

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Women's Leadership: From Vedic Wisdom to Viksit Bharat as Architects of India's Knowledge Society

Dr. Andrey Shastri

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts
Amity University, Lucknow
email- ashastry@lko.amity.edu

Dr. Shivangi

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts
Amity University, Lucknow
email- smishra4@lko.amity.edu

Dr. Mansi Mishra

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts
Amity University, Lucknow
email- mmishra4@lko.amity.edu

Abstract

India's intellectual and cultural heritage has long been shaped by Indigenous Knowledge Systems rooted in Vedic traditions, local practices, oral histories, and community-centered learning. Within these traditions, women have played a significant yet often under-recognized role as preservers, creators, and transmitters of knowledge. This paper explores the contribution of women to India's evolving knowledge society by tracing their role from the Vedic period to the contemporary vision of *Viksit Bharat*. In ancient India, women such as Gargi and Maitreyi participated in philosophical debates and contributed to spiritual and intellectual traditions, reflecting a period where women's education and participation in knowledge production were respected. Over time, however, patriarchal structures, social restrictions, and colonial interventions marginalized women's access to education and public intellectual spaces. The study examines how Indigenous Knowledge Systems continue to survive through women's lived experiences in areas such as healthcare, agriculture, environmental conservation, handicrafts, food traditions, and community ethics. Rural and tribal women, in particular, remain custodians of sustainable practices and cultural memory that contribute to social resilience and ecological balance. In the present era, the vision of *Viksit Bharat* emphasizes innovation, inclusivity, digital transformation, and knowledge-based development. This paper argues that India's progress toward becoming a developed nation cannot be achieved without recognizing women as central architects of the knowledge society. By connecting traditional wisdom with contemporary developmental goals, the paper highlights the importance of integrating gender justice, indigenous epistemologies, and educational empowerment into national policy frameworks. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining history, gender studies, and social development perspectives to cultivate the discourse on knowledge production and nation-building in India.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Vedic Wisdom, Viksit Bharat, Gender, Knowledge Society, Patriarchal practices.*

Introduction

India is one of the ancient, largest and oldest civilizations in the world and has a very rich heritage in terms of knowledge traditions. In ancient India, knowledge was not limited to temples, gurukuls, or royal courts. It lived in forests, small villages, and simple ashrams where rishis and munis spent their lives searching for truth and understanding life. People learned through conversations, observation, and shared experiences. Women were also a part of this intellectual journey. Scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi were respected for their wisdom and courage to ask difficult questions about life, spirituality, and society. Their stories remind us that learning in ancient India was once seen as a shared human pursuit, where wisdom was valued more than gender. Long before modern schools and universities were established, knowledge in India was passed through oral traditions, family practices, spiritual teachings, folk culture, and local experiences. This traditional form of learning is known as Indigenous Knowledge Systems. These systems include knowledge related to farming, medicine, water conservation, food habits, handicrafts, healing practices, environmental balance, and social ethics. Women have always been at the centre of these knowledge traditions. In Indian homes and communities, women preserved language, rituals, storytelling, medicinal practices, and cultural values. Ancient Indian texts also mention women scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, and Ghosha, who participated in philosophical discussions and contributed to intellectual life during the Vedic period. Their presence shows that women were not merely passive members of society but active creators of knowledge. Over time, however, social inequalities and patriarchal practices reduced women's access to education and public spaces. Colonial rule further weakened indigenous traditions by promoting Western education systems while ignoring local knowledge practices. As a result, many traditional wisdom systems became marginalized. Today, India is moving toward the vision of *Viksit Bharat*, which aims to create a developed, self-reliant, as well as knowledge-based nation. In this context, Indigenous Knowledge Systems have gained renewed importance because they promote sustainability, community participation, and cultural identity. Women's leadership is equally important because no society can progress without the active participation of half of its population. This paper explores how women have contributed to Indigenous Knowledge Systems from ancient times to the present day and how their participation can help build an inclusive and sustainable knowledge society in India.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To understand the meaning and significance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in India.
2. To examine the role of women in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge.
3. To explore women's contribution from the Vedic period to modern India.
4. To connect Indigenous Knowledge Systems with the vision of *Viksit Bharat*.
5. To highlight the importance of women's leadership in building a knowledge society.

Scope of the Study: This study mainly focuses on the historical and contemporary role of women in India's Indigenous Knowledge Systems. It covers the transition from Vedic period till present-day developments. The paper also examines the role of rural and tribal women in preserving local knowledge traditions. Since the topic is broad, the study uses selected examples related to education, healthcare, agriculture, environment, and cultural preservation. The study is interdisciplinary in nature because it combines perspectives from history, gender studies, development studies.

