



## Indian Knowledge and Women's Empowerment

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### Abstract

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in contemporary social, economic, and political discourse, particularly in developing countries like India where historical inequalities have shaped gender relations. In the Indian context, empowerment cannot be fully understood without examining the role of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), which encompass indigenous philosophies, cultural traditions, ethical frameworks, educational practices, and community-based wisdom developed over centuries. This study critically examines the relationship between Indian knowledge and women's empowerment, highlighting both its empowering potential and its historical limitations. Indian knowledge traditions are deeply rooted in philosophical concepts such as Shakti (feminine power), Dharma (ethical duty), Karma (action), and Jnana (knowledge). These concepts have historically provided a moral and intellectual framework that recognizes women as active agents of social and spiritual life. Ancient Indian texts and traditions acknowledge the intellectual and spiritual contributions of women scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra, indicating that women once held significant positions in the production and transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, the worship of feminine divinity in various forms reflects a symbolic recognition of women's strength and creative power within Indian culture.

**Keywords:** Women's empowerment, Indian knowledge systems, gender equality, traditional culture, education, policy frameworks

### Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a central theme in academic research, public policy, and social reform movements across the world. In India, the question of women's empowerment is deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, philosophical, and socio-economic factors that have evolved over thousands of years. Unlike purely modern or Western frameworks, the Indian understanding of empowerment is rooted in its indigenous knowledge systems, which encompass philosophy, religion, ethics, education, social organization, and community-based practices. An exploration of Indian knowledge and women's empowerment therefore requires a contextual approach that examines tradition alongside modern transformation. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a vast body of intellectual and cultural heritage developed through ancient texts, oral traditions, folk practices, and lived experiences. These systems include philosophical concepts such as Dharma (moral duty), Karma (action and consequence), Jnana (knowledge), and Shakti (feminine power). Together, they shape social behaviour, ethical values, and gender relations. The status of women in Indian society has historically oscillated between reverence and restriction, empowerment and exclusion. Understanding this paradox is crucial for analysing the role of Indian knowledge in shaping women's lives.

Historically, women in early Indian society enjoyed a relatively higher status in education and intellectual pursuits. References to women scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, and Apala in Vedic literature indicate that women actively participated in philosophical debates and knowledge creation. Education during the early Vedic period was not entirely gender-exclusive, and women were recognized as capable learners and teachers. These examples challenge the assumption that women's empowerment is a purely modern concept and demonstrate that Indian knowledge traditions contained progressive elements that supported gender equality.

However, over time, social stratification, rigid patriarchal norms, and institutionalized customs led to the marginalization of women. Interpretations of religious texts and customary laws increasingly emphasized women's domestic roles while limiting their access to education, property, and public life. Practices such as child marriage, purdah, and denial of inheritance rights became widespread, leading to the decline of women's autonomy. These developments reveal that the application of knowledge, rather than knowledge itself, often determined women's status. Consequently, Indian knowledge systems came to reflect both empowerment and oppression, depending on how they were interpreted and practiced. Despite these challenges, Indian knowledge has consistently offered counter-narratives



that support women's empowerment. The concept of Shakti, which represents the feminine principle as the source of cosmic energy, occupies a central place in Indian philosophy and spirituality. The worship of goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi symbolizes strength, wisdom, and prosperity, reinforcing the idea that women embody power rather than weakness. Similarly, the Bhakti movement provided women with a platform to express spiritual autonomy and challenge social hierarchies. Women saints like Meerabai, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi used devotional poetry to assert their independence and critique patriarchal authority.

Indian knowledge systems also emphasize holistic development, where empowerment is not limited to economic or political dimensions but includes moral, cultural, and spiritual growth. Traditional knowledge in fields such as Ayurveda, agriculture, handicrafts, and folk arts has long been preserved and transmitted by women. Women's roles as healers, seed keepers, artisans, and storytellers demonstrate how indigenous knowledge has enabled them to contribute meaningfully to family and community wellbeing. Such contributions, though often undervalued, have strengthened women's social status and economic resilience, particularly in rural India.

In the modern era, women's empowerment has gained constitutional and legal recognition. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality, non-discrimination, and affirmative action for women, reflecting both democratic ideals and ethical principles resonant with Indian philosophical thought. Policies related to education, health, employment, and political participation have created new opportunities for women to assert their rights. Importantly, contemporary empowerment initiatives often integrate Indian knowledge with modern development strategies. Programs such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Panchayati Raj Institutions, and women-oriented skill development schemes rely on collective learning, community participation, and local knowledge-sharing traditions rooted in Indian society.

