



## Working women and social organisation of knowledge in India

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### Abstract

There exists a deep and dynamic relationship between working women and the social organization of knowledge in India, shaped by historical, cultural and institutional factors. The social organization of knowledge refers to the ways in which a society produces, classifies, values and transmits knowledge. Indian society has traditionally been patriarchal, structured around rigid gender norms, gendered divisions of labour and caste hierarchies, all of which have significantly influenced how women's work is perceived, recognized and documented. Although women have historically participated in diverse economic activities, much of their labour has remained invisible within formal knowledge systems. While women's participation in formal employment receives institutional recognition, their extensive contribution in the informal sector where a large proportion of working women are engaged often remain unacknowledged. This paper examines how the Indian knowledge system has shaped and defined women's work, tracing its historical legacy as well as the transformations experienced by working women over time. It also explores the evolving challenges and opportunities faced by women in contemporary India. Finally, the paper suggests ways in which modern knowledge frameworks can be aligned with traditional Indian knowledge systems to promote greater gender equality, social recognition and women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Dynamic, hierarchies, perceived, knowledge, transformation, contemporary

### Introduction

India with diverse social and cultural milieu has created a knowledge system that are intricately woven together. The role of women is pivotal and located at the nexus of cultural richness and diversity. Women have been the creator and carrier of knowledge, but the traditional gender norms, hierarchies and division of labour have restricted women to significant roles. Additionally, discrimination have often influenced women's access to education, decision-making platforms and legal recourse. Despite these barriers, women have made their way in different fields and contributed in economic activities such as agriculture, medicine, education, manufacturing and others. While these forms of labour were essential to social and economic life, they were often viewed as extensions of women's familial responsibilities rather than as independent economic contributions. As a result, much of women's work remained outside formal recognition and documentation.

Traditional Indian knowledge systems transmitted skills and occupational knowledge through oral traditions, family structures and caste-based practices. Women were expert in areas such as food processing, textile production, healthcare and agriculture. However, access to formal education and textual knowledge was historically limited for women, leading to a gendered hierarchy in knowledge production where men dominated scholarly and institutional spaces. Consequently, women's experiential and practical knowledge was undervalued despite its social importance.

The colonial period marked a major transformation in the organization of knowledge and work. Colonial education systems privileged Western epistemologies and formal employment, further marginalizing indigenous and informal forms of women's labour. Women's work became increasingly invisible in official records, particularly in rural and household-based economies. At the same time, social reform movements began advocating women's education

and participation in public life, laying the foundation for gradual change.

In post-independence India, expanding education, legal reforms and economic development opened new opportunities for women in formal employment. Working women increasingly entered professions such as teaching, healthcare, administration and later corporate and technological sectors. However, the legacy of traditional gender roles persisted, resulting in a dual burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labour. Women's large-scale participation in the informal sector continued to be inadequately represented in knowledge systems, policy frameworks, and labour statistics.

In contemporary India, the transformation of women's work reflects both continuity and change. Feminist scholarship, gender-sensitive policies and digital platforms have begun to challenge traditional knowledge hierarchies by recognizing women's unpaid and informal labour. At the same time, efforts are being made to reinterpret Indian knowledge traditions in more inclusive ways, acknowledging women as knowledge producers rather than merely caregivers. Thus, while the Indian Knowledge System historically shaped women's work within restrictive gender norms, it is now being re-examined and reconfigured to support gender equality and women's empowerment.

### Review of Literature

The review of literature examines existing studies on women's empowerment, education and gender equality within the Indian context, with a special focus on the Indian Knowledge System. It highlights key debates, trends and gaps in research related to social, economic and educational empowerment of women. This review helps in understanding how traditional knowledge and modern approaches together shape women's roles in society.

The study, “Indian knowledge system and women: A journey towards access to justice and empowerment”, by Neha Kumari (2024) <sup>[1]</sup> explains that the journey toward women’s access to justice and empowerment within the Indian knowledge system reflects both progress and persistent challenges. While historical traditions and contemporary initiatives have sought to protect women’s rights and promote gender equality, patriarchal norms, implementation gaps and limited legal awareness continue to restrict access to justice. Recognizing these challenges enables policymakers, legal professionals and civil society to strengthen legal systems. Balancing cultural traditions with modern legal frameworks is essential for creating a more inclusive and effective justice system that upholds women’s rights in India. A case study by Ritika Hemdev (2024) <sup>[2]</sup>, “Empowering women: Entrepreneurship in the Indian knowledge system – A case study”, concludes that Women entrepreneurs in India use traditional knowledge creatively despite many social and economic challenges. Supporting them through education, fair policies and better market access can strengthen their businesses. This will promote gender equality, preