



Women's Role and Epistemic Representation in the Indian Knowledge System : A Textual Analysis in the Perspective of Śruti, Smṛti and Purāṇa

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Abstract:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) encompasses centuries of accumulated wisdom, customs, traditions, and indigenous practices that have shaped the cultural and intellectual fabric of society. Rooted in ancient texts, folklore, and community-based knowledge, IKS has significantly influenced diverse fields such as philosophy, medicine, agriculture, and spirituality. These longstanding knowledge traditions have played a crucial role in forming social norms, guiding ethical values, and sustaining holistic ways of living across generations in India.

This paper provides the role, status, and epistemic representation of women within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), drawing upon a comprehensive textual analysis of Śruti, Smṛti, and Purāṇic literature. The study highlights that in the Vedic period, women held significant intellectual, spiritual, and social authority as seers/ Risika, philosophers, educators, and contributors to sacred texts. Women such as Gārgī, Maitreyī, Lopāmudrā, and Apālā exemplify this tradition, illustrating that education, brahmacharya, and philosophical inquiry were accessible to women and socially esteemed. Vedic hymns authored by women and their participation in debates demonstrate the gender-inclusive nature of early Indian knowledge traditions.

The paper further traces the shift in women's status during the Later Vedic and Smṛti periods, where socio-political changes, caste expansion, and patriarchal norms gradually restricted women's educational, religious, and public roles. Smṛti texts, while acknowledging the ethical importance of women within family and society, also reflect emerging constraints on their autonomy. Nevertheless, texts such as Manusmṛti affirm that familial and societal prosperity depends upon the respect and well-being of women.

Purāṇic narratives and Shakti traditions further emphasize the centrality of the feminine in sustaining cosmic order. Goddesses like Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā embody wisdom, prosperity, and power, while characters such as Draupadī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Ambā highlight women's agency, moral authority, and resistance against injustice. These narratives reinforce the view that women serve as protectors of dharma and architects of social and spiritual transformation. By synthesizing classical texts, historical insights, and indigenous knowledge traditions, this paper concludes that women within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) are not passive inheritors of culture but active producers of knowledge, mentors, and creative forces. Recognizing both their historical empowerment and the factors that later diminished their roles provides

crucial perspectives for re-envisioning women's place in modern education and society, in harmony with the objectives of NEP 2020 and the broader agenda of cultural revitalization.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge System, Women Intellectual Śruti, Smṛti, Purāṇa.*

Introduction:

The Indian Knowledge System stands as a profound intellectual tradition, among the oldest worldwide, embodying a considerable array of philosophical, cultural, scientific, and ethical insights preserved across Śruti, Smṛti, and Purāṇic texts. In examining this rich heritage, a critical aspect emerges in understanding the role and representation of women, highlighting not only their significant contributions but also the intricate transformations in their social status throughout various historical epochs.

In the Vedic era, women occupied significant educational and intellectual positions as seers, scholars, poets, and participants in spiritual discourse, while later texts reflect gradual transformations in their roles shaped by changing socio-cultural dynamics.

The NEP 2020 underscores the significance of this rich heritage, advocating for the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems within contemporary education. This initiative aims to foster cultural awareness, encourage holistic learning, and deepen the comprehension of India's intellectual traditions, highlighting the crucial role such integration plays in advancing education.

The paper undertakes a profound textual analysis rooted in Śruti, Smṛti, and Purāṇa, with the intent to rigorously explore how these essential texts articulate the concepts of women's knowledge, and empowerment.

This paper aims to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the epistemic presence of women within India's intellectual history, providing a serious examination of the empowering and restrictive frameworks that have historically shaped their involvement in the realm of knowledge.

Indian culture, traditions, beliefs, and customs are fundamentally intertwined with the nation's spiritual heritage. Consequently, when planning developmental activities or behavioral change programs, it is imperative to integrate them with traditional values and social structures; without this alignment, such initiatives risk failing to endure. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) serves as an indispensable guide in ensuring these efforts are appropriately structured and sustainable.

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) serve as a crucial mechanism for reconstructing indigenous knowledge, deeply rooted in India's profound civilizational wisdom. By offering a holistic approach to education, these systems engage learners through sustainable and ethically grounded frameworks, addressing critical gaps often neglected in modern educational paradigms.

Objectives:

- ❖ To highlight the varied roles of women in traditional Indian knowledge systems and acknowledge their significant contributions to intellectual traditions.
- ❖ The purpose of this study is to critically analyse the role of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in influencing and advancing women's empowerment in the Indian context.