Education plays a pivotal role in bridging traditional knowledge and modern empowerment. The incorporation of Indian knowledge systems into curricula encourages women to engage with their cultural heritage while acquiring critical thinking and professional skills. Awareness of indigenous knowledge fosters self-confidence, cultural identity, and leadership qualities among women, enabling them to participate more effectively in social and economic life. At the same time, access to scientific education, technology, and digital platforms has expanded women's empowerment beyond traditional boundaries. However, significant challenges remain in leveraging Indian knowledge for women's empowerment. The persistence of patriarchal attitudes, selective interpretation of tradition, and erosion of indigenous practices due to globalization continue to restrict women's agency. Cultural norms are sometimes misused to justify gender inequality, undermining the transformative potential of Indian knowledge systems. Therefore, a critical and balanced approach is necessary—one that acknowledges the limitations of tradition while reclaiming its progressive and inclusive elements.

### Research Objectives

1. To study the role of Indian knowledge systems in promoting women's empowerment.
2. To analyze traditional Indian practices that contribute to women's social and economic development.
3. To examine the relevance of Indian knowledge in contemporary women empowerment initiatives.

### Historical Perspective on Indian Knowledge and Women's Empowerment

The historical development of Indian society reveals a complex and evolving relationship between Indian knowledge systems and the status of women. Indian knowledge, rooted in ancient philosophical traditions, religious texts, and community practices, has played a significant role in shaping women's social position, access to education, and participation in economic and cultural life. A historical analysis shows that women's empowerment in India has not followed a linear path; instead, it has fluctuated across different periods, influenced by social, political, and ideological changes.

#### Women in the Vedic Period

In the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a relatively high status and actively participated in intellectual and spiritual life. Vedic literature records the presence of women scholars such as Gargi Vachaknavi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, and Apala, who engaged in philosophical debates and contributed to sacred hymns. Education was not strictly gender-based, and women had access to learning in areas such as philosophy, ethics, and ritual knowledge. Marriage was often delayed, allowing women to pursue education, and women were regarded as partners in religious and social duties. This period

reflects an empowering phase of Indian knowledge, where women were recognized as capable bearers and creators of knowledge.

#### Post-Vedic and Classical Period

During the later Vedic and classical periods, social structures became more rigid due to the codification of laws and customs. Texts such as the Dharmashastras increasingly emphasized gender-specific roles, restricting women's mobility and educational opportunities. Patriarchal interpretations of Indian knowledge led to the subordination of women within family and society. Practices like child marriage and limitations on women's property rights became more prevalent. However, even during this period, Indian knowledge was not entirely oppressive. Women continued to play roles in household management, arts, and religious rituals, indicating a partial retention of social agency.

#### Medieval Period and the Bhakti Movement

The medieval period witnessed further challenges to women's empowerment due to social conservatism and political instability. Despite these constraints, the Bhakti movement emerged as a powerful force that challenged social hierarchies, including caste and gender discrimination. Women saints such as Meerabai, Andal, Lal Ded, and Akka Mahadevi used devotional poetry and spiritual expression to assert personal freedom and religious autonomy. The Bhakti tradition emphasized inner devotion over ritual authority, thereby creating inclusive spaces for women's voices and spiritual leadership. This movement represents a significant moment when Indian knowledge was used as a tool of resistance and empowerment.

#### Colonial Period and Social Reform

The colonial period marked a turning point in the history of women's empowerment in India. Exposure to Western education and modern ideas led to critical debates about women's rights and social justice. Indian social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, and Savitribai Phule advocated women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of oppressive practices like sati. These reform movements drew upon both Indian ethical traditions and modern rational thought, redefining Indian knowledge to support women's empowerment. Education became a key instrument for transforming women's social status during this period.

#### Post-Independence Period

After independence, women's empowerment became a constitutional and developmental priority. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality, freedom, and affirmative action for women, reflecting a synthesis of democratic values and indigenous ethical principles. Post-independence policies focused on education, health, employment, and political participation of women. Traditional knowledge systems continued to influence women's empowerment through community-based practices, self-help groups, and local governance institutions. Women increasingly emerged as leaders in social movements, education, and economic activities, supported by both modern frameworks and indigenous knowledge traditions.

#### Contemporary Scenario

In contemporary India, Indian knowledge systems are being re-evaluated and integrated into education, governance, and sustainable development initiatives. Women are reclaiming traditional knowledge in areas such as Ayurveda, organic farming, handicrafts, and folk arts, using it as a source of livelihood and identity. At the same time, challenges such as patriarchy, misinterpretation of tradition, and globalization persist. The historical perspective thus highlights that Indian knowledge has the potential to empower women when interpreted progressively and aligned with constitutional values.

