain that, read within the broader structure of the text, it exemplifies the loss of independent legal and religious personhood that characterised women's status under classical Dharmashastra norms (IndiaFacts, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2022).

Even India's own school curriculum has recently drawn attention to this transition: a revised NCERT textbook cites the Manusmriti to illustrate a documented decline in women's educational opportunities and religious participation relative to the early Vedic period, while explicitly noting that the text is referenced as a historical source rather than endorsed as a legal authority (Vajiram & Ravi, 2026). Critical legal and feminist scholarship has gone further, with B. R. Ambedkar's early twentieth-century critique arguing that the Manusmriti's provisions denied women the right to acquire knowledge and religious learning. More recent scholarship describes the text's cumulative effect as leaving women more constrained under classical Dharmashastra norms than they had been in the Vedic period (Kuruvilla, 2022). A comparative Hindi-language study of ancient and modern women's education, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Anekant: Kristu Jayanti Hindi Shodh Patrika*, similarly traces this trajectory from relative openness in the Vedic period to increasing restriction in the medieval period, before charting the slow expansion of women's education under colonial reform and, subsequently, in independent India (*Anekant: Kristu Jayanti Hindi Shodh Patrika*, n.d.).

4. CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE: THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Despite this narrowing, Indian intellectual and spiritual history did not become uniformly closed to women. The medieval Bhakti movement, which spread across various regions of the subcontinent from roughly the sixth century onward, offered a renewed avenue through which women could participate as composers, philosophers, and spiritual authorities, operating through vernacular languages and devotional practice rather than exclusively through Sanskritic scholastic institutions (Women Scholars in Ancient India, 2025). One of the earliest recorded women saints of this tradition is Karaikal Ammaiyar, a Tamil devotee of Shiva who lived around the sixth century CE and whose hymns of asceticism and total surrender to the divine are regarded as foundational to Tamil devotional literature (Vajiram & Ravi, 2026). Andal, a ninth-century Tamil poet-saint and one of the twelve Alvars of the Vaishnava tradition, composed the *Thiruppavai* and *Nachiyaar Thirumozhi* and is remembered as considering herself the bride of Vishnu (ClearIAS, 2025; Dhaara, 2022). Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth-century Kannada poet-saint of the Virashaiva or Lingayat tradition, renounced marriage to a king and is remembered for *vachanas* (devotional verses) that directly challenged prevailing social expectations of female modesty and domesticity (ClearIAS, 2025; Feminism in India, 2017). In Kashmir, the mystic poet Lal Ded similarly renounced domestic life and

composed vakhs (verses) that are still read as part of the regional Shaiva tradition (Feminism in India, 2017).

Mirabai, a sixteenth-century Rajput princess and devotee of Krishna, renounced her royal position and produced a substantial corpus of bhajans; feminist historian Kumkum Sangari has described Mirabai's life and poetry as having redefined the possibilities of freedom, faith, and autonomy available to women of her era (Faith Futures Collective, 2025). In Maharashtra, Soyarabai, a saint from the Mahar caste associated with the Varkari devotional tradition, used her abhangas (devotional songs) to challenge caste-based as well as gender-based exclusion, illustrating that Bhakti-era women's intellectual and spiritual agency intersected with caste hierarchy as much as with gender (Faith Futures Collective, 2025).

At the same time, scholars caution against reading the Bhakti movement as straightforwardly liberatory. Bhakti did not develop outside the surrounding social order, and women saints continued to operate within a world that expected marriage, chastity, and domestic obedience; most women who pursued a devotional or scholarly path were able to do so only by explicitly renouncing marital ties, and even within Bhakti communities some women, such as the wives of prominent Virashaiva saints, continued to model an ideal of the obedient householder rather than the renunciant (Studocu, 2025; Feminism in India, 2022). The Bhakti movement is thus best understood not as a straightforward continuation of Vedic-era openness but as an alternative and parallel channel through which women's intellectual and spiritual agency re-emerged, often outside — and sometimes in explicit tension with — both orthodox Brahmanical institutions and the domestic norms of Bhakti communities themselves.

5. THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER AND THE RESHAPING OF GENDERED KNOWLEDGE

The colonial period introduced a further layer of complexity to the gendered history of Indian knowledge systems. Colonial scholarship frequently approached Indian civilisation through rigid, homogenising categories that obscured both the internal diversity of Indian traditions and their historical evolution, producing flattened narratives that did not adequately register either the genuine achievements of women within these traditions or the specific mechanisms of their later marginalisation (Sunday Guardian, 2026). Colonial administrators and reformers, along with nineteenth-century Indian social reform movements, engaged in extensive debate over women's education, sometimes drawing selectively on classical precedent to argue for or against expanding women's access to formal learning. This period is significant for the present discussion because it shaped the very categories — "tradition," "modernity," "Vedic," "reform" — through which later generations, including contemporary IKS scholarship, continue to interpret the gendered history of Indian knowledge.

6. THE CONTEMPORARY POLICY MOMENT: NEP 2020 AND IKS REVIVAL

The most significant recent institutional development is the National Education Policy 2020, which explicitly foregrounds India's indigenous knowledge traditions and has led to the

creation of new divisions within the Indian Knowledge System, research bodies, and university centres (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). A Hindi-language research paper on IKS and NEP 2020 describes Indian Knowledge System as the very foundation of Indian culture and Sanskrit learning, encompassing the accumulated knowledge of the Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads, Shruti and Smriti literature, and the various darshanas, dharmashastras, and arthashastras, and argues that this tradition's central educational aim was always the holistic development of the learner's personality rather than the mere transmission of information (Bharatiya Jnana Parampara evam Rashtriya Shiksha Niti-2020, 2024). Alongside its IKS provisions, NEP 2020 articulates gender equity commitments, including measures to increase enrolment and retention of girls, promote gender-sensitive curricula, and increase women's representation in educational leadership (Netto et al., 2025). Scholarly assessments describe these as important but only partially realised commitments, noting that success depends on sustained institutional coordination and broader cultural change rather than policy language alone (Netto et al., 2025; Juneja, 2021).

Analyses of NEP 2020's gender dimensions have identified specific structural concerns that predate and persist alongside the policy. Female enrolment in India remains disproportionately concentrated in arts and humanities relative to science and technology streams, a pattern attributed to structural inequalities in secondary schooling, comparatively high dropout rates among girls, and persistent gendered assumptions about appropriate fields of study (The Hans India, 2020). NEP 2020's proposals — including a shift toward a four-year undergraduate structure, a more centralised research curriculum intended to delay narrow specialisation, and expanded vocational and open/distance learning options — are framed by researchers as potentially useful levers for addressing these gaps. However, their actual impact requires ongoing evaluation through a gender-equity lens (The Hans India, 2020).

At the same time, scholars working explicitly at the intersection of IKS and gender have begun to ask how classical philosophical concepts might be mobilised for contemporary gender-transformative education. One recent conference contribution, presented at the International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems in Global Perspectives, examines how classical frameworks such as the purusharthas (the four aims of human life) and teachings drawn from various Indian spiritual traditions might be reinterpreted to support gender equality and challenge conventional gender roles within educational settings (Gender-Transformative Learning, 2024). This scholarship argues that the barriers to gender-responsive education in India — including entrenched social norms, unequal access to higher education, and the difficulty of embedding gender analysis into development practice — can be partly addressed by drawing on the collective intellectual resources of educators, students, families, and communities, an approach the authors describe as harnessing collective intelligence for curricular and institutional reform (Gender-Transformative Learning, 2024).

7. PERSISTENT GENDER GAPS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Any assessment of IKS and gender would be incomplete without examining contemporary patterns of knowledge production in India, since these represent the present-day continuation of the same underlying question: who is enabled to produce and disseminate knowledge.

In science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, women's participation and career advancement continue to face documented constraints. Research applying a social-constructionist lens to Indian STEM fields finds that barriers to women's career advancement arise at the intersection of social, organisational, and institutional contexts specific to India, rather than from any single cause, and that gendered assumptions about who belongs in technical fields continue to shape recruitment and retention in areas such as computer science and information technology (Rethinking the relationship between gender and technology, n.d.).

In academic publishing, a large-scale bibliometric study of Indian research output between 2008 and 2017, drawing on Web of Science data from fifty of the most research-productive Indian institutions, found persistent gender disparities in authorship, institutional participation, and international collaboration across disciplines (Paswan & Singh, 2020). Similar patterns are visible in specific fields: a study of authorship in major Indian oncology journals between 2017 and 2022 found that only about 30 percent of authors across more than two thousand articles were women, with female representation notably lower in review articles and editorials than in original research, and with women comprising as little as 3.5 to 24.4 percent of editorial board membership across the journals studied, despite a gradual upward trend over the study period (Representation of female authors in oncology, 2024).

