Revisiting Social Security in the Indian Knowledge Tradition: A Critical Analysis of Women in the Unorganized Sector

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Abstract
In the contemporary discourse of globalized economies, the concept of 'Social Security' is predominantly viewed through the lens of Western welfare state models - emphasizing insurance, state pensions, and contractual rights. However, for the vast majority of Indian women employed in the unorganized sector - comprising construction workers, domestic help, and agricultural labourers - these modern frameworks have proven largely inaccessible and insufficient. This paper posits that the solution to this modern crisis may lie in a critical "re-visiting" of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). By engaging with classical texts such as Kautilya's Arthashastra and the ethical frameworks of Dharma and Yogakshema, this research explores indigenous systemic approaches to social protection. It contrasts the ancient duty-based (Kartavya) social order, which decentralized welfare through community and guild structures, against the modern rights-based centralized state model. The study draws upon empirical realities of women in the unorganized sector in Vidarbha and beyond, analysing how the erosion of traditional community safety nets has exacerbated their vulnerability. Ultimately, the paper argues for a "Decolonized Social Work Practice," proposing a synthesized model that integrates the ethical imperatives of the IKS - specifically the concepts of Lok-Sangrah (universal welfare) and Antyodaya (upliftment of the last) - into contemporary policy formulation to ensure sustainable, culturally congruent security for women workers.
Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Social Security, Unorganized Sector, Women Workers, Yogakshema, Dharma, Social Work, Globalization.

1. Introduction
1.1. Contextualizing the Crisis
The "Unorganized Sector" in India is not merely a statistical category; it is the living reality for over 93% of the nation's workforce. Within this vast ocean of informal labour, women constitute the most vulnerable segment. Whether they are balancing loads at construction sites in Nagpur, weaving in home-based industries, or toiling as agricultural labourers, these women exist on the margins of the formal economy. They are characterized by low wages, a complete absence of employment security, and a lack of legislative protection regarding health, maternity, and old age.

The post-1991 era of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) has fundamentally altered the labour landscape. While it has opened avenues for economic growth, it has simultaneously led to the "informalization" of the workforce. As traditional agrarian structures crumble and urbanization accelerate, women are increasingly pushed into precarious labour markets where the protective shield of the traditional joint family is fractured, and the modern state's safety net has yet to fully form.

1.2. The Relevance of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)
In addressing this crisis, social scientists and policymakers often look to the West - to models like the Beveridge Report or Scandinavian social security systems. However, this paper argues that India possesses an incredibly rich, indigenous history of knowledge regarding governance, economics, and social ethics that is often overlooked. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is not limited to metaphysics or spirituality; it encompasses robust systems of Arthashastra (Political Economy) and Dharmashastra (Social Jurisprudence).

The relevance of exploring the IKS lies in its systemic approach to human welfare. Unlike the modern view, which often sees "social security" as a corrective measure for market failures, the Indian tradition viewed the protection of the vulnerable as a fundamental, non-negotiable duty (Dharma) of the social structure itself.

1.3. Research Objectives
This paper aims to achieve the following:

1. To conceptualize "Social Security" through the terminology and frameworks of the Indian Knowledge Tradition (specifically Yogakshema).
2. To critically analyse the current socio-economic status of women in the unorganized sector, drawing on field realities from the Vidarbha region.
3. To identify the "systemic gaps" where modern policies fail these women and investigate if IKS principles can offer a corrective methodology.
4. To propose a framework for integrating indigenous values into modern Social Work practice and policy.

2. Conceptual Framework: Social Security in the Indian Knowledge Tradition

To understand the potential of the IKS, we must first deconstruct the terminology used in ancient Indian thought regarding welfare and protection. The modern term "Security" implies a defence against external threat, but the Indian equivalents suggest a more proactive and holistic state of being.

2.1. Yogakshema: The Ancient Mandate for Welfare

The most pertinent concept is Yogakshema, a compound word found in the Rigveda and extensively elaborated in Kautilya's Arthashastra (c. 300 BCE).

- Yoga refers to the acquisition of resources or prosperity that one does not yet possess.
- Kshema refers to the protection and preservation of what has already been acquired.

In the Arthashastra, the King (representing the State) is explicitly told: "In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare." Kautilya mandates that the state is the ultimate guarantor of Yogakshema for those who are vulnerable. This included specific mandates for the protection of women workers. The text mentions state-run spinning houses (Sutra-Adhyaksha) specifically designed to provide dignified employment to widows, deserted women, and those unable to leave their homes, ensuring they could earn a livelihood without facing public humiliation. This indicates a sophisticated understanding of "social security" that includes not just handouts, but the Right to Work in a dignified environment.

