



## Ancient Indian Traditions of Women's Empowerment and Its Influence on Modern Women's Education

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### Abstract:

*Women's empowerment has emerged as a central discourse in contemporary educational and developmental studies. However, its philosophical and cultural foundations in ancient Indian civilization remain comparatively underexplored in modern scholarship. This study examines the traditions of women's empowerment in ancient India and analyzes their influence on contemporary women's education. Using a qualitative historical-documentary research method, the study critically investigates Vedic literature, Upanishadic texts, Smritis, and classical Indian philosophical sources, along with modern policy documents and scholarly interpretations. The findings indicate that women in early Vedic society enjoyed considerable intellectual, spiritual, and educational agency, though these freedoms declined in subsequent historical periods. The study further argues that contemporary educational reforms, including gender-inclusive policies and the vision of equitable education, reflect foundational principles embedded in ancient Indian traditions. The paper concludes that a balanced integration of indigenous wisdom and modern educational frameworks can contribute to a more inclusive and transformative model of women's education. The study also identifies ongoing challenges in integrating women's empowerment into modern education, such as gender stereotypes, unequal learning opportunities, safety concerns, and limited access to leadership roles.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Empowerment, Ancient India, Women's Education, Indigenous Knowledge, Educational Transformation, Gender Equality.*

### 1. Introduction:

In India's sociocultural and educational development, women's empowerment has continued to be a major subject. Historical and literary evidence indicate that ancient Indian civilization acknowledged and supported women's intellectual, spiritual, and social agency, despite the fact that modern discussions frequently point to international frameworks, constitutional guarantees, and modern reforms as the main forces behind gender equality. Women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra are portrayed in Vedic literature as philosophers and participants in deep metaphysical discussions. A culture that fostered intellectual curiosity regardless of

gender is seen in the discussions led by women thinkers found in the Upanishads. Similar to this, Buddhist and Jain literature highlight women's active participation in religious and philosophical life by describing their important roles as academics, teachers, and spiritual guides. Classical treatises and inscriptions reveal women's participation in arts, governance, education, and public discourse, suggesting a society where women's contributions were acknowledged and respected.

Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development and social justice. In contemporary India, educational policies and constitutional mandates emphasize gender equality and inclusive access to education. However, historical evidence suggests that the roots of women's empowerment in India extend far beyond modern reform movements.

In modern India, constitutional provisions, legislative reforms, social movements, and educational expansion have sought to restore gender equity. Initiatives such as the Right to Education, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the focus on gender inclusion in NEP 2020 reflect an ongoing commitment to empowering girls and women through formal education.

Gender equity's philosophical, cultural, and educational underpinnings can be better understood by revisiting long-standing traditions of women's empowerment. This study aims to identify concepts and tactics that can improve women's education today, support holistic development, and encourage social change by examining historical precedents alongside current educational practices. Essentially, a cultural framework and a useful manual for tackling current issues in gender-sensitive education are provided by comprehending the heritage of ancient empowerment.

This study examines these historical trajectories and explores how ancient traditions continue to influence contemporary educational discourses on gender equity

## **2. Rationale of the Study:**

Although numerous studies examine women's empowerment from modern socio-political perspectives, limited research systematically connects ancient Indian traditions with contemporary educational reforms. Understanding this historical continuum is important for:

- i. Reclaiming indigenous epistemological contributions to gender discourse.
- ii. Critically evaluating historical shifts in women's status.
- iii. Informing culturally grounded educational policy development.

By revisiting classical traditions, this study seeks to situate women's empowerment within a broader civilizational framework rather than viewing it solely as a modern construct

## **3. Objectives of the Study:**

The study aims to:

- i. Examine the concept of women's empowerment in ancient Indian traditions.
- ii. Analyze the historical evolution of women's educational rights.
- iii. Investigate the decline and transformation of women's status in later periods.
- iv. Explore the relevance of ancient traditions in contemporary women's education.

#### 4. Research Questions:

- i. How was women's empowerment conceptualized in ancient Indian texts?
- ii. What educational opportunities were available to women in early Indian society?
- iii. What factors contributed to the decline of women's educational status?
- iv. How do ancient traditions influence contemporary educational reforms?