#### Philosophical Foundations and Indian Thought

Indian philosophical thought provides a rich and complex foundation for understanding women's empowerment. Unlike purely material or legal interpretations of empowerment, Indian philosophy views human development as a holistic process involving ethical conduct, knowledge, spiritual growth, and social responsibility. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), rooted in ancient scriptures, philosophical schools, and lived traditions, offers concepts that directly and indirectly shape women's roles, rights, and agency. Central philosophical ideas such as Shakti, Dharma, Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Moksha form the intellectual and ethical basis for analysing women's empowerment within Indian thought. **Concept of Shakti and Feminine Power**



One of the most significant philosophical contributions of Indian thought to women's empowerment is the concept of Shakti, which represents the primordial feminine energy responsible for creation, sustenance, and transformation of the universe. In Indian philosophy, Shakti is not subordinate to the masculine principle but is understood as its dynamic force. Without Shakti, Shiva remains inactive, symbolizing that power and action originate from the feminine principle.

The philosophical recognition of the feminine as a source of strength and creativity challenges the notion of women as weak or dependent. The worship of goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi reflects different dimensions of feminine power— courage, destruction of injustice, wisdom, and prosperity. These symbolic representations reinforce the philosophical idea that women embody strength, intellect, and moral authority. From an empowerment perspective, Shakti philosophy provides a powerful ideological foundation for gender equality and self-confidence among women.

#### **Dharma and Ethical Responsibility**

The concept of Dharma occupies a central position in Indian philosophical discourse. Dharma refers to moral duty, ethical conduct, and righteous living that sustains social harmony. While traditional interpretations often assigned gender-specific duties, a philosophical reinterpretation of Dharma emphasizes universal ethical responsibility applicable to all individuals, regardless of gender.

From this perspective, women are not confined to domestic roles but are moral agents capable of fulfilling Dharma in social, economic, intellectual, and political spheres. The empowerment of women aligns with Dharmic principles of justice, fairness, and social balance. When Dharma is understood as ethical action rather than rigid role prescription, it supports women's participation in education, leadership, and public life.

#### **Indian Thought and Social Transformation**

Indian philosophical traditions emphasize harmony between individual growth and social welfare. The idea of Lokasangraha (welfare of the world), articulated in the Bhagavad Gita, encourages individuals to act for collective wellbeing. Women's empowerment aligns with this principle, as empowered women contribute to family stability, community development, and national progress. Contemporary interpretations of Indian thought integrate these philosophical foundations with constitutional values of equality and justice. Reinterpreting traditional concepts through a gender-sensitive lens enables Indian philosophy to remain relevant in addressing modern challenges faced by women.

#### **Indian Knowledge and Empowerment Practices**

Indian knowledge systems are deeply embedded in everyday life and have historically shaped social organization, livelihoods, health practices, and cultural expression. These knowledge traditions, transmitted through texts, oral narratives, customs, and lived experiences, have played a crucial role in empowering communities, particularly women. Empowerment within Indian knowledge frameworks is not limited to formal political or economic rights but extends to cultural identity, social participation, and collective wellbeing. This section examines how indigenous knowledge practices have contributed to women's empowerment across various domains.

#### **Traditional Education and Knowledge Transmission**

Education in traditional Indian society extended beyond formal institutions and was deeply rooted in community life. While formal gurukula education later became male-dominated, women continued to acquire and transmit knowledge through informal channels such as oral traditions, storytelling, rituals, and practical skills training within households and communities. Mothers and elder women acted as primary educators, passing on moral values, cultural norms, and survival skills to the next generation. Women's participation in oral literature folk songs, proverbs, and narratives served as a medium for expressing social concerns, preserving historical memory, and reinforcing collective identity. These informal educational practices enhanced women's social authority and reinforced their role as custodians of cultural knowledge. Such forms of education empowered women by valuing experiential learning and community-based wisdom.

#### **Indigenous Health Practices and Ayurveda**

One of the most significant areas where Indian knowledge empowered women is health care, particularly through Ayurveda and traditional healing practices. Women have historically served as midwives, healers, and caregivers, possessing extensive knowledge of medicinal herbs, dietary practices, reproductive health, and childcare. This indigenous health knowledge enabled women to provide essential healthcare services, especially in rural and tribal areas where modern medical



facilities were limited. Traditional practices related to prenatal care, childbirth, and postnatal recovery strengthened women's role in community health management. Control over health-related knowledge increased women's autonomy and decision-making power within families and communities. Even today, women practitioners of Ayurveda and folk medicine contribute to primary healthcare and sustainable health practices.