In health-system leadership, an analysis using India as a case study argues that examining how gender operates within health systems and the wider society is essential to achieving more inclusive leadership, building on a 2019 World Health Organisation report that documented substantial gender inequalities in leadership roles across health systems globally (Gideon, Asthana, & Bisht, 2024).

Taken together, these contemporary studies suggest that the historical narrowing of women's access to formal knowledge production, traced in earlier sections of this article, has left durable institutional traces that persist despite decades of formal legal equality and despite recent policy commitments under instruments such as NEP 2020.

8. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: ROMANTICISATION, SELECTIVE MEMORY, AND THE RISK OF INSTRUMENTALISATION

A gender-sensitive engagement with IKS must guard against two opposite errors. The first is uncritical romanticisation: treating the existence of figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi as proof that ancient India was broadly egalitarian, a claim the textual and historical record does not support. Historians of the Vedic period are explicit that hierarchy and inequality coexisted with the visibility of a small number of exceptional women scholars, and that later legal and social codes moved in a more restrictive direction (Sunday Guardian, 2026). Treating exceptional

cases as representative risks obscuring the lived constraints faced by the vast majority of women across most periods of Indian history.

The second error is wholesale rejection: dismissing IKS as inherently and irredeemably patriarchal, which forecloses the possibility of critically recovering genuine instances of women's intellectual agency and of using reinterpreted classical frameworks as resources for contemporary gender-transformative pedagogy, as some current IKS-gender scholarship attempts to do (Gender-Transformative Learning, 2024). Both errors share a common flaw: they substitute a simplified narrative — either uniformly liberatory or uniformly oppressive — for the more complex, regionally and temporally variable historical record that careful scholarship reveals.

A further concern raised implicitly by NEP 2020's dual emphasis on IKS revival and gender equity is the risk of instrumentalisation: the possibility that references to historical women scholars are deployed rhetorically in policy and public discourse without being accompanied by the structural reforms — in curriculum design, institutional leadership, research funding, and workplace conditions — that contemporary data show are still required (Netto et al., 2025; The Hans India, 2020).

9. TOWARDS A GENDER-JUST ENGAGEMENT WITH IKS: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the historical and contemporary evidence reviewed above, several directions emerge for a more gender-just integration of IKS into Indian education and research.

First, curricular treatments of IKS should present the historical record on women's intellectual participation with appropriate nuance, including both the documented contributions of figures such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra and the later social and legal restrictions that narrowed women's access to formal learning, rather than presenting either an uncritically celebratory or uncritically dismissive account.

Second, the integration of IKS into teacher training and curriculum development under NEP 2020 offers a concrete opportunity to embed gender analysis directly into IKS pedagogy, following approaches already proposed in the literature, such as reinterpreting classical ethical frameworks to support contemporary gender-equity goals (Gender-Transformative Learning, 2024).

Third, policy commitments to gender equity within NEP 2020 — including gender-sensitive curricula, leadership development programmes, and monitoring through gender audits — require sustained institutional investment and independent evaluation to move from stated intention to measurable outcome, particularly in closing the persistent gap in female participation in STEM enrolment, research authorship, and institutional leadership documented above (Gender Equity in Indian Education, 2024; Paswan & Singh, 2020).

Fourth, research institutions and academic publishers should continue to track and publicly report gender disparities in authorship, editorial representation, and leadership, since bibliometric evidence of this kind has been central to identifying the scale and persistence of the problem in Indian science and medicine (Paswan & Singh, 2020; Representation of female authors in oncology, 2024).

10. CONCLUSION

The Indian Knowledge System, understood as a plural and evolving body of philosophy, science, and epistemology, contains genuine and textually attested instances of women's intellectual agency, from the Vedic-era scholarship of Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi to the devotional and philosophical literature of Bhakti-era women poet-saints. At the same time, Indian intellectual history also records a subsequent narrowing of women's formal access to knowledge production, a pattern shaped by evolving social codes, colonial reinterpretation, and institutional structures whose effects remain measurable in contemporary Indian science, academic publishing, and health leadership. The current policy moment, defined by NEP 2020's simultaneous emphasis on IKS revival and gender equity, offers a genuine opportunity to integrate these two agendas — but only if historical engagement with IKS remains critically honest rather than selectively celebratory, and only if policy commitments to gender equity are matched by sustained structural investment. A gender-just Indian Knowledge System, in other words, requires recovering women's place in India's intellectual past while continuing to dismantle the institutional barriers that still shape women's place in India's intellectual present.

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