

Indian Knowledge Systems and Gender: Recovering Women's Epistemic Agency and Reimagining Equity

Asha Shukla

Former Vice Chancellor, BRAUSS

Managing Director, APPHF India

ashashukla2006@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The renewed academic and policy interest in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), spurred in part by the National Education Policy 2020, has largely proceeded without a sustained gender lens. This paper argues that any serious recovery of indigenous Indian epistemologies must simultaneously recover the contested, uneven, and often erased place of women within them. Drawing on Vedic, Upanishadic, and Dharmashastra textual evidence alongside regional, oral, and craft-based knowledge traditions, the paper traces a trajectory in which women moved from being recognised participants in early Vedic intellectual life — as seers, debaters, and composers of hymns — to being progressively excluded from formal knowledge production under later codified law, even as they continued to generate, conserve, and transmit ecological, medicinal, culinary, textile, and oral knowledge outside sanctioned canons. The paper further examines how colonial historiography and modern disciplinary boundaries compounded this erasure by treating only textualised, Brahmanical, male-authored knowledge as 'authentic' IKS. It concludes by proposing a gender-just framework for IKS scholarship and pedagogy — one that treats women not merely as subjects described within these systems but as knowers, transmitters, and innovators whose epistemic labour must be restored to the centre of the Indian knowledge tradition.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, gender, women's epistemology, Vedic women scholars, indigenous knowledge, National Education Policy 2020, feminist historiography

1. Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass the accumulated intellectual, scientific, aesthetic, ethical, and practical traditions that have developed on the Indian subcontinent over several millennia — spanning Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy, grammar and logic, Ayurveda and other medical sciences, mathematics and astronomy, architecture and metallurgy, agriculture and ecological management, and vast bodies of oral, folk, and craft knowledge held by communities across caste, region, and gender lines. The recent institutional push to mainstream IKS in Indian higher education has produced a valuable corrective to colonial-era dismissals of indigenous thought as unscientific or pre-rational. Yet this revival carries a significant risk: that in recovering 'Indian' knowledge, scholarship quietly reproduces a narrow, textualised, upper-caste, and predominantly male canon, while the equally rich and equally 'Indian' knowledge traditions sustained by women — as ritual specialists, healers, agriculturists, artisans, oral historians, and philosophers — remain at the margins of the conversation.

This paper takes as its starting point the position that gender is not an incidental variable to be added onto IKS scholarship after the fact, but a structuring principle that shaped which knowledge was recorded, which was transmitted orally and therefore rendered 'informal', which knowers were named and which anonymised, and which domains of knowledge were valorised as philosophy or science as against those dismissed as domestic skill or folk custom. Recovering IKS with integrity therefore requires recovering its gendered history alongside its intellectual content.

2. Conceptualising Indian Knowledge Systems

IKS is best understood not as a single unified doctrine but as a plural, layered ecology of knowledge traditions: classical Sanskrit learning (the Vedas, Upanishads, Darshanas, and shastric literature); regional and vernacular intellectual traditions in Tamil, Pali, Prakrit, and other languages; and a vast substratum of oral, tribal, and folk knowledge that was never systematically textualised at all. Contemporary IKS scholarship, and much of the policy discourse surrounding it, has tended to privilege the first of these strata — written, Sanskrit, and institutionally transmitted knowledge — because it survives in accessible textual form. This privileging has methodological consequences for gender: women's participation in Sanskrit learning was itself constrained by unequal access to formal education across most of recorded history, so a knowledge system defined primarily by its texts will structurally under-represent women's intellectual contribution, even where women were demonstrably active as knowers and practitioners in oral and applied domains.

3. Gender in the Epistemic Architecture of Ancient India

3.1 The Vedic Period: Recognised Women Seers

The early Vedic corpus, particularly the Rig Veda, records the names of a number of women rishikas (women seers) credited with the composition of hymns, including Lopamudra, Ghosha, Apala, Vishwavara, and Maitreyi. Their presence in the textual record indicates that, in this period, formal participation in the highest form of sanctioned knowledge production — hymn composition and philosophical dialogue — was not exclusively male. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's account of the philosopher Gargi Vachaknavi publicly debating the sage Yajnavalkya on questions of ultimate reality, and of Maitreyi's dialogue with her husband on the nature of the self, are frequently cited as evidence that women could occupy the position of philosophical interlocutor and not merely subject or audience.

3.2 Contraction under Dharmashastric Codification

This relatively open participation contracted over subsequent centuries as knowledge became more formally codified through the Dharmashastra literature, most influentially the Manusmriti, which progressively narrowed women's independent access to Vedic study and ritual authority and redefined female worth chiefly through relational roles as daughter, wife, and mother. Historians of gender in ancient India, notably Uma Chakravarti(2018) and A. S. Altekar(1959), have documented this trajectory as a shift from a period of comparatively greater intellectual latitude to one of increasing textual and legal restriction, coinciding with

the consolidation of caste and patriarchal property relations. Importantly, this contraction affected formal, sanctioned knowledge; it did not eliminate women's intellectual and practical activity, which persisted and adapted in domains outside the shastric gaze.