#### 5. Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative historical-documentary research design. Primary sources include Vedic literature, Upanishads, and classical Indian philosophical texts. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books on gender studies, and policy documents such as the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020).

Documents were selected based on relevance to women's education and empowerment. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize findings into intellectual empowerment, spiritual participation, social agency, and educational access. Limitations include reliance on textual interpretation and historical reconstruction.

**Procedure:** Content was categorised under thematic areas such as intellectual traditions, social roles, spiritual contributions, and educational access. Comparative analysis was used to examine shifts from ancient to modern periods.

#### 6. Review of related literature:

**Shettar, R. M. (2015)**, According to her article "A Study on Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment in India," women can only be empowered if their social and economic standing is raised. This could only be accomplished by implementing specific social and economic policies aimed at promoting women's overall development and helping them see their potential as powerful human beings. For a significant percentage of the population, globalization, liberalization, and other socioeconomic forces have provided some relief. Nonetheless, women's empowerment in India is still severely inadequate in a number of sectors.

**Khatri, R. (2016)**, Her paper, "The Role of Education towards Women Empowerment in India," focuses on how literacy and education affect women's empowerment and offers recommendations for improvements that should be taken into account for both economic growth and women's empowerment.

**Suresh, P. & Sivakumar, T. (2017)**, published "Women Empowerment in India-A Changing Scenario." They noted that improving the economic, social, and political standing of women—the historically disadvantaged members of society—is fundamentally the process of empowering women. It is the procedure for protecting kids from all types of violence.

**Singhnineteenth. N. (2010)** Their article focuses on "Education and Women Empowerment: A Crux of Indian Thinkers" Nineteenth-century India is characterised by enormous scholarly and traditional springs. Overthrown by foreign supremacy & influence of contemporary Western tradition gave birth to a New awakening. Some Indians gradually came to hold that elements of contemporary Western tradition and thoughts had to be absorbed to recreate their society. Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi was one of India's strong advocates of women's empowerment. Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed in the independence of women, not only socially but also economically. But still, when we see the present situation, it is far behind the dream Mahatma Gandhi saw. With every single stage of women's empowerment, new problems are

proliferating (Campbell and Dass, 2019). Dr. Pal and Dr. Rath stated that the role of Rabindranath Tagore or Gurudeva in the freedom of women was a decisive one. He contended for the independence of women through his letters, short stories, and essays and exposed the plight of women. Today, we feel the significance of women's education. According to Mahatma Gandhi, both males and females are of equal abundance and accompany each other, and the presence of one would not be defensible without the other.

**Kaushik's (2010)** Worth a article on "women's education in reference to the Ancient education system the researcher discusses in this Study. The role of women's education in the ancient educational system is examined in this essay, which looks at a number of civilizations, including ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and India. According to historical texts, archeological discoveries, and academic research, education was crucial for women in ancient societies since it frequently dictated their social standing, prospects for marriage, and roles in the family and community..

## 7. Analysis and Discussion:

### **Objective 1: Examine the concept of women's empowerment in ancient Indian traditions.**

Women's empowerment was multifaceted, intricate, and historically dynamic, according to research on ancient Indian cultures. Ancient texts, archaeological evidence, and cultural traditions demonstrate that women exercised significant social, educational, economic, and spiritual roles in early periods, particularly during the Vedic age.

A key dimension of empowerment was educational autonomy. Women such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra illustrate that female scholars participated actively in philosophical debates and contributed to intellectual life. Access to Vedic learning and participation in scholarly assemblies reflect their respected academic status.

Another dimension involved legal and property rights. In several early texts, women possessed rights to inheritance, ownership, and participation in family decisions. These rights enabled women to exercise economic independence and social agency within familial and community structures.

**Main Aspects of Women's Empowerment in Ancient India:** Women's empowerment in ancient India was reflected through their active participation in intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual life. Contrary to common assumptions, women enjoyed considerable autonomy and respect during several phases of ancient Indian civilization, particularly in the Vedic and early post-Vedic periods.