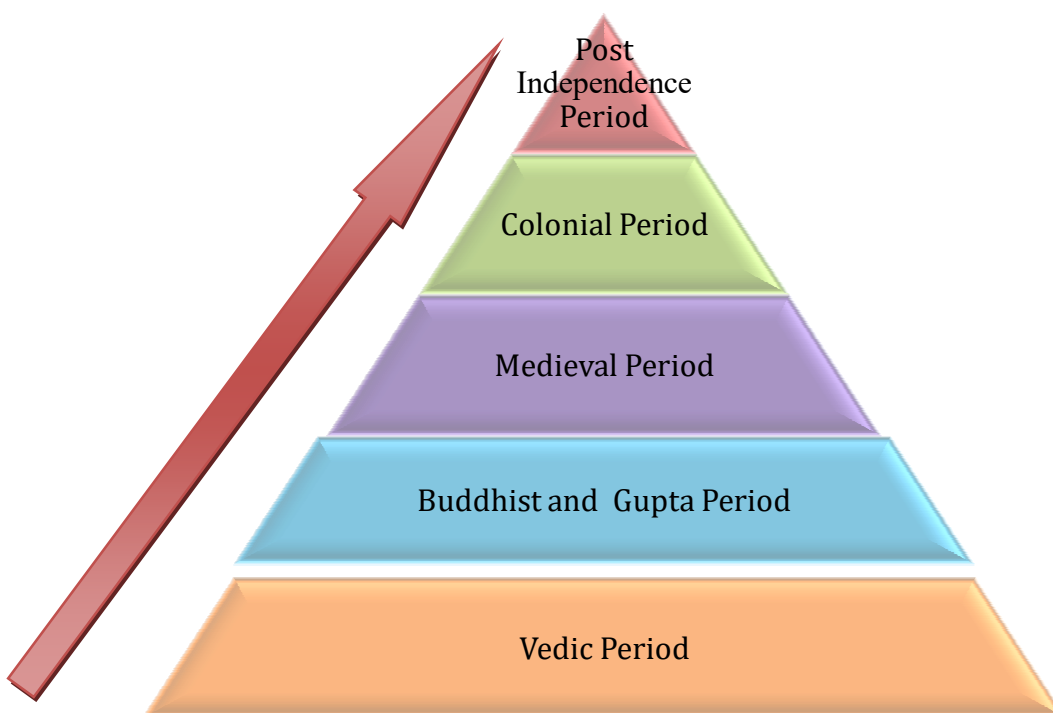
Methodology:

This paper relies exclusively on secondary data, utilizing an extensive literature review and an examination of statements and findings put forth by a variety of scholars, each offering unique viewpoints.

- ❖ **Literature Review:** Explore Vedic writings, Puranas, classical texts, scriptures, commentaries, and historical accounts that discuss women's roles in Indian knowledge systems, along with contemporary research articles, books, and dissertations on gender and traditional knowledge
- ❖ **Textual Analysis:** Examine foundational texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Ayurvedic literature, and regional writings to identify and acknowledge the contributions of women and other knowledge practitioners.
- ❖ **Thematic Categorization:** Organize women's contributions into themes such as education, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, literature, philosophy, arts, and oral traditions etc.
- ❖ **Interpretation and Critical Analysis:** Critically examine and interpret the findings to understand the depth and context of women's contributions within traditional knowledge systems.

Historical Perspective of Indian Education:

The evolution of education in India began in the Vedic period with oral instruction in gurukulas, emphasizing scriptures, philosophy, and moral development. This tradition continued with the establishment of renowned centers like Nalanda and Takshashila during the Buddhist and Gupta eras. In the medieval period, pathshalas and madrassas emerged, though women's education remained limited to select families. During the colonial era, Western-style education was introduced alongside reform movements advocating literacy and women's education. After independence, India has focused on universal education, gender equality, and integrating traditional knowledge with modern curricula, reflecting a continuous journey of intellectual and social progress.



Principal Aspects of Women's Empowerment in the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems:

Indian Knowledge System have historically recognized the essential role of women in society. They advocate for the education of women, their involvement in decision making, and their participation in cultural, spiritual and economic activities. IKS also promotes women's leadership, social recognition and the preservation of knowledge. We now undertake a detailed analysis of women's empowerment within these frameworks. The points below highlight indigenous practices in Indian culture and outline the key dimensions of women's empowerment.

- ❖ Access to education and knowledge
- ❖ Participation in religious and spiritual practices
- ❖ Decision-making within family and community
- ❖ Economic independence and livelihood skills
- ❖ Leadership and governance roles
- ❖ Health and well-being awareness
- ❖ Engagement in arts, literature, and intellectual pursuits
- ❖ Social recognition and respect
- ❖ Advocacy and voice in societal matters

Access to education and knowledge:

Education in the Vedic period focused mainly on Vedagyan (knowledge of the Vedas) and spiritual learning. It was primarily oral, with students memorizing and reciting sacred texts like the Rigveda. It is believed that the Rigveda is the earliest text of Vedic literature. While it does not contain direct references specifically about the position of women, various descriptions and metaphors offer insights into their status. In Vedic education, women played a significant and empowered role. The Gurukul system was inclusive, allowing both boys and girls to live with their teachers and study subjects ranging from the Vedas, philosophy, mathematics, and ethics to astrology and grammar. Education aimed not just at knowledge but at holistic vidya, combining intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth. Women, especially Brahmavadinis (female scholars), actively participated as students and teachers, contributing to intellectual and spiritual discourse.

Bramhacharyan kanyā yubnām bindate patim

ब्रह्मचर्येण कन्या युवनाङ् बिनन्दते पतिं

ব্রহ্মচর্যেণ কন্যা যুবনাং বিন্দতে পতিম

(A young girl, practicing celibacy and following the disciplined life of Brahmacharya, unites with her husband.)

