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## Role of Indian knowledge systems in promoting gender equality and empowerment

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### Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) embodies centuries of ancient customs, traditions, and pre-existing knowledge. These elements helped mould and shape social norms and values in society. Schemes of IKS are found in numerous ancient texts, folklore, and community knowledge systems in India and have shaped multiple domains like Philosophy, Medicine, Agriculture, and even Spirituality. IKS flora and fauna feature women who have historically been subjugated and oppressed, leading to their significance being marginalised through patriarchal societies. This study aims to construct and comprehend IKS and its frameworks to interrogate patriarchy, perceive gender equity, and understand its effectiveness. It seeks to retrace the empowering narratives, often marginalised concerning historical documents and Indian Vedic literature, that enshrine women scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi. Additionally, it focuses on the more traditional cultures from matrilineal societies like the Khasi and Naga tribes where gender relations have facilitated women's socio-political power. The study investigates contemporary approaches to Indian Knowledge Systems drawing from women's traditional agricultural, herbal, and eco-friendly farming as pathways to empowerment and economic activity. In pursuit of women empowerment through economic participation, the study seeks to incorporate these facets into the modern education system, policy structures, and development programmes to bring about change towards gender equity. From this perspective, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) can significantly contribute towards combating gender discrimination as well as enabling the creation of a more equitable society.

**Keywords:** Indian knowledge system, gender equality, women's empowerment, traditional wisdom, cultural practices, indigenous knowledge

### Introduction

India's multifaceted cultural heritage and India's ancient knowledge systems (IKS) involve the interrelationships of philosophy, science, the arts, agriculture, medicine, and religion, which fundamentally shaped societal systems and intellects. These systems of knowledge, which are ingrained in centuries-old written and unwritten texts and customs, enabled knowledge creation and social welfare (Mukherjee, 2020) <sup>[6]</sup>. Even so, the nurturing and propagation of these traditions have been guided by patriarchal systems that have persisted, seizing women's contribution, their role, and annihilating IKS. Most women were unable to receive formal schooling or participate in intellectual debates due to the appropriate guidelines set by a multitude of ancient society texts and their rules. This resulted in women's absence from available records (Sharma & Roy, 2019) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Even so, several components and structures within IKS indicate and support the notion of women's inclusivity and empowerment.

For example, according to Vedic Literature, female scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi were respected philosophers and theologians, suggesting that women had important intellectual contributions in early Indian civilization (Sen, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, indigenous women have always been the key bearers of traditional knowledge, including agricultural and herbal medicine, midwifery, and even sustainable agricultural practices, which still underpin the rural economy today (Chakraborty, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>. The transformation of these practices from the perspective of women's empowerment could enable women to harness their agency by recapturing history and enhancing their status as epistemic beings. Moreover, some indigenous and

tribal societies in India, like the Khasi and Garasia, have maintained certain matrilineal customs, granting women ascribed property rights and participating in decision-making, which suggests that some forms of gender equity have always been a feature of Indian social structure (Das & Banerjee, 2021) <sup>[3]</sup>. Such practices counter the assumption of a single all-powerful patriarchal history and establish a basis for modern interventions in gender empowerment. With respect to the modern context of India, these are some examples of IKS that should be revived and integrated into the educational system and policies for the promotion of gender equity in the recognition of women's contributions and roles.

As with government initiatives like the National Education Policy outlined in the year 2020, there is always a systematic effort aimed at incorporating unique knowledge systems in education. Such methods, in turn, serve the dual purpose of facilitating women's roles in their respective fields and motivating the younger generation, as traditional systems have claimed to achieve (GoI, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, strengthening grassroots movements that utilise female-led traditional Ayurveda, handicrafts, and sustainable agriculture can increase women's socio-economic activities and ultimately their earnings (Patel, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>. Gender-inclusive approaches also serve in providing an accurate and balanced interpretation of how the Indian Knowledge System has been developed to children, thus playing a crucial role in eradicating social gender inequality in India. The use of feminist approaches in formulating and implementing IKS objectives makes it possible to examine "ethnocentric" historical works and correct them by ensuring women achieve recognition in the context of modern activities. At the end of the day, a gender-sensitive IKS serves to facilitate women's advancement and strengthens the argument that traditional knowledge and artefacts from India should be adhered to so that the country becomes a more equal and fairer place for its women citizens.

## Review of Related Literature

### Gender and Indian Knowledge Systems

The Institution of Gender in the Indian Knowledge System is an evolving area which has not been extensively researched. A particularly rich source of study on gender attribution in Indian society is the \*dharma\* concept from the ancient scriptures. The Vedas, for example, talk about several female sages like Gargi and Maitreyee who were revered as Rishikas and were great philosophers and scholars. However, subsequent changes within the sociopolitical fabric constrained women's roles to be primarily domestically oriented. The role of women in ancient India during the later periods became increasingly multifaceted where they were authoritative in some contexts, but their autonomy was restricted in others. As Sharma (1994) puts it, an Indian society in retrospect had a less distorted gender hierarchy since it operated under sociopolitical boundaries rather than the dominant caste system faith. who points out the increased constraints on women's roles during the colonial period with the advent of western constructive ideologies onto India's caste systems, societal structures as a whole became more rigid.

## Empowering Practices in IKS

The analysis of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) reveals gender-sensitive competencies. Patel (2023) <sup>[7]</sup> examines women's contributions to the rural economy of India with a focus on their participation in subsistence agriculture as a skill. These women often possess significant agricultural skill, allowing them to dominate local markets. Sundaram (2007) <sup>[12]</sup>, for instance, observes that some Indian tribal societies utilise governance structures where women actively participate in decision making, as in some matrilineal societies in Meghalaya.

While Rao (2010) <sup>[8]</sup> presents a different perspective. He says that some customs may contribute towards entrenching gender bias. For instance, certain cultures have some rituals which still assign the role of caregiving and home management to women only, a necessary function that is far too restrictive for one's self-actualisation. Hence, there is a need to focus on an analysis that separates enabling or disempowering facets of Indigenous Knowledge systems.

## Need and Significance of the Study

Though much has been done towards protecting women's rights and achieving gender justice, there are still issues pertaining to gender gaps which are predominantly found in rural areas as well as in backward classes. Such disparities are evident in the consumption of education, health, economic activities and even political engagement. This research is important because it:

1. **Highlights elements of IKS that foster women's development:** There are many indigenous efforts that could mitigate gender inequalities, but most of them do not get employed as they should be implemented.
2. **Supplies an empowerment model that resonates with women's culture:** IKS offers an opportunity for women in rural areas to be empowered unlike modern approaches to gender equality which are often resisted.
3. **Serves as a tool to achieve policy advocacy:** Policymakers can appreciate the importance of traditional knowledge and design gender responsive policies that take into account indigenous knowledge systems for sustainable empowerment.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To study past and current examples of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) which have enabled women's empowerment and gender equity.
2. To evaluate the influences of indigenous practices on gender relations within the communities, particularly those that defy patriarchal systems.
3. To suggest ways through which IKS can be incorporated into initiatives for gender equality in such a way that modern concepts of empowerment are also preserved.
4. To analyse the contribution of IKS to the construction of gender relations in its dual form as practices of empowerment and as practices that reinforce unequal gender relations.

## Materials and Methods

The methodology of the research is document-based and utilises secondary data including historical writings,

ethnographic research, scholarly articles, government publications, and even some case studies. This enables the study to integrate different views and phenomena surrounding IKS and gender equality.

#### Key sources include

1. **Ancient scriptures:** Texts such as Vedas, Upanishads, and Mahabharata are scrutinised for mentions of women in the intellectual, spiritual, and social domains.
2. **Ethnographic and field studies:** Research focusing on rural and tribal knowledge systems practices.
3. **Government and NGO reports:** The review of projects with women's empowerment intentions that utilise indigenous knowledge systems such as rural development projects.
4. **Academic journals:** Gender studies, indigenous knowledge systems, and traditional knowledge articles.

#### Discussions

##### Historical Perspectives on Women in IKS

Women have been active participants in society in India, including serving as key pillars of family and community life. Women in India were not merely confined to the domestic sphere, but were also treated with respect as leaders of thought and spirituality. The Vedas, which are central texts of Hinduism, suggest that women actively engaged in and contributed to many facets of religious activities and intellectual works. Gargi and Maitreyi, two of the most revered sages in Vedic literature, were among the sages who were respected for their scholarly and philosophical contributions and participated in the learned discussions of their time (Sen, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. There are hymns in the Rigveda, which were composed by women, suggesting that female participation in religious and scholarly traditions was not only permissible but encouraged (Sharma, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>. Ardhanarishvara, the concept which depicts Shiva as one with integrated masculine and feminine energies, represents the philosophical ideal of gender balance in Indian culture.

This androgynous form, in which the masculine and feminine principles are inseparable, demonstrates a great cultural perception of the interdependence and equality of both (Chakraborty, 2022) <sup>[12]</sup>. Such representations question the assumption of gender inequality being an inbuilt feature of Indian society and provide an insight into a bygone age when patriarchy was not hegemonic to spiritual and intellectual discourse. The Ardhanarishvara is not solely a symbol of faith but philosophical proof that male and female energies are not subordinated but are integrative, signifying the already latent acceptance of women's equal status in the cosmos and society.

As Indian culture and society advanced, especially with the advent of Islamic and British rule, the role of women in society became more suppressed. The colonial paradigm fuelled the patriarchal "rules of governance" as Western ideas of family, authority, and gender were imposed by missionaries and colonial administrators, which often treated women as second-class citizens and consigned them to the domestic sphere (Ghosh, 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Both during and after the post-colonial period, the neglect of women's education was one of the colonial disrespects that was most tangible. While men were prepared to interact

with a Western education, women were normally shut out of any form of education that strengthened their identity as nurturers or housewives. The participation of women in numerous intellectual and spiritual activities in history shrank considerably during the colonial period, and with it, the leadership and scholarship offered by women was drastically reduced too (Basu, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. In addition, British colonial power further upheld harmful social traditions like child marriage and Sati and claimed that their intention was to 'civilise' colonised subjects, while turning a blind eye to the positive traditions that empowered women.

During the colonial era, there existed a 'modernity' which sometimes increased education and economic productivity but did so begrudgingly with regard to gender inclusivity. The nationalist movements that emerged during this period were invariably antagonistic towards colonial powers, and more often than not, they did not integrate gender considerations into their agendas. Leaders like Gandhi focused on women's involvement in the struggle for nationalism but primarily as mothers who had to sacrifice for the glory of the nation instead of assuming a more active role in politics and society (Gandhi, 2007) <sup>[12]</sup>. This framing, while important in mobilising women towards independence, still encouraged deeply held gendered nurture ideals that women's primary role is as caregivers responsible for socialising children into the world.

The years that followed independence saw a renewed attempt to integrate women into social and intellectual spheres, which set off in the inter-war period. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay came into the limelight now which shows how much women's empowerment remained contested in post-colonial India. The challenge, however, was how to dismantle already existing deeply rooted patriarchy that had, to a certain extent, underpinned colonial rule. These leaders were actively participating in politics, but also in cultural and educational transformations, as if to say that women were not only restricted to household duties. Nevertheless, these interventions did not purport to remove the enduring constraints imposed on women's participation in the public sphere.

Moreover, the latter part of the twentieth century brought about a clash between the idealistic vision of Ancient Indian knowledge systems and the prevailing reality of a contemporary patriarchal society. Although the Constitution of India guaranteed gender equality along with provisions for women's rights and their participation in several domains, the society and the traditional setup mostly remained rigid.

In as much as the constitution guarantees certain rights, the debate around providing women with the recognition of their contributions as well as their intellect and spirituality has been missing in contemporary discussions (Sen, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. The renewed focus on IKS, especially in indigenous knowledge, traditional medicine and cultural practices, provides an opportunity to examine the historical contributions of women to these areas and appreciate their vital position in the socio-intellectual milieu of ancient India.

To sum up, even though ancient Indian scriptures and traditions recognised the contributions of women in all fields, the subsequent history, especially colonialism and

modernity, neglected women's contributions to the world. The Ardhanarishvara philosophy along with the portrayals of female Vedic sages do serve as reminders from a time when women were revered and enjoyed equal status in society; however, with the evolution of the world, these ideals got suppressed due to sociopathic tendencies of men. Looking back this way, and thinking critically about IKS gives an opportunity to bring women's voices into the fold to counteract the perpetuated neglect.

### **Indigenous practices promoting women's empowerment**

Indigenous practices across Indian cultures have historically placed women at the centre of community life, empowering them economically and socially due to their importance in the preservation of culture, agriculture, and family. An interesting example of women's empowerment through indigenous practice and custom is that of the Garo tribe of Meghalaya, where property and land are inherited through the maternal lineage. This system puts women at the centre of family assets and resources which gives them economic power and social control in the community (Das & Banerjee, 2021) <sup>[3]</sup>. In such societies, women do not merely serve as the women who manage the home; they are decision makers in the family who have power regarding land ownership, inheritance, and resource distribution which places them in a special position in family and community politics. Such a matrilineal arrangement is in stark contrast to the majority of the rest of India where there is a marked predominance of patriarchal systems that place women's economic and social contributions in the shadows.