Review of Literature

A review of literature helps in understanding how different scholars, thinkers, and researchers have studied Indigenous Knowledge Systems, women's participation, and India's knowledge traditions. The existing literature shows that women have historically contributed to education, culture, spirituality, environmental protection, and community-based knowledge, although their role has often been ignored in mainstream historical writings.

Uma Chakravarti in her work on gender and social history explains how patriarchal structures gradually reduced women's access to education and intellectual spaces in ancient India. She argues that although women in the early Vedic period enjoyed relative freedom, later social systems imposed restrictions that marginalized their public participation. Her work is important because it connects gender inequality with historical changes in social and religious institutions.

Savitribai Phule is widely recognized in educational literature as one of the pioneers of women's education in India. Studies on her contribution show how education became a tool for social justice and empowerment of women and marginalized communities during colonial India. Her efforts challenged caste and gender discrimination and created a foundation for inclusive knowledge systems.

Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the importance of village self-reliance and local knowledge systems. Gandhi believed that India's strength lies in its villages and traditional occupations. His concept of *Gram Swaraj* promoted decentralized development and respected local wisdom. Many scholars studying Indigenous Knowledge Systems consider Gandhian thought relevant even today because it supports sustainability and community participation. Several researches related to tribal and rural women also illustrates that women contribute significantly to traditional healthcare, handicrafts, food preservation, folk culture, and oral traditions. However, many scholars point out that modernization and globalization are causing the disappearance of local knowledge practices. Younger generations are increasingly disconnected from indigenous traditions due to urbanization and market-driven lifestyles. Recent policy discussions on *Viksit Bharat* and sustainable development emphasize innovation, digital transformation, and inclusive growth. However, scholars argue that development cannot become truly inclusive unless indigenous traditions and women's experiences are recognized. Studies on gender and development repeatedly highlight that women should not only participate in development programs but also shape knowledge production and policy-making.

Understanding Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Indigenous Knowledge Systems refer to the traditional knowledge developed by local communities over generations. This knowledge is deeply connected with nature, culture, and daily life. Unlike modern education systems that often focus on theory and specialization, indigenous knowledge is practical, experience-based, and community-oriented. For example, Indian farmers traditionally used natural methods for soil fertility and water conservation. Local healers used herbs and medicinal plants for treatment. Women in villages preserved seeds, food traditions, and home remedies. Tribal communities protected forests through sacred beliefs and cultural practices. Indigenous knowledge is important because it teaches sustainable living. In today's world, where environmental crises and social inequalities are increasing, traditional wisdom can provide solutions that are eco-friendly and community-centered.

Women in Vedic Knowledge Traditions: The Vedic period is often remembered as a time when women enjoyed greater freedom in intellectual and spiritual life. Women participated in religious rituals, received education, and engaged in philosophical debates. Texts mention women sages and scholars who questioned social and spiritual ideas. In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), women have historically been more than mere participants; they have been creators, preservers, and transmitters of wisdom across diverse disciplines. Most notable Gargi was not only one of the most respected women philosophers of ancient India, but also very intellectual. In ancient time she participated in most of the debate with so called highly intellectual Rishis. She also participated in debates in the court of King Janaka and discussed deep philosophical questions related to existence and the universe. Maitreyi was another scholar known for her wisdom and spiritual understanding. These examples show that women were considered capable of intellectual and spiritual achievements.

There is no doubt that, women also contributed to family education and cultural transmission. Mothers and grandmothers passed moral values, stories, songs, and rituals to children. Thus, the home itself became an important centre of knowledge. However, this relatively inclusive environment gradually changed with the rise of rigid social structures and patriarchal norms. Patriarchy has played a major role in shaping social and cultural structures in Indian society. It refers to a system in which men hold greater power and authority in family, religion, education, and public life, while women are often confined to subordinate roles. Although women in the early Vedic period participated in intellectual and spiritual activities, patriarchal values gradually restricted their freedom, mobility, and access to education. Over time, women's knowledge and contributions became limited to domestic spaces and were rarely recognized in formal historical records. Patriarchy also influenced Indigenous Knowledge Systems by controlling whose knowledge was considered valuable. While men's contributions were often documented and institutionalized, women's practical wisdom related to healthcare, food preservation, agriculture, and community traditions remained invisible or undervalued. Feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti describe this process as "Brahmanical patriarchy," where caste and gender hierarchies worked together to maintain social control over women.

Even today in this so-called modern era, patriarchal attitudes continue to affect women's participation in leadership, education, and decision-making. Therefore, recognizing women's experiences and restoring their place in knowledge traditions is essential for creating an inclusive and democratic knowledge society in the vision of *Viksit Bharat*. Women's access to formal education declined, and their roles became limited to domestic responsibilities.