2.2. Dharma as Social Obligation

In the Western tradition, social security is often framed as a "Right" of the citizen. In the Indian tradition, it is framed as the "Duty" (Dharma) of the collective.

The concept of Rina (Debt) is central here. Every individual is born with debts to the gods, ancestors, and society (Manushya-Rina). Discharging this debt involves caring for others. Therefore, the care of the elderly, the widow, or the destitute woman was not seen as "charity" but as the discharge of a spiritual and social debt. This created a decentralized social security net where the family (Kula), the guild (Shreni), and the village (Grama) acted as the primary insurers, with the King acting only as the insurer of last resort.

2.3. Streedharma and Protectionism

It is essential to acknowledge the complexity of the IKS. While texts like the Manusmriti are often criticized for patriarchal restrictions, they simultaneously emphasize protection. The injunction that a woman must be protected by her father in childhood, husband in youth, and son in old age - while restrictive in a modern feminist context - was, in its time, a rigid "Social Security Contract." It legally bound the male members of the family to provide economic support. The breakdown of this contract in the modern era, without an adequate state replacement, is a primary cause of the destitution seen in the unorganized sector today.

3. Research Methodology

This research paper is a qualitative inquiry that uses a Hermeneutic and Comparative approach.

1. Hermeneutic Analysis: The study interprets primary classical texts (in translation) such as the Arthashastra, Shantiparva of the Mahabharata, and various Smritis to extract the "theory" of social protection in ancient India.
2. Sociological Analysis: The paper relies on secondary data sources, including National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports, the Arjun Sengupta Committee Report (NCEUS), and existing academic literature on women in the unorganized sector. It specifically draws upon the author's previous empirical work regarding women construction workers and tribal populations in Nagpur to provide "ground-level" validity.

3. Comparative Synthesis: The core analytical tool is the juxtaposition of the "Ideal" (IKS principles) against the "Real" (current status of women workers). This dialectic allows us to see not just what is wrong with the current system, but why it is failing at a foundational level.

4. The Modern Reality: Women in the Unorganized Sector

To understand the necessity of revisiting the IKS, we must first confront the harsh reality of the present. The "Unorganized Sector" includes all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services.

4.1. The Construction Industry: A Case Study in Precarity

Based on fieldwork conducted in Nagpur (Puranik, 2016), the construction industry serves as a brutal example of modern insecurity. Women working as Rejas (head-loaders) face specific vulnerabilities:

- Wage Discrimination: despite the Equal Remuneration Act, women consistently earn less than men for equal manual labour.
- Health Hazards: Prolonged exposure to cement dust, heavy lifting during pregnancy, and lack of sanitation facilities lead to chronic health issues.
- Lack of Creche Facilities: Despite the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act mandating creches, most women are forced to keep their infants at dangerous construction sites, exposed to dust and injury.

This reality stands in stark contrast to the Kautilyan ideal, which mandated that the state must provide support to pregnant women and infants. The modern state has the laws (The BOCW Act), but lacks the Dharma (ethical enforcement) to implement them.

4.2. Globalization and the Feminization of Poverty

Globalization has led to the "putting-out" system, where work is outsourced to women in their homes (e.g., bidi rolling, agarbatti making, embroidery). While this allows women to work from home, it effectively renders them invisible. They are not recognized as "employees" but as "independent contractors," stripping them of all employer-liability protections.

- No Fixed Hours: The line between household chores and wage labour blurs, leading to the "double burden."
- Isolation: Unlike the ancient Shreni (guilds) where artisans worked collectively and had bargaining power, the modern home-based worker is isolated and unable to unionize.

4.3. The Failure of the "Rights-Based" Approach

Post-independence India adopted a "Rights-Based" approach (e.g., The Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008). However, for a woman who is illiterate, migrant, and living hand-to-mouth, "claiming a right" is a significant hurdle. It requires documentation (Aadhaar, registration) that she often lacks. The system is passive; it waits for the worker to claim benefits. The IKS model was active; it placed the duty on the leader (Nayak) or the community to ensure no one starved.

5. Critical Discussion: Bridges and Barriers

This section explores the systemic disconnects between the Indian ethos and modern policy, and how bridging them could offer solutions.

5.1. From 'Contract' to 'Relationship'

The modern labour market is transactional. An employer hires a woman for a day, pays her (often underpaid), and the relationship ends. There is no long-term obligation.

In the IKS framework, the relationship between the Yajman (patron) and the Sevak (worker) was often generational and governed by Jajmani relations. While the Jajmani system had its own caste-based exploitations, its positive feature was "security of subsistence." A patron could not easily fire a worker; they were obliged to support the worker's family during famines or festivals.