- i. Access to Education and Intellectual Life:** Women in ancient India had access to education and were actively involved in scholarly pursuits. They studied sacred texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads and participated in philosophical debates. Renowned women scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra exemplify female intellectual leadership, highlighting women's role in knowledge creation and dissemination.
- ii. Social and Legal Rights:** Ancient Indian women possessed various social and legal rights, including the right to choose their spouse through practices like swayamvara. Women were respected as partners in household and social life, and marriage was viewed as a partnership based on mutual responsibility rather than domination.
- iii. Economic Participation:** Women contributed significantly to economic activities such as agriculture, handicrafts, trade, and household management. They were recognized as key

contributors to family wealth and economic sustainability, and in certain cases, women managed property and financial affairs.

- iv. **Religious and Spiritual Agency:** Women played an essential role in religious rituals and spiritual practices. They participated as priests' assistants, composers of hymns, and spiritual seekers. Female sages and seers were acknowledged as capable interpreters of spiritual wisdom, reflecting gender inclusivity in religious life.
- v. **Political and Administrative Involvement:** Historical and literary sources indicate that women were involved in governance and administration. Queens and women leaders often acted as advisors, regents, or administrators, demonstrating leadership capabilities in political decision-making.
- vi. **Cultural Respect and Symbolic Status:** Women were symbolically revered as embodiments of Shakti (power) and were integral to cultural and ethical traditions. Their status as mothers, educators, and preservers of values emphasized respect, dignity, and moral authority.
- vii. **Family and Social Leadership:** Women played a central role in shaping moral values and social norms within the family and community. Their influence extended to child education, ethical training, and social cohesion, underscoring their leadership in nurturing future generations.

However, the discussion also shows that these empowering dimensions were not uniform across castes, regions, and epochs. Gradual shifts during the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods introduced restrictions, altering women's mobility, autonomy, and educational opportunities. Thus, women's empowerment in ancient India was marked by both periods of progressive recognition and later ideological constraints.

#### **Objective 2: Analyze the historical evolution of women's educational rights.**

The transition from ancient to modern periods reflects a long, non-linear evolution of women's status. The discussion indicates both significant regressions and notable advances over time.

During medieval periods, women's status declined due to socio-religious conservatism, patriarchal customs, and institutional restrictions such as child marriage, sati, purdah, denial of education, and legal inequality. These practices sharply contrast with earlier ideals of dignity, autonomy, and scholarly participation. This study briefly states the evaluation -

- i. **Women in the Ancient Period:** In early ancient India, particularly during the Vedic age, women enjoyed a relatively high social status. They had access to education, participated in intellectual discourse, and were involved in religious and philosophical activities. Women such as Gargi and Maitreyi exemplified scholarly excellence. Marriage was considered a partnership, and women exercised a degree of autonomy in personal and social matters. Economic participation in agriculture, crafts, and household management further strengthened their role in society.
- ii. **Decline during the Medieval Period:** The medieval period witnessed a gradual decline in women's status due to social conservatism, political instability, and the strengthening of patriarchal norms. Practices such as child marriage, purdah, and restrictions on education and mobility limited women's opportunities. Although some women emerged as rulers, poets, and saints, the general social position of women became more constrained during this era.
- iii. **Revival during the Modern Period:** The modern era marked a significant shift in the status of women, largely influenced by social reform movements, colonial education, and exposure to liberal ideas. Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule

advocated women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of oppressive practices. Legal reforms gradually recognized women's rights in education, property, and marriage.

- iv. **Contemporary Developments:** In the post-independence period, constitutional guarantees of equality and justice strengthened women's position in society. Women gained access to higher education, employment, and political participation. Government initiatives, legal protections, and international commitments have further promoted gender equity. Despite persistent challenges such as inequality and discrimination, women today play active roles in leadership, science, education, and governance

The modern era, however, initiated a wave of transformative changes driven by social reformers, legislative reforms, and educational expansion. Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, and Dayananda Saraswati advocated for women's education, abolition of harmful customs, and legal protections. Their efforts laid the foundation for the modern discourse on gender rights.