After observing brahmacharya (and acquiring knowledge through the study of the Vedas and Shastras), a maiden, in her youth, will attain a learned husband. This is a direct affirmation of women's education. This assertion reflects the Vedic outlook on women's education and personal discipline. More than thirty women are mentioned in the Rigveda texts, including Ghoshā, Lopāmudrā, Gārgī, Maitreyī, Apālā, Viśvāvarā, Rātrī, Aditi, and many more. The strongest evidence of the high education and intellectual sophistication of women in the Vedic era is that they themselves composed Vedic hymns. Gargi's debate with Yajnavalkya is one of the most celebrated dialogues in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. She boldly questioned the sage on the nature

of reality, creation, and the ultimate substratum of the universe. Her sharp intellect and fearless inquiry highlight the profound philosophical stature of women in the Vedic period. The dialogue between Maitreyī and Yājñavalkya in the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad centers on the nature of immortality and true wisdom. When Yājñavalkya offers his wealth before renouncing worldly life, Maitreyī asks whether wealth can grant spiritual fulfillment. Her profound questions lead Yājñavalkya to deliver some of the Upaniṣad's deepest teachings, showcasing her intellectual depth and spiritual insight.

Strīrūpam śaucam ādāya brahmacāryam samācāret.

स्त्रीरूपम् शौचमादाय ब्रह्मचार्यं समाचरेत्
स्त्रीरूपम् शौचमादाय ब्रह्मचार्यं समाचरेत्

One should cultivate brahmacharya (discipline and purity in conduct) while upholding the virtues of womanhood and maintaining purity. Above statement directly connects to women's education by showing that the qualities required for Vedic learning—purity, discipline, and inner refinement—were associated with women themselves. This implies that women were seen as capable of practicing brahmacharya, the disciplined student life devoted to study.

vidyām sarvasēvā jananī-rūpaṇīm

विद्यां सर्वसेवा जननीरूपणीम्
विद्यां सर्वसेवा जननीरूपणीम्

অর্থ: জ্ঞান সব মানুষের জন্য সমানভাবে মায়ের মতো স্নেহশীল। Meaning: Knowledge is equally loving and nurturing to all human beings, just like a mother.

prajñā nāryaḥ sarvatra loka-śikṣāyām jananī-rūpā

প্রজ্ঞা নার্য: সর্বত্র লোকশিক্ষায়া জননীরূপা
প্রজ্ঞা নার্য: সর্বত্র লোকশিক্ষায় জননীরূপা

অর্থ: নারীর প্রজ্ঞা সর্বত্রই প্রতিফলিত হয়; তিনি সমাজের শিক্ষায় জননী হিসেবে অবদান রাখেন- Meaning: A woman's wisdom is reflected everywhere; she contributes as a mother to the education and nurturing of society.

sarvāḥ striyaḥ śikṣām abhiyantu sarvadā

সর্বা: স্ত্রিয়: শিক্ষামভিযন্তু সর্বদা
সর্বা: স্ত্রিয়: শিক্ষামভিযন্তু সর্বদা

অর্থ: সব নারীর মধ্যে শিক্ষা ও জ্ঞান উদ্ভূত হোক; তারা সর্বদা শিক্ষার জন্য উৎসাহী হোক - Meaning: May education and knowledge arise in all women; may they always remain eager to learn.

dvābhyām saha karmaṇyetah jñānapathe samānagataḥ

দ্বাভ্যাং সহ কর্মণ্যেত: জ্ঞানপথে সমানগত:
দ্বাভ্যাং সহ কর্মণ্যেত: জ্ঞানপথে সমানগত:

অর্থ:- নারী ও পুরুষ উভয়কেই সমানভাবে কর্ম করতে হবে, যেন তারা জ্ঞানপথে সমানভাবে এগোতে পারে - Meaning: Both women and men must contribute equally through their actions so that they can progress together on the path of knowledge.

brahmavādinīyo bhābhūvūḥ

ब्रह्मवादिन्यो भभूवुः)

ब्रह्मवादिन्यो भभूवुः

अर्थ:-तारा ब्रह्मवादिनीं छिलेन- Meaning: They were Brahmavadinis (women devoted to the study and pursuit of spiritual and Vedic knowledge).

gārgyai brahmavit bhavati prāśnaih devānapi yojayati

गार्ग्यै ब्रह्मवित् भवती प्रश्नैः देवानपि योजयती

गार्ग्यै ब्रह्मवित् भवती प्रश्नैः देवानपि योजयती

अर्थ:- गार्गी एमन ज्ञाने समृद्ध यिनि देवतादेरु प्रश्ने पराजित करेछिलेन- Meaning: Gargi was so enriched with knowledge that even the gods were defeated by her questions.

nāryaḥ prajñāvatīḥ lokamārgadarśinīyaḥ

नार्यः प्रज्ञावतीः लोकमार्गदर्शिन्यः

नार्यः प्रज्ञावतीः लोकमार्गदर्शिन्यः

अर्थ:-नारी प्रज्ञावती हले समाजेर पथप्रदर्शक हये ठैनेन- Meaning: When a woman is wise, she becomes a guiding light for society. Scriptural Endorsement of Women's Education

During this era, women were not only participants but also contributors to philosophical discourse, ritual practices, and Vedic debates, making it a notably gender-inclusive period in Indian history.

However, from the Later Vedic period onward, discrimination in education, rights, and social life gradually intensified, worsened further by child marriage, widow-burning, purdah, and polygamy. The decline of women's education deepened during successive foreign invasions, whose arrival created prolonged insecurity and social anxiety. To "protect" women, society restricted their movement and enforced purdah, limiting access to education and public life. Fear of abduction and political turmoil led families to withdraw girls from learning, causing a decline in women's educational freedoms after the Vedic age. Chronicles such as Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, the *Prithviraj Raso*, and Persian works like Al-Biruni's *India* and Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* describe widespread fear of abduction, loss of honour, and social vulnerability faced by women. These records reveal how insecurity and violence directly influenced families to restrict women's movement, enforce purdah, and limit their participation in education and public life. As a result, historical literature not only documents the decline of women's safety but also explains how this insecurity contributed to the gradual withdrawal of women from intellectual and social spaces.

अप्रामाम् अपि तां तस्मै कान्यां दद्यात् यथाविधि

aprāptām api tāṃ tasmai kanyāṃ dadyāt yathāvidhi

अप्राप्तम् अपि तां तस्मै कन्या दद्यात् यथाविधि।

कन्या एखनो प्राणुवयस्क ना हलेओ, यथाविधि ताके सेइ पुरुषेर काछे विवाहे दान करा येते পারে

Even if the girl has not yet reached maturity, she may be given in marriage to that man according to the prescribed rules.

कार्या स्त्रीभिरहितं गृहकार्यं सदा।
kāryā strībhir ahitam gṛhakāryam sadā
কার্যা স্ত্রীভিরহিতং গৃহকার্যং সদা

মহিলাদের সর্বদা গৃহকর্মে নিযুক্ত থাকতে হবে। Women should always be engaged in household duties

अधीतव्या न स्त्रियः वेदान्। (Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra)
adhītavyā na striyaḥ vedān
অধীতব্যা না স্ত্রিয়ঃ বেদান্

নারীদের বেদশিক্ষা বা উচ্চশিক্ষা গ্রহণের অধিকার নেই- Women do not have the right to study the Vedas or pursue higher education.

Over time, especially under foreign influence, society shifted in ways that gave men greater authority over women while demanding little responsibility from them. Although the *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* urges that wives be protected even more than wealth, social practice often followed Chanakya's view of prioritizing self-interest over one's wife.

Participation in religious and spiritual practices:

During the Rig Vedic period, women actively participated in religious and spiritual life, engaging in Vedic rituals, yajnas, and philosophical debates, and even performing sacrifices alongside men. They had the right to study the Vedas and pursue spiritual knowledge, reflecting a relatively egalitarian religious culture. However, after the Later Vedic period and especially under successive foreign invasions, women's participation in religious and spiritual practices became increasingly restricted. Fear of insecurity, social instability, and patriarchal norms led to the enforcement of practices like purdah and stricter household confinement, limiting women's access to Vedic learning and public rituals. Consequently, their spiritual roles were largely confined to domestic worship and non-mantric religious duties.

Decision-making within family and community:

Women such as Savitri are depicted in the Rig Vedic texts as wise, assertive, and capable of making important decisions within family and social contexts, serving as respected advisors in both household and ritual matters. R.S. Sharma (*India's Ancient Past*, 2005) notes that Vedic women had the right to own property, engage in trade, and offer counsel in family and clan affairs, highlighting their active role in economic and social decision-making. Likewise, Romila Thapar (*Early India*, 2002) emphasizes that women participated in intellectual debates (*sabhas*), reflecting their acknowledged role in social, religious, and ritual deliberations. Collectively, these accounts illustrate that women in the Vedic period held significant authority both within the household and in broader community life. After the Vedic period, especially under foreign influence, women's authority and access to education gradually declined their learning was largely confined to domestic skills, and progressive freedoms of the Vedic era were increasingly curtailed, reducing their role mainly to household and reproductive duties.

Economic independence and livelihood skills:

In the Vedic (Boidik) era, women had some access to livelihood skills, but real economic independence was limited to a small, educated elite. Texts such as the Rigveda mention learned women like Gargi, who engaged in philosophical debates, and Lopamudra and Ghosha, who composed hymns—showing that

intellectual work could be a form of livelihood for a few. Many ordinary women worked in agriculture, cattle rearing, spinning, weaving, pottery, and brewing, contributing directly to household economies. However, property rights were usually denied, wages were rare, and most work remained unpaid and controlled by male family heads. Over time, later Vedic laws further restricted women's inheritance and education. Thus, while skills and work participation existed, economic freedom was uneven, caste-bound, and mostly symbolic rather than truly independent.

Leadership and governance roles:

Here are a few examples that illustrate women's leadership and governance roles clearly during the Vedic period.

Draupadi stands out as one of the most powerful and resistant female characters in the *Mahabharata*. She courageously opposed injustice, patriarchal humiliation, and social double standards, often articulating reasoned protest against oppression. For instance, when humiliated in the royal court, she famously asked, “*Can one who has lost herself cause the loss of another?*”—a question that resonates with modern feminist ideas of agency and consent. By openly challenging a male-dominated judicial system, Draupadi asserted her public voice and demonstrated that women have the right to question authority. She also refused to allow her body to be treated as a commodity during her humiliation, asserting bodily autonomy in a context where male authority sought to control her. Her resistance was not only personal but political as well; her oath of vengeance became a key catalyst for the Kurukshetra war. Draupadi's story illustrates that no decision is legitimate without a woman's consent, women have the right to challenge male-dominated institutions, and personal humiliation cannot be separated from broader social justice. From the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) perspective, Draupadi embodies fearless agency and public voice, challenging injustice and patriarchal authority while asserting bodily and moral autonomy. Her resistance and political influence demonstrate that women's consent and ethical action are central to social and moral order.