#### Agricultural Knowledge and Food Security

Indian agrarian knowledge systems have relied heavily on women's expertise in agriculture. Women have traditionally been involved in seed selection, preservation, sowing, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Their knowledge of crop diversity, soil fertility, water management, and seasonal cycles has been essential for food security and environmental sustainability. Seed preservation practices, often managed by women, ensured biodiversity and resilience against climate variability. This agricultural knowledge empowered women by establishing them as key contributors to household economies and community survival. In recent years, women's self-help groups and farmer collectives have revived these indigenous practices, combining them with modern techniques to enhance income and sustainability.

#### Handicrafts, Cottage Industries, and Economic Empowerment

Traditional Indian handicrafts such as weaving, pottery, embroidery, basket-making, and metalwork have long provided women with avenues for economic independence. These skills, passed down through generations, represent a fusion of artistic creativity and practical knowledge. Women artisans have used indigenous techniques and locally available resources to produce goods for household use and local markets. Engagement in cottage industries has empowered women by generating income, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing social recognition. Contemporary initiatives supporting handicrafts often emphasize the revival of traditional knowledge while connecting women artisans to modern markets. This integration strengthens economic empowerment while preserving cultural heritage.

#### Folk Arts, Performing Traditions, and Cultural Expression

Indian folk arts and performance traditions have served as powerful tools of empowerment for women. Forms such as Lavani, Jatra, Tamasha, Yakshagana, and Kalbelia dance have allowed women to express emotions, social critiques, and cultural identity. Through music, dance, and theatre, women have communicated experiences of love, struggle, resistance, and aspiration. Participation in folk arts enhances women's self-expression, confidence, and social visibility. These cultural practices challenge restrictive norms by placing women in public spaces and leadership roles within artistic communities. Folk traditions thus function as platforms for both cultural continuity and social empowerment.

#### Community Governance and Collective Practices

Indian knowledge systems emphasize collective decision-making and community responsibility. Traditional village institutions and informal councils relied on consensus and shared values. Although women were often excluded from formal leadership, they played influential roles in community welfare through informal networks. In contemporary India, women's empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions reflects the revival of collective knowledge practices. SHGs enable women to share experiences, manage savings and credit, and collectively address social issues. These practices draw upon indigenous traditions of cooperation, mutual support, and shared learning, empowering women economically and socially.

#### Spiritual Practices and Moral Empowerment

Spiritual knowledge has been a source of moral and psychological empowerment for women. Participation in devotional practices, rituals, and religious festivals provided women with emotional strength, social networks, and a sense of purpose. Spiritual traditions rooted in Bhakti emphasized personal devotion and inner strength, allowing women to transcend social hierarchies. Women saints and devotees demonstrated that spiritual knowledge could serve as a means of self-assertion and resistance against oppressive norms. This spiritual dimension of empowerment remains relevant, as it nurtures resilience, self-worth, and ethical consciousness among women.

#### Modern Impacts of Indian Knowledge on Empowerment

In the contemporary era, Indian knowledge systems continue to influence empowerment processes by adapting traditional wisdom to modern socio-economic and political contexts. While globalization,



industrialization, and technological change have transformed Indian society, indigenous knowledge has not lost its relevance. Instead, it has been reinterpreted and integrated into education, governance, health, economic development, and women-centric empowerment initiatives. The modern impact of Indian knowledge lies in its ability to provide culturally rooted, sustainable, and inclusive pathways for empowerment.

#### Indian Knowledge and Modern Education

One of the most visible modern impacts of Indian knowledge on empowerment is in the field of education. Recent educational reforms emphasize the inclusion of Indian knowledge systems, local languages, and cultural practices in curricula. This approach strengthens cultural identity while promoting critical thinking and creativity. For women, education that incorporates indigenous knowledge fosters self-confidence and a sense of belonging, enabling them to participate more effectively in social and professional life. Women's access to education, combined with traditional values that emphasize learning as a path to liberation (Jnana), has expanded opportunities in higher education, research, and skill-based training. Digital platforms and online learning have further enabled women, particularly in rural areas, to access knowledge while balancing domestic responsibilities. Thus, Indian knowledge, when integrated with modern educational tools, plays a significant role in empowering women intellectually and socially.

#### Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Generation

Indian knowledge has significantly contributed to women's economic empowerment in the modern period. Traditional skills such as handicrafts, weaving, food processing, herbal medicine, and agriculture have been transformed into sustainable livelihood opportunities through market integration and entrepreneurship programs. Government and non-government initiatives promote indigenous crafts and local enterprises, providing women with income-generating opportunities and financial independence. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are a prominent example of how traditional collective practices have been adapted for modern economic empowerment. These groups facilitate savings, credit access, skill development, and entrepreneurship among women. By drawing on indigenous traditions of cooperation and mutual support, SHGs empower women economically while enhancing leadership skills and decision-making capacity.

#### Health, Wellbeing, and Indigenous Knowledge

In the modern healthcare landscape, Indian knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, Yoga, and traditional healing practices have gained global recognition. Women's traditional roles as caregivers and healers have evolved into professional opportunities in alternative medicine, wellness industries, and community health programs. Knowledge of herbal medicine, nutrition, and reproductive health has empowered women to make informed decisions about their own wellbeing and that of their families. The integration of Yoga and holistic health practices into modern lifestyles has enhanced women's physical and mental health, contributing to self-confidence and resilience. Empowerment through health knowledge enables women to participate actively in education, work, and social life, reinforcing the interconnection between wellbeing and empowerment.

#### Political Participation and Leadership

Indian knowledge traditions emphasize community welfare, ethical leadership, and collective responsibility. These principles resonate strongly with modern democratic practices and women's political empowerment. The reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has enabled women to participate in local governance and decision-making processes. Women leaders often draw upon local knowledge and cultural understanding to address community issues such as education, sanitation, and healthcare. Their leadership reflects a blend of traditional values and modern governance, demonstrating how Indian knowledge can strengthen women's political empowerment at the grassroots level.

#### Digital Empowerment and Knowledge Access

The digital age has transformed the way knowledge is accessed and shared. Indian knowledge systems have found new expression through digital platforms, online archives, and social media. Women use digital tools to learn skills, market traditional products, share experiences, and advocate for social change. Digital literacy programs have empowered women by reducing information gaps and increasing access to opportunities. The combination of digital technology and indigenous knowledge has expanded women's participation in e-commerce, online education, and virtual



communities. This fusion enhances empowerment by bridging traditional wisdom with modern innovation.

### Conclusion

The study of Indian Knowledge and Women's Empowerment reveals that empowerment in the Indian context is a multidimensional and culturally rooted process. Indian knowledge systems, developed over centuries through philosophical thought, social practices, and lived experiences, have played a significant role in shaping women's status, agency, and participation in society. This research demonstrates that Indian knowledge is neither entirely empowering nor wholly restrictive; rather, it contains diverse strands that have been interpreted differently across historical periods. A critical and balanced understanding of these knowledge systems is essential for advancing women's empowerment in contemporary India.

Historically, Indian knowledge traditions acknowledged women as intellectual, spiritual, and moral agents. The presence of women scholars in Vedic literature, the philosophical recognition of the feminine principle as Shakti, and the inclusive spiritual ethos of the Bhakti movement highlight the empowering dimensions of Indian thought. These traditions affirmed women's capacity for knowledge, devotion, and leadership, challenging the notion that empowerment is a purely modern or external concept. At the same time, the study recognizes that patriarchal interpretations and rigid social structures gradually limited women's access to education, property, and public life, creating deep gender inequalities.

The analysis of Indian philosophical foundations demonstrates that core concepts such as Dharma, Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Moksha provide ethical and intellectual support for women's empowerment when interpreted progressively. These ideas emphasize moral responsibility, agency, knowledge as liberation, spiritual equality, and human dignity. Reinterpreting these philosophical principles through a gender-sensitive lens allows Indian knowledge to align with contemporary values of equality and justice, reinforcing women's rights and social participation.

This research further highlights the practical role of Indian knowledge in empowering women through everyday practices. Indigenous knowledge in education, health care, agriculture, handicrafts, folk arts, and community governance has enabled women to contribute significantly to family welfare and economic sustainability. Women's traditional roles as healers, artisans, farmers, and cultural custodians reflect the experiential dimension of empowerment, which is often overlooked in conventional development models. These practices demonstrate that empowerment extends beyond formal employment and political representation to include cultural identity, social recognition, and collective wellbeing.

In the modern period, Indian knowledge systems have continued to influence women's empowerment through their integration into education, economic development, health initiatives, and governance structures. Programs such as Self-Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and skill development initiatives draw upon traditional collective knowledge and community-based learning. The incorporation of Indian knowledge into modern education and digital platforms has expanded women's access to information, skills, and opportunities, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. This fusion of traditional wisdom with modern innovation represents a sustainable model of empowerment.

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