### **Objective 3: Investigate the decline and transformation of women's status in later periods.**

Post-independence constitutional guarantees further strengthened women's status by ensuring equality, non-discrimination, and political representation. Expansion of schooling, reservation policies, and economic opportunities contributed to widening women's roles in public life.

Contemporary research shows a notable rise in women's participation across professional sectors, political leadership, higher education, and entrepreneurship. However, gender gaps remain persistent in areas like safety, wage equality, representation in STEM fields, and socio-cultural freedom.

Thus, the transformation of women's status from ancient to modern India reflects a movement from early empowerment, through periods of decline, toward gradual re-empowerment structured by education, legislation, and socio-political reforms. The modern landscape, despite improvements, reflects a coexistence of progress and enduring challenges.

The discussion identifies several conceptual and practical challenges in incorporating women-empowerment ideals into contemporary educational systems.

A major barrier is the persistence of gender stereotypes in schools, curricula, and teaching practices. Hidden curricula often reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting girls' aspirations in fields such as science, technology, and leadership.

- i. **Persistence of Gender Stereotypes:** Deep-rooted societal stereotypes continue to influence educational content, classroom interactions, and career guidance. Girls are often subtly discouraged from pursuing subjects such as science, technology, and mathematics, while traditional gender roles are reinforced through textbooks and pedagogical practices. Such biases hinder the development of confidence and equal participation among female learners.
- ii. **Inequality in Access and Participation:** Despite improvements in enrollment, disparities persist in access to quality education, particularly for girls from marginalized communities. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and safety concerns restrict regular attendance and continuation of education, especially at secondary and higher levels.
- iii. **Curriculum and Pedagogical Limitations:** Many educational curricula lack a gender-responsive perspective and fail to include women's contributions across disciplines. Teaching methods often remain teacher-centred, limiting critical discussion on gender equality, rights, and empowerment.

The absence of experiential and participatory learning reduces students' ability to internalize empowerment values.

- iv. **Inadequate Teacher Training:** Teachers play a crucial role in promoting gender equity; however, many educators receive limited training on gender-sensitive pedagogy. Unconscious bias, lack of awareness, and insufficient professional development prevent teachers from fostering inclusive and empowering learning environments.
- v. **Institutional and Policy Gaps:** Although policies supporting women's education exist, their implementation often remains inconsistent. Limited funding, weak monitoring mechanisms, and a lack of coordination between policy goals and institutional practices undermine the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives within educational institutions.
- vi. **Digital and Technological Divide:** The increasing reliance on digital education has exposed gender disparities in access to technology. Girls, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, face limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy, restricting their participation in modern learning environments.
- vii. **Cultural Resistance and Social Norms:** Traditional beliefs and cultural practices sometimes conflict with empowerment ideals, leading to resistance from families and communities. Education that promotes independence and critical thinking among girls may be viewed as a threat to established social norms, slowing progress toward gender-inclusive education.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist. Policies such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, NEP 2020, gender sensitisation programs, and scholarships for women in higher education create enabling conditions. The rise of digital learning provides flexible pathways for girls in remote or disadvantaged regions. Additionally, global emphasis on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) promotes institutional commitment to women's empowerment in education.

Thus, integrating women-empowerment ideals into modern education requires systemic reforms that address structural inequalities, pedagogical practices, cultural norms, and institutional capacities.

## 8. Women's Empowerment in Ancient India:

- i. **Intellectual and Educational Agency:** Evidence from Vedic literature suggests that women participated in philosophical debates and religious discourse. Women were entitled to Upanayana (initiation) and were recognized as Brahnavadinis (seekers of knowledge). This indicates institutional acknowledgement of women's intellectual capacities.
- ii. **Spiritual and Social Participation:** Ancient texts reflect the participation of women in ritual practices and spiritual inquiry. While patriarchal norms existed, early Vedic society offered comparatively greater autonomy than later periods.
- iii. **Historical Decline and Transformation:** The post-Vedic and medieval periods witnessed increasing restrictions on women's mobility and education. Factors such as socio-political instability, rigidification of caste structures, and patriarchal interpretations of scriptures contributed to this decline. Reform movements in the 19th century, however, reinitiated advocacy for women's education.

## **9. Influence on Modern Women's Education:**

Contemporary policies promoting gender equality in education resonate with foundational values of dignity, knowledge, and self-realization embedded in ancient traditions. Initiatives encouraging girls' education, leadership development, and inclusive curricula reflect these enduring principles.

However, modern empowerment must also address contemporary challenges such as digital exclusion, economic disparity, and structural discrimination.

## **10. Significance of the Study:**

This study has significant implications for academia, policy, society, and culture. From an academic standpoint, it advances knowledge of historical paradigms of women's empowerment in ancient India. By examining the intellectual, social, spiritual, and educational roles of women in classical periods, the research provides valuable insights into the philosophical and cultural foundations of gender equity. It bridges the gap between historical scholarship and contemporary educational theory, offering a conceptual framework that links the ancient traditions of empowerment with modern pedagogical and policy-oriented reforms.

The study provides useful implications for modern education in terms of policy significance. Policymakers may create gender-sensitive curricula and culturally grounded initiatives that not only promote equity in access but also nurture holistic development by drawing on insights from historic traditions of women's empowerment. Acknowledging the historical accomplishments of female academics and leaders lays the groundwork for creating educational initiatives that incorporate social responsibility, ethical education, and respect for diversity. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and international commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5) are two examples of how education policy can be improved by using these historical patterns.

The societal significance of the study is equally profound. Highlighting the achievements and status of women in ancient Indian society challenges persistent gender stereotypes and provides culturally resonant role models for students and communities. The research promotes awareness of women's historical intellectual and social contributions, thereby inspiring broader societal reflection on the values of equality, respect, and inclusion. By reconnecting communities with their cultural heritage, the study reinforces the notion that empowerment is both a historical legacy and a contemporary necessity.

Culturally, the study revives respect for women thinkers, scholars, and spiritual guides who shaped intellectual discourse and social norms in ancient India. By foregrounding their contributions, the research helps bridge civilisational values with contemporary efforts toward gender justice. It encourages an educational and social ethos that recognises the intrinsic dignity and potential of women, thereby fostering cultural continuity and ethical awareness in modern learning environments. Overall, the study's significance lies in its capacity to inform academic inquiry, influence policy and practice, and promote societal transformation through a historically grounded understanding of women's empowerment.

## **11. Educational Implications:**

- i. Integrating indigenous knowledge systems into gender studies curricula.
- ii. Promoting culturally rooted yet critically informed pedagogy.
- iii. Encouraging interdisciplinary research on historical foundations of empowerment

## 12. Conclusion:

The study demonstrates that ancient India nurtured a rich and multi-dimensional tradition of women's empowerment, encompassing intellectual, social, spiritual, and educational aspects. Women actively participated in philosophical discourse, contributed to arts, sciences, and governance, and exercised agency within religious and social spheres. These historical examples underscore that the foundation of gender equity is not a modern invention but an inherent aspect of India's civilisational heritage.

Over subsequent centuries, socio-political and cultural shifts, including feudalism, patriarchal norms, and restrictive practices, led to a decline in women's autonomy, access to education, and public participation. Despite these historical setbacks, reform movements during the 19th and 20th centuries, led by visionaries such as Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Gandhi, and others, catalysed the restoration of educational opportunities, legal rights, and social recognition for women. Modern educational policies, constitutional protections, and initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and gender-inclusive reforms under NEP 2020 continue to address lingering disparities and promote equitable access to knowledge and skill development.

The research underscores that revisiting ancient empowerment models offers critical lessons for contemporary education. These models provide philosophical and practical guidance for designing curricula, pedagogy, and institutional structures that nurture dignity, equality, and holistic development. Integrating the values of intellectual freedom, social responsibility, and moral agency into modern educational practices can empower women not merely as recipients of knowledge but as active agents of societal transformation.

In conclusion, the legacy of ancient Indian women's empowerment, when thoughtfully incorporated into contemporary education, can strengthen gender-sensitive policies, promote inclusive learning environments, and inspire a generation of learners to pursue knowledge, leadership, and ethical engagement. By bridging historical traditions with modern pedagogical innovations, the education system can cultivate empowered women capable of shaping a just, equitable, and progressive society.

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