Critique: We cannot return to feudalism. However, the value of the relationship needs to be restored. Modern Social Security attempts to replace the "Patron" with the "State." But the State is distant and impersonal. A revived IKS model would suggest decentralized welfare boards - tripartite bodies of workers, employers, and state representatives at the municipal level - that recreate the "community of care" rather than a distant bureaucratic office.

5.2. The Concept of Daan (Charity) vs. CSR

Indian culture has a deeply ingrained tradition of Daan (giving) and Ishta-purta (public works for spiritual merit). Wealthy merchants in ancient India built rest houses (Dharamshalas) and water tanks not just for tax breaks, but for spiritual merit.

Today, we have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). However, CSR is often disconnected from the core business practices. A construction company might fund a school as CSR but exploit its own women workers.

Revisiting IKS: The concept of Shubh-Laabh (Auspicious Profit) implies that profit earned through exploitation is Ashubh (inauspicious). Integrating this ethical dimension into management and social work advocacy is crucial. Social workers must advocate that "Social Security" is not a cost to the company, but a moral imperative (Dharma) of doing business.

5.3. Indigenizing Social Work Methods

Social Work education in India is heavily influenced by Western individualism (Casework, Freud, etc.). However, for a tribal woman or a rural labourer, her identity is collective. She is a member of a caste, a tribe, a village.

- Methodology of Lok-Sangrah: Social work practice with unorganized women should focus on Lok-Sangrah (holding the people together). Group Work and Community Organization should take precedence over individual casework.
- The Role of the Social Worker: In the IKS, the Madhyasth (mediator) played a key role. The modern social worker must act as this Madhyasth, bridging the gap between the illiterate woman worker and the complex state machinery.

6. A Proposed Model: Systematizing Indigenous Knowledge

Based on the analysis, this paper proposes a three-tiered model to integrate IKS into modern social security for unorganized women.

6.1. Tier 1: The Neo-Shreni (New Guilds)

We must encourage the formation of "Neo-Shrenis" - modern cooperatives based on the ancient Guild model. Unlike trade unions which are often confrontational/political, Shrenis were constructive/professional.

- Function: These bodies would register women workers (tailors, domestic help) and set standard rates, preventing exploitation.
- Social Security: Following the ancient practice, a portion of the guild's income would go into a "Common Fund" to support members during maternity or illness, providing an immediate, non-bureaucratic safety net.

6.2. Tier 2: Community-Based Care (The Village Model in Urban Slums)

Urban slums, where most unorganized workers live, lack social cohesion. Social Work intervention should focus on creating "Neighbourhood Care Committees" modelled on the Panchayat.

- Crèches: Community-run crèches (supported by state funds but managed by elderly women in the community) would solve the childcare crisis, allowing younger women to work safely. This aligns with the joint family support mechanism.

6.3. Tier 3: Ethical Policy Formulation (The Rajdharma)

Policymakers must move beyond the "Minimum Subsistence" approach to the "Yogakshema" approach.

- Universal Pension as Dakshina: Old age pension for unorganized women should be framed not as a dole, but as Dakshina (honorarium) for their lifetime of service to the nation's economy. This shift in narrative - from "beneficiary" to "contributor" - restores dignity, a core value of Indian culture.

7. Conclusion

The crisis of the unorganized sector in India is, at its heart, a crisis of belonging. As India races towards a $5 trillion economy, the women who build its roads, harvest its crops, and clean its homes are being left behind in a state of precarious existence, stripped of the traditional protections of the past and yet to be fully embraced by the protections of the modern state.

This paper does not advocate for a regression to the past, nor does it ignore the caste and gender hierarchies that plagued ancient systems. However, it argues that the Indian Knowledge System offers a "Systemic Wisdom" - a blueprint of interconnectedness - that is sorely missing in modern policy. The concepts of Yogakshema teach us that the prosperity of the state is meaningless without the security of the vulnerable. The concept of Dharma teaches us that social security is a collective moral debt, not just a fiscal burden. The concept of the Shreni teaches us the power of decentralized, professional self-organization.

For the field of Social Work, the path forward involves a synthesis. We must use the tools of modern constitutional rights, but we must fuel them with the spirit of indigenous ethics. By viewing the woman in the unorganized sector not just as a "labour unit" but as a vital part of the social organism, we can design social security systems that are not only economically viable but culturally rooted and humanely effective. As we move towards 2047 and the vision of a developed India, the true measure of our progress will be how well we uphold the ancient prayer: "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah" (May all be happy) - ensuring that this happiness extends to the invisible hands that build our nation.

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