According to Chakraborty (2022) <sup>[2]</sup>, this system facilitates female participation in the economy, which in turn propels them to make critical decisions in scenarios where their importance is seldom acknowledged in other patriarchal societies. This is why women in Garo society are empowered.

Equally, in rural India, women have historically played a pivotal role in agricultural production and possess considerable power as farmers and livestock managers. In numerous agricultural societies, it is the duty of women to plant, grow, and fetch crops as well as practise animal husbandry (Patel, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>. Even though their duties are physically demanding, they have customarily been neglected by both society and conventional agricultural academia. Women's knowledge of seasonal rhythms, biodiversity within their vicinity, and surrounding areas, and their local informal farming practices greatly contributes to agricultural advancement, particularly in regions that heavily rely on subsistence farming without modern agricultural reforms (Sharma, 2019) <sup>[11]</sup>. Such critical knowledge, which is rooted in history, is paramount for ensuring food security as well as promoting ecological sustainability. In a number of marginalised communities, women rear the livestock, which is the principal source of food and money for the family. The control of these economic resources gives them the leverage to make choices affecting the income level of their families. Where women have this economic power, their range of influence extends beyond the household to aid in community and village decision-making.

Like other leaders, they too have a say in the matters that concern agriculture and the welfare of the local population,

thus expanding their spheres of influence further into public domains (Basu, 2020) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Additionally, women are at the centre of preserving and passing on knowledge in India's indigenous settlements which goes beyond cultural practices. Most indigenous societies assign women as primary keepers of oral traditions, folklore, and other vital rituals for social norms continuity (Ghosh, 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>. For instance, in tribal societies such as the Santhals and the Oraons, women play a crucial role in the maintenance of cultural narratives and the performance of rituals, serving as healers, spiritual leaders, and storytellers of the community. These roles enable women to claim authority in the spiritual and cultural domains of the community because they are the sources of the wisdom that defines the identity and values of the tribe. In this case, women's empowerment goes beyond economic empowerment to spiritual and cultural empowerment, because they help in safeguarding their people's collective memory and traditions.

Concerning areas such as agriculture, ownership of properties, and preservation of cultures, women have been at the centre of it all, demonstrating how indigenous practices have influenced these societies profoundly, yet the modern world fails to recognise the impact. With primary focus placed on regions such as India which suffer deeply from gender issues, examining these systems can reveal how indigenous practices can be integrated in the present world to provide an overall inclusive atmosphere. These systems do highlight the socially and economically changing indigenous practices, which will enhance the position women hold and how they can contribute to the improvement of their society in the future (Patel, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **Integrating IKS into Modern Gender Equality Frameworks**

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems with modern gender equality frameworks is a complicated yet fundamentally necessary task that must ensure gender inclusivity and equality while simultaneously valuing history. A significant challenge in merging these two aspects involves cultivating a culture of preservation, and documentation of Indigenous Knowledge is a surefire way of accomplishing that. It is no secret that the majority of Indigenous Knowledge Systems emanating from tribal and rural societies are practiced and taught orally. With the impact modernity and globalisation have brought upon the world, these systems are incredibly susceptible to erosion (Patel, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>. These systems must be recorded in writing systematically, and noting women's contributions to agriculture, medicine, and community politics is a major step towards thorough preservation. A comprehensive understanding of gender relations is fundamental for recording and systematising indigenous knowledge. Modern technology offers collaboration with indigenous knowledge holders and the creation of databases or even archives that can be utilised by future generations (Sharma, 2019) <sup>[11]</sup>. It is equally important that the analysed content of IKS in question is scrutinised impartially, where one of the focuses is gender dynamics. Many indigenous approaches are known for being supportive of women, but the existence of practices that reinforce gender stereotypes or hijack the notion of power in a highly patriarchally dominated society



is something that cannot be ignored.

For instance, some actions, practices, or traditions that seem to promote equality may still restrict women's freedom through certain roles such as particular rituals or social expectations (Ghosh, 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>. Thus, it becomes pertinent to separate practices that can be seen as empowering, such as land ownership fairly allotted to women in matrilineal societies, and those that create adverse gender stereotypes. A critical analysis of the practices enables understanding of what is beneficial or celebration-worthy versus what has to be changed, set aside, or eliminated to foster contemporary ideals of justice and equity (Das & Banerjee, 2021) <sup>[3]</sup>. Community engagement is another important aspect of attempting to embed IKS into gender equity strategies. It is important to engage local women on issues concerning the applicability of indigenous knowledge in the modern world. This approach allows women to be at the forefront of changing traditional gender roles as well as changing notions of womanhood. Through engaging in discussions on the merits and demerits of traditions, communities can reframe culturally bound gender relations that subjugate women.

Thus, it increases the recognition, appreciation, and respect for women's contemporary roles in maintaining and transmitting cultural information as they usually remain the key holders of IKS in a variety of indigenous societies (Chakraborty, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>. At the same time, the support of policies is fundamental in integrating IKS into the existing gender equality frameworks. It is possible for governments to formulate documents that appreciate the role of IKS in cultural preservation and at the same time offer a platform for empowering women. Women and gender-focused programmes may include IKS such as women in agriculture, rural health care, and women's community leadership in national policies and development plans (Basu, 2020) <sup>[1]</sup>. Policies drafted in this manner should be in line with international human rights instruments, not forgetting the set standards of the principles of equality and non-discrimination, as well as competent women's participation in decision making. Such involvement of women, and participation by all citizens in decision making, enables IKS to be adopted into formal policy frameworks. Women are acknowledged as change agents concerning cultural heritage preservation and social transformation. Women bear the most responsibility for the history and cultural heritage of their people. Women are primary socialisers; they are responsible for what to remember, celebrate, share with future generations, and such powers are the basis of social change.

In combination, these approaches provide a transformative vision towards an integrated and equitable future, where the incorporation of IKS within gender equality frameworks not only motivates women but also cultivates an understanding of how knowledge and power have always been constructed and contested across different communities in a gendered manner.

## Findings

The results of the study are summarized as follows:

1. **Positive Elements of IKS:** The involvement and economic contributions of women in traditional farming, leadership, and family activities enable self-

sufficiency and provide a solution towards the modern gender gap.

2. **Urban And Social Distortions:** Some of the IKS practices have been altered to meet the social and urban needs of modern civilisation, but they still perpetuate patriarchal systems. These are practices that must be examined closely and changed.
3. **Gender Sensitive Development Using Non IKS:** The 'Selfie with Daughter' initiative, which seeks to celebrate girls and 'Lado Panchayat,' which seeks to politically mobilise women, exemplifies the use of IKS today and suggests solutions towards the ever-increasing gender inequality.

## Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), as it is called, consists of innumerable traditions, practices, and philosophies that need only critical examination to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. Knowledge Systems IKS entails several means of coping with agriculture, medicine, spirituality, governance, and many others that are practised or made in India, most of which were inherited. In traditional patterns, there is a bias-free approach towards gender roles as women and men have complementary responsibilities which is evident in the matriarchal society of Meghalaya where women control the land and property (Das & Banerjee, 2021) <sup>[3]</sup>. Such systems grant women economic and social power in making decisions that affect families and the community. Moreover, in rural India, women possess adequate knowledge in agriculture; their concentration in agriculture, livestock production, and sustainable farming enables them to participate actively in the local economy and community governance (Patel 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>. Though IKS offers boundless possibilities for the empowerment of women, not all elements of it strive for gender equality. Most of these indigenous epistemologies have been created under patriarchal conditions, so some of the practices may reinforce gender norms or confine women to the private or domestic sphere.

Hence, it is important to analyse IKS in the context of whether the practices do aid in the social betterment of women or whether they perpetuate the existing patriarchal social structures (Ghosh, 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>. In this regard, India can value and preserve the facets within IKS which are empowering, such as the acceptance of women's roles as spiritual leaders, economically productive members, and decision-making authorities in their households. These facets need to be integrated into modern education policies and curricula because they can drastically change societal perceptions concerning gender relations. Educational and State institutions can teach the role of women in history and modern society through IKS and a gender-sensitive approach. Special policies that are meant to increase the recognition of the importance of IKS for gender equality, among other things, enable women to participate fully in governance and economic activities. This deeper understanding, towards an appreciation of IKS and its connection with contemporary gender equality, can foster a scenario in which both men and women have equal opportunity, resources, and prospects towards a more prosperous and inclusive society.

### Educational Implications

Incorporating the Indian Knowledge Systems into school programmes can accomplish the following:

1. Broadly appreciate the gender dynamics in India by integrating the historical roles of women.
2. Enable learners to assess stereotypical customs and practices which promote gender equality.
3. Instill pride in women's contribution to community development and actively participate in the advancement of society.
4. Formulate a responsive policy to educational challenges by appreciating the pluralistic nature of Indian Indigenous Knowledge System.

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