Kunti's character in the *Mahabharata* represents the invisible power and “silent leadership” of women within a patriarchal society. She successfully navigated the enormous social challenges of single motherhood while making strategic decisions that shaped the course of events, such as keeping Karna's identity hidden and guiding the Pandavas through numerous political and moral dilemmas. Her instructions and counsel carried the weight of statecraft, demonstrating that her moral authority was equivalent to that of rulers. Kunti's story illustrates the profound ethical and psychological capacity of women in managing both family and broader societal affairs. Even when her decisions remained private, their consequences influenced society at large, showing that sacrifice should not be seen merely as a duty but as a manifestation of powerful moral agency. From the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) perspective, Kunti exemplifies women's silent yet profound leadership, showing that strategic decisions and moral authority within the family can shape societal outcomes. Her actions highlight that even private choices by women can exert significant influence on politics, ethics, and social order.

Gandhari in the *Mahabharata* exemplifies silent yet powerful protest and ethical politics. By voluntarily blindfolding herself, she shared in her husband's suffering and symbolically resisted patriarchal and political injustice. She repeatedly warned against Duryodhana's wrongdoings, showing that women's moral counsel carries political weight. Her character demonstrates that silence can be a form of agency, grief can inspire principled action, and ignoring women's ethical guidance can have serious societal consequences. From the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) perspective, Gandhari demonstrates that a woman's silent protest and moral vigilance carry political and ethical power, showing that agency does not always require loud action. Her grief transforms into principled resistance, emphasizing that women's counsel and ethical foresight are crucial for societal stability.

Amba in the *Mahabharata* stands as a powerful symbol of bodily sovereignty, justice, and revenge. She was forcibly taken, exemplifying patriarchal female objectification, yet she asserted her rights over her own body by vowing to punish Bhishma. Even through reincarnation as Shikhandi, she fulfilled her quest for revenge, demonstrating that the denial of a woman's choice can provoke profound social consequences. Amba's story shows that revenge can serve as justice when legal remedies fail, and personal resistance against patriarchy has the power to reshape history. From the perspective of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), women are not merely passive members of society but active architects of civilization. Their voice, protest, vengeance, and leadership form the very foundation of ethical governance, justice, and the moral structure of society.

Indian literature teaches that women's resistance is not merely personal; it serves as a tool for restoring social morality. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) emphasizes that a woman's resistance redirects society toward its moral core. In essence, women's resistance functions as a social correction mechanism, reinforcing justice and ethical order.

Voice of Women — Foundation of Justice and Knowledge - Throughout the Vedic, Upanishadic, Puranic, and epic traditions, women have imparted knowledge and influenced critical decisions. Examples include: Gārgī challenging Yājñavalkya on the nature of Brahman; Maitreyī raising profound questions about self-knowledge; Draupadī demanding justice for her honor in the royal court; and Gandhārī offering moral counsel against waging war. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) teaches that women's questioning forms the intellectual foundation of civilization. Silence is not a virtue—women's public voice is a civilization necessity. Women's voice, resistance, revenge, and leadership—all are equally powerful in shaping civilization. It reveals that:

- ❖ A woman's body becomes controlled by state and political power.
- ❖ Violating a woman's honor can destabilize the entire society.
- ❖ Body-politics functions as a tool of patriarchal power.

These issues remain highly relevant today in discussions of:

- Body Politics
- Rape Culture Analysis
- Consent Theory

The Women in the Mahābhārata resist in multiple ways:

- Moral resistance – Draupadī
- Ideological resistance – Gandhārī
- Bodily resistance – Ambā
- Social resistance – Kuntī

All these forms of resistance represent different expressions of empowerment. Learning from Literature – A woman is capable of asserting her rights:

- ✓ She can question the structures of state and power.
- ✓ She can guide society in ethics and justice.

- ✓ She is not an object, but a subject with agency and autonomy.
- ✓ Her voice can transform the very face of politics.

Draupadī demonstrated that a single woman, standing alone, can challenge a male-dominated state system. After the Vedic era, when women were confined to the household, education became a distant dream. The voice of women was increasingly suppressed, and their power of speech systematically curtailed, leading to growing oppression. Khana serves as a notable example of this trend.

Health and well-being awareness:

Khanā is regarded as ancient India's first female folk scientist. She excelled as an analyst of celestial movements and as an interpreter of the influence of planets and stars. She guided agricultural practices by applying astronomy, forecasting weather through careful observation of seasonal winds, rainfall, air pressure, and lunar phases. Beyond agriculture, she offered advice on diet, seasonal cycles, environmental health, and family well-being. Khanā stands as an indispensable pillar of female knowledge in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), representing a historical figure through whom five fields of knowledge—environmental science, agricultural science, astronomy-mathematics, health culture, and folk wisdom—flourished together. Her sayings guided agrarian societies for thousands of years, grounded in experience, tested observation, and scientific coherence, including deep insights into seasonal cycles, climate, and soil characteristics. Yet, despite her immense contributions, her tongue was cut off, symbolizing the suppression of women's voice and knowledge. But our Vedic culture teaches us:

“Saṅgacchadhvaṃ saṅbadadhvaṃ saṅ vo manāṃsi jānatām |

Debā bhāgaṃ yathā pūrve saṅjānānā upāsate ||”

সংগচ্ছধ্বং সংবদধ্বং সং বো মনাংসি জানতাম্ ।

দেবা ভাগং যথা পূর্বে সংজানানা উপাসতে ।।

(ঋগ্বেদ: ১০.১৯১.২-৪)

Walk together, speak together, let your minds be in harmony. In the Vedic period, women played a vital role in promoting health and well-being, combining practical knowledge with spiritual guidance. Figures like Sāvitrī and Lopāmudrā in the *Rigveda* advised on balanced diets, seasonal routines, and spiritual practices to maintain physical and mental health (*Rigveda* 10.125; *Atharvaveda* references). Maitreyī, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* (2.4), linked ethical living and self-knowledge with overall wellness.

Social recognition and respect:

In the Vedic period, women enjoyed significant social recognition and respect, as evidenced in both texts and society. Prominent female sages like Gārgī and Maitreyī participated in philosophical debates with male scholars, demonstrating that their knowledge and opinions were valued (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*). Women also contributed hymns to the *Rigveda* (e.g., Lopāmudrā, Apālā), showing public acknowledgment of their intellectual authority.

These examples indicate that women were respected as thinkers, teachers, and moral guides, with their voices carrying weight in both spiritual and social spheres. Jabālā's example shows that Vedic society could accord women respect and recognition for their spiritual, intellectual, and moral contributions. In the Vedic worldview, every god is accompanied by a goddess, reflecting the principle of balance and complementary power. Goddesses are not merely consorts but active participants in cosmic functions, symbolizing wisdom, energy, and moral guidance. This duality underscores the Vedic respect for feminine power, acknowledging

that divine and social order depends equally on both male and female principles. In the Vedic and later Indian traditions, Shakti Pūjā (worship of the Goddess) highlights the centrality of feminine power in spiritual and social life. Shakti is regarded as the dynamic energy that empowers gods and sustains the universe, symbolizing wisdom, creativity, and moral strength. The practice of Shakti Pūjā reflects the recognition that women. In this context, Tantra Sādhana reflects the profound recognition of feminine power (Shakti) as essential for spiritual and cosmic balance. Tantra emphasizes that spiritual realization and worldly efficacy depend on harmonizing masculine and feminine principles, symbolizing that the feminine—like women in society—is not subordinate but a vital, dynamic force guiding knowledge, morality, and transformation. Kumārī Pūjā exemplifies the Vedic and later Indian recognition of the divine feminine present in young girls. The practice reflects the understanding that feminine power is sacred and central to spiritual, social, and moral order. By honoring a girl as a deity, society acknowledges the inherent agency, respect, and transformative capacity of women from an early age.

Jāyadeva composed *Dehipada Pallava Mudrām* in the Gītāgovindam, where Rādhā is portrayed as a feminine character symbolizing Śakti and the power of love (Preroysi Śakti). In this work, Krishna appeals to Rādhā, requesting her to allow the union of their energies, reflecting the interplay of masculine and feminine principles. Through this poetic dialogue, Jāyadeva highlights the sacredness, agency, and transformative power of the feminine, portraying women not merely as companions but as active participants in spiritual and emotional realms.

The Devi Sūkta (Rigveda), voiced by the goddess Vāk (Speech personified), declares: “Aham rāṣṭrī sangamanī” I am the sovereign ruler who unites the people,” affirming the concept of feminine power as central to cosmic order and social harmony. Additionally, the Śrī Sūkta (from the Rigveda Khila) venerates Goddess Lakṣmī as the embodiment of prosperity and well-being, chanted traditionally for household and social welfare—indicating women’s symbolic representation of abundance in society.

Advocacy and voice in societal matters:

In the *Mahabharata*, characters like Draupadi assert moral justice—her *question in the royal court* stands as one of the earliest examples of a woman demanding accountability from power structures. Similarly, Kunti, Gandhari, and Amba articulate perspectives on duty, governance, and bodily autonomy, highlighting women’s moral agency in political spaces. Thus, IKS recognizes women not merely as cultural symbols but as thinkers, counsellors, reformers, and advocates whose voices shaped social ethics, community wellbeing, and civilizational values.

Compared to the Rigvedic society, the life of women in the later Vedic period became much more difficult. During this time, numerous powerful kingdoms emerged, and each maintained a highly aggressive nature. The expansion of the caste system was one of the major reasons behind this shift. With the beginning of the later Vedic age, the status of women gradually declined, and harmful practices such as the dowry system played a role in diminishing their position in society. The traditional fourfold varna system—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra—continued to exist, and it survives even in the modern era. However, in addition to these four principal varnas, numerous sub-castes also emerged. In the later Vedic period, unlike in the Rigvedic age, women were unable to attain high positions within the social hierarchy.