4. Women as Knowers Beyond the Sanskrit Canon

Outside the textualised philosophical tradition, women across regions and communities have historically been primary custodians of ecological, medicinal, culinary, and craft knowledge systems that meet every substantive definition of indigenous science even though they were rarely recorded in Sanskrit treatises. This includes: seed selection, crop rotation, and agro-ecological knowledge developed and transmitted by women cultivators across generations; birthing, herbal, and post-natal care practices held by dais (traditional midwives) and women healers, which constituted a parallel, largely oral medical tradition alongside codified Ayurveda; textile, dyeing, and craft knowledge, such as regional weaving and embroidery traditions, encoding sophisticated material science transmitted almost entirely through female apprenticeship; and oral literature, lullabies, ritual songs, and proverb traditions that preserved historical memory, ethical instruction, and cosmology in vernacular form.

Matrilineal and matrilineal communities such as the Khasi and Garo of Meghalaya, and the historical Nair tradition of Kerala, offer a further corrective to any singular narrative of women's epistemic marginalisation, since in these systems women held property, inheritance, and, in many cases, decision-making authority that shaped the transmission of communal knowledge. These cases demonstrate that gendered access to knowledge and authority within the Indian subcontinent was never uniform, but varied significantly by region, community, and kinship structure.

5. The Colonial Encounter and the Compounding of Erasure

Colonial ethnography and Orientalist scholarship, in the process of 'discovering' and cataloguing Indian knowledge for administrative and academic purposes, tended to engage primarily with male pandits and Sanskrit textual authorities, reproducing and hardening the pre-existing bias toward formal, textualised, upper-caste male knowledge. Feminist historians such as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid(1989), and Tanika Sarkar(2001), have argued that colonial and nationalist discourse alike instrumentalised the figure of the 'traditional Indian woman' — invoking her as a repository of spiritual and cultural authenticity — while simultaneously denying actual women access to institutional education and public intellectual life for much of the nineteenth century. The consequence for IKS as a field is a double erasure: women's practical and oral knowledge was excluded from the archive because it was oral and domestic, and their symbolic image was simultaneously deployed in cultural-nationalist arguments about tradition without regard to their actual epistemic agency.

6. Contemporary Revival: Opportunities and Gender Blind Spots

The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly calls for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curricula at all levels, and the establishment of a dedicated IKS Division under

the Ministry of Education has accelerated funding, research, and curricular reform in this area. This represents a significant opportunity to institutionally validate knowledge traditions long excluded from formal higher education. However, early implementation has tended to prioritise recovering classical Sanskrit science — mathematics, astronomy, logic, and philosophy — with comparatively limited attention to gendered knowledge traditions such as women's agricultural science, midwifery and herbal medicine, oral history, and craft knowledge. Where gender is addressed, it is frequently treated descriptively, as a chapter on 'the status of women' in ancient India, rather than analytically, as a lens that should shape how the entire IKS curriculum selects, values, and presents knowledge.

7. Towards a Gender-Just Framework for IKS

A gender-just approach to IKS scholarship and pedagogy would need to attend to at least the following dimensions:

- Expanding the archive: systematically documenting oral, agricultural, medicinal, and craft knowledge traditions held by women, using ethnographic and oral-history methods rather than relying solely on surviving Sanskrit texts.
- Naming women knowers: restoring, wherever the historical record permits, the names and specific contributions of women scholars, healers, and practitioners, rather than treating women's knowledge as anonymous or communal by default.
- Reading canonical texts critically: teaching Vedic, Upanishadic, and Dharmashastra material alongside historical analysis of how and why women's access to formal knowledge production narrowed over time, rather than presenting these texts as an undifferentiated, timeless whole.
- Valuing applied and oral knowledge equally: according domains such as midwifery, seed-saving, and textile science the same epistemic seriousness given to classical philosophy and mathematics within IKS curricula.
- Engaging regional and community diversity: incorporating matrilineal, tribal, and non-Sanskritic traditions so that IKS scholarship reflects the subcontinent's actual plurality of gender arrangements rather than a single normative model.

8. Conclusion

The recovery of Indian Knowledge Systems is, at its best, a project of restoring epistemic dignity to traditions long dismissed by colonial and modern disciplinary hierarchies. That project remains incomplete, and arguably self-undermining, if it reproduces the very exclusions — of orality over textuality, of the domestic and applied over the philosophical, of women's labour over women's authorship — that shaped which knowledge survived in recorded form in the first place. A gender-just IKS scholarship does not require inventing a mythical age of unqualified equality; the historical record shows real contraction in women's formal intellectual standing over time. It requires, instead, the harder and more honest work of tracing that history

accurately, while actively recovering the parallel, undervalued knowledge traditions that women sustained regardless. Only on that basis can Indian Knowledge Systems be taught, researched, and institutionalised as a genuinely representative account of the subcontinent's intellectual inheritance.

References

1. Altekari, A. S. (1959). *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. Motilal Banarsidass.
2. Chakravarti, U. (2018). *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree/SAGE.
3. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy, 2020.
4. Sangari, K., & Vaid, S. (Eds.). (1989). *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kali for Women.
5. Sarkar, T. (2001). *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Permanent Black.

Bibliography

1. Chanana, K. (Ed.). (1988). *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. Orient Longman.
2. Doniger, W. (Trans.). (1981). *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*. Penguin Classics.
3. Thapar, R. (2002). *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Penguin Books.
4. Wadley, S. S. (Ed.). (1980). *The Powers of Tamil Women*. Syracuse University Maxwell School.
5. Bala, S., & Tomar, G. (2025). Role of Women in Traditional Indian Knowledge Systems. *Jagannath University Journal of Research and Review*, 1(2).