Colonialism and the Decline of Indigenous Knowledge: During British colonial rule, India's traditional education and knowledge systems were weakened. Colonial education policies promoted English-based learning while local traditions were considered backward or unscientific. As a result, indigenous practices lost social respect. Women were among the most affected because their knowledge was mostly informal and community-based. Since colonial systems valued only institutional education, women's contributions in households and villages were ignored. At the same time, social reform movements emerged to improve women's education and rights. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Savitribai Phule, and Jyotirao Phule worked for women's education and social equality. Savitribai Phule, in particular, played a revolutionary role by opening schools for girls and marginalized communities. Thus, the colonial period became both a time of decline and transformation for women's participation in knowledge systems.

Women and Knowledge Society in Contemporary India: Today, India is moving toward becoming a knowledge-driven society where education, innovation, and digital technology are important for national development. The vision of *Viksit Bharat* emphasizes inclusive growth, self-reliance, and sustainable development. Women are increasingly participating in education, science, politics, entrepreneurship, and social leadership. Several Government programs and schemes helped in promoting girls' education, somehow digital literacy, and women's entrepreneurship have improved opportunities for women. However, many challenges still remain. Rural women often lack access to quality education, healthcare, technology, and employment opportunities. Many indigenous practices are disappearing because younger generations are disconnected from local traditions. To build a truly inclusive knowledge society, India must combine modern education with indigenous wisdom. Women should not only be beneficiaries of development but active decision-makers and leaders. They should be in fore front in every sector.

Major Findings of the Study: The study highlights several important findings:

1. Women Have Always Been Knowledge Creators: Women were not only caretakers but also intellectual contributors in Indian society. From Vedic scholars to rural healers, women have shaped India's cultural and intellectual traditions.

2. Indigenous Knowledge Systems Promote Sustainability: Traditional practices related to farming, medicine, and environmental protection are often more sustainable than modern industrial methods.

3. Patriarchy Reduced Women's Visibility: Although women contributed significantly to knowledge systems, patriarchal social structures limited their public recognition and access to education.

4. Rural and Tribal Women Preserve Cultural Memory: Many indigenous traditions survive today because of the efforts of women in villages and tribal communities.

5. Modern Development Needs Traditional Wisdom: The vision of *Viksit Bharat* can become more inclusive and sustainable if indigenous knowledge and women's experiences are integrated into policy-making.

Suggestions

To strengthen Indigenous Knowledge Systems and women's leadership, the following suggestions may be considered:

1. Promote Indigenous Knowledge in Education

Schools and universities should include local history, folk traditions, traditional medicine, and ecological practices in their curriculum.

2. Recognize Women Knowledge Holders

Women involved in traditional healing, handicrafts, farming, and environmental conservation should receive social and economic recognition.

3. Digital Documentation of Traditional Knowledge

Government and academic institutions should digitally document oral traditions and local practices before they disappear.

4. Encourage Women's Leadership

Women should be included in decision-making bodies related to rural development, environment, education, and cultural preservation.

5. Support Rural and Tribal Communities

Policies should provide financial assistance, training, and market access to women engaged in indigenous occupations.

6. Blend Tradition with Innovation

Traditional wisdom should be connected with modern science and technology to create sustainable solutions for the future.

Conclusion

India's Indigenous Knowledge Systems are a valuable part of its civilizational heritage. These systems reflect centuries of human experience, environmental understanding, and community wisdom. Women have played a central role in preserving and transmitting this knowledge from ancient times to the present. From Vedic scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi to rural women preserving seeds and medicinal practices, women have continuously shaped India's knowledge society. Yet, their contributions have often remained invisible due to patriarchy, colonial influence, and modern development models that prioritize formal institutions over community wisdom. The vision of *Viksit Bharat* provides an opportunity to rethink development in a more inclusive and sustainable way. India cannot become a truly developed nation unless women's voices, indigenous traditions, and local knowledge systems are respected and integrated into national progress. A knowledge society is not built only through technology and economic growth. It is built through cultural memory, social justice, environmental balance, and collective participation. Women, as architects of knowledge and community life, are therefore essential to India's journey toward a stronger and more humane future.

REFERENCES

- Anway Mukhopadhyay, *The Authority of Female Speech in Indian Goddess Traditions: Devi and Womansplaining*. Springer Nature, 2020
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of "Ancient" India*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (1993): 579-585.
- Khushboo Dixit and Pooja Gurjar, "The Feminine Dimension of Indian Knowledge Systems: A Journey from Vedic Hymns to Modern Era," in *Indian Knowledge System to Elevate Bharatiyata @ NEP2020* (2026): 146-153.
- Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988).
- <https://iksindia.org/>