Status of Women in the Smriti Period:

In the Smriti period, when discussing the status of women and their relationship with men, it is seen that women were respected and appreciated by their fathers, husbands, brothers, and in-laws, who wished for their well-being. Manusmriti testifies that a family in which women suffer will inevitably face ruin, whereas a family in which women are happy will prosper.

शोचन्ति ज्येष्ठभ्रातरो यः स्त्रीदुःखं समाचरेत् ।
śocanti jyeṣṭha-bhrātaro yaḥ strī-duḥkhaṁ samācāret
শোচন্তি জ্যেষ্ঠভ্রাতরো যঃ স্ত্রীদুঃখং সমাচরেত্

যে সমাজে কোনো পুরুষ নারীকে কষ্ট দেয়, সেখানে তা শুধু তার ব্যক্তিগত দোষ নয়—পরিবার ও সমাজের জন্যও লজ্জা ও দুঃখের কারণ হয়ে দাঁড়ায়।

In a society where a man causes suffering to a woman, it is not merely his personal fault—it becomes a matter of shame and sorrow for the family and the entire society

जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी ।
Jananī janmabhūmiśca sbargādapi garīyāsī
জননী জন্মভূমিষ্চ স্বর্গাদপি গরীয়সী

Manu advises every householder to delight his daughter as the most sensitive and cherished being, and to honour the mother as the most revered person in the world.

‘Mother and motherland are greater than even heaven,’ this statement is spoken by Lord Rama after the victory over Lanka, when Vibhishana requests him to remain and rule the prosperous kingdom. Rama refuses, declaring that a mother’s love, one’s duty to the homeland, and loyalty to one’s own roots surpass all celestial pleasures or material comforts. In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), this verse symbolizes the elevated status of the mother—representing nurturing, protection, and creation—and affirms her foundational role in shaping both the individual and the civilization.

न त्राज्या दूषिता नारी
na tyājyā dūṣitā nārī
দূষিতা (অপমানিত/পাপী বলে অভিযুক্ত) নারীকে ত্যাগ করা উচিত নয়

If a woman, against her will, is forcefully violated or taken by a criminal, she should not be abandoned on account of that defilement. A ‘defiled’ woman is not to be rejected. One should only wait until her menstrual period is over; by that itself, she is considered purified.” (Atri Samhitā, verses 197–198).

In earlier times, many foreign invasions came into the Sindh region from the west, during which a large number of women were violated. The Smṛtis therefore discussed what kind of social response should be adopted towards such women. This approach is found in the Devala Smṛti. The Devala Smṛti is included in the Smṛti-Samuccaya published from the Ānandāśrama Press. Let us base our discussion on that text.

If a woman is taken by force by a mlechha (foreigner/outcaste) and does not become pregnant, she is purified in three nights. If she becomes pregnant, then purification is achieved through the Kṛcchra-Sāntapana penance and anointing with clarified butter (ghee). (Debol Smṛiti., 47–49) If pregnancy occurs by a man of a different caste, then after the termination of the pregnancy and upon the return of menstruation, the woman becomes purified, like gold purified by heating. (Debol Smṛiti., 50–51)

नित्यमास्यं शुचि स्त्रीणाम् । मनु ५.१३.
yabhichārād ṛtau śuddhiḥ strīṇām caiva na saṁśayaḥ
ব্যভিচারাদ্ ঋতৌ শুদ্ধিঃ স্ত্রীণাং চৈব ন সংশয়ঃ (বৃহদ্-যম. ৪. ৩৬)

A woman becomes purified after sexual violation by the return of her menstrual cycle; of this there is no doubt

कुसुमधर्माणो हि घोषितः सुकुमारोपक्रमाः । कामसूत्र, १९ अध्याय, पृ १९९

Kusumadharmāṇo hi ghoṣitaḥ sukumāropakramāḥ.

That is, women are like flowers—delicate and tender—so one’s behavior towards them should also be gentle. Women should be treated with kindness and compassion. Although Manu instructs that women should be respected, but he does not grant them independence. In childhood, a woman is under her father; in youth, under her husband; and in old age, under her son. She is never truly independent (Manu 9.3). The justification given is that women are considered easily led astray or vulnerable to abuse (Manu., 9.5–20).

যত্র নার্যাস্ত পূজ্যন্তে রমন্তে তত্র দেবতাঃ ।

যত্র এতাস্ত ন পূজ্যন্তে সর্বাস্তত্রাফলাঃ ক্রিয়াঃ ।

Yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ |

Yatra e’tāstu na pūjyante sarvāstatra phalāḥ kṛiyāḥ

Where women are honored, divinity blossoms there; where they are not honored, all actions remain fruitless.” (Manu Smṛti 3.56)

স্ত্রিয়ঃ শ্রিয়শ্চ গেহেষু ন বিশেষোহস্তি কশ্চন,

Strīyaḥ śriyashcha gheṣeṣu na viśeṣo ‘sti kaścan

If a woman is not pleased, the family lineage cannot be protected (Manu 3.61; 9.8). The household’s beauty, harmony, and well-being also do not flourish (Manu 3.60–62).

Ramesh Chandra Dutt, after evaluating the status of women in the Vedic age, came to the conclusion that: Compared with other ancient countries, women in India were given higher respect, and the great epics and ancient literature of India accord women a higher position than the epics and literature of ancient Greece.

Will Durant (1885–1981), the American historian, said: In the Vedic age, women enjoyed far greater freedom than in later periods of Indian history. In choosing a partner, they had more say than marriage customs alone would suggest. They could attend feasts and dances freely and take part in religious sacrifices alongside men. They were allowed to study and participate in philosophical debates, like Gārgī. If a woman became a widow, there were no fixed restrictions on her remarriage.

Critical Socio cultural Analysis:

Numerous ancient texts reveal that, despite the idealized portrayal of a spiritually enlightened society, women in the Vedic and post-Vedic periods lived within rigidly patriarchal structures. Ritual practices such as *niyoga*, stringent dharmic regulations, and the authority exercised by male ascetics often curtailed women’s autonomy and left them in socially vulnerable positions. Many legends recount situations in which influential rishis, using their spiritual power, demanded unquestioned obedience from women—illustrating systems of structural domination rather than moral purity. The celebrated figures of Gargi and Maitreyi were exceptional cases limited to elite circles, not indicators of widespread gender equality. Gargi’s famous exchange with Yājñavalkya—culminating in his threat to silence her—symbolizes male anxiety over intellectual authority and the constraints placed on women who challenged patriarchal norms. Although the Vedic era is frequently portrayed as progressive, the broader social framework remained deeply patriarchal, regulating women’s bodies, choices, and voices under the guise of dharma. Many ancient narratives—from

the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and various Puranic accounts—suggest that kings and rishis often exercised overwhelming authority over women, and this power imbalance sometimes placed women in situations where their consent or autonomy was limited. Episodes such as Sage Vyasa performing *niyoga* with Ambika and Ambalika, Menaka being sent to disturb Vishwamitra’s tapasya, or Kunti giving birth to Karna through the divine mantra before marriage illustrate how women were frequently involved in circumstances shaped by male decisions, divine commands, or social compulsions rather than personal choice. These stories symbolically highlight how patriarchal structures functioned in early society, where women’s bodies and lives were often governed by the desires, interpretations, or authority of powerful men.

Key Learning from the Entire Discussion:

- ❖ **Women as Sources of Knowledge-** Vedic texts portray women as contributors to wisdom—many *r̥ṣikās* composed hymns and participated in philosophical debates.
- ❖ **Equality of Men and Women :** Vedic principles emphasize saha-dharma—men and women are equal partners in life, duty, and spiritual pursuit.
- ❖ **Women’s Right to Education :** Girls practiced brahmacharya, studied the Vedas, and had access to intellectual, spiritual, and ethical education.
- ❖ **Honor and Protection of Women’s Dignity :** Smṛti literature stresses that a family or society prospers when women are respected and deteriorates when they are harmed.
- ❖ **Women as Embodiments of Shakti :** Purāṇic traditions highlight women as powerful forms of energy, creativity, and moral strength (Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi).
- ❖ **Women’s Agency and Moral Authority :** Characters like Draupadī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Ambā show women’s power to question injustice, exercise agency, and demand dharma.
- ❖ **Women as Upholders of Social and Cultural Values :** Vedic and Purāṇic texts show women maintaining family harmony, ethical order, and cultural continuity.
- ❖ **Spiritual Capacity of Women :** Women are capable of attaining *mokṣa* through knowledge, devotion, and righteous living—same as men.
- ❖ **Motherhood as a Sacred Institution :** Texts glorify the mother as superior to even heaven (*jananī janmabhūmisca svargād api garīyasī*).
- ❖ **Holistic View of Women’s Empowerment :** women not only in domestic roles but also as thinkers, leaders, protectors, and guides of society.

Conclusion:

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), women occupy a significant epistemic and cultural position, reflected richly across Śruti, Smṛti, and Purāṇic literature. In the Śruti tradition, women emerge not only as seekers of truth but also as creators of knowledge. The Smṛti texts, while prescribing social norms, also affirm the indispensability of women to the moral and spiritual wellbeing of society, emphasizing their role in sustaining household dharma, prosperity, and ethical order. The Purāṇas further elevate women through the celebration of goddesses like Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā, representing knowledge, wealth, and power, thus enshrining the feminine as the dynamic force behind creation, preservation, and transformation. Collectively, these textual traditions of IKS portray women not merely as passive recipients of culture but as active knowledge bearers, moral agents, and foundational pillars of social and cosmic harmony.

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Abbreviations

AV	Atharva Veda
RV	Rig Veda
YV	Yajur Veda
SV	Sama Veda
Br.	Brāhmaṇa
Ar.	Āraṇyaka
Up.	Upaniṣad
Śr.	Śruti
Sm.	Smṛti
Pur.	Purāṇa
Itih.	Itihāsa
MBh.	Mahābhārata
Rām.	Rāmāyaṇa
Manu.	Manusmṛti
Yāj. Sm.	Yājñavalkya Smṛti
Dh. Śā.	Dharmasāstra

Bhāg. Pur.	Bhāgavata Purāṇa
Viṣ. Pur.	Viṣṇu Purāṇa
Mār. Pur.	Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa
Devī Bhāg.	Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa
IKS	Indian Knowledge System
Epist.	Epistemology
Ed.	Editor
Trans.	Translator
Vol.	Volume
No.	Number
p./pp.	Page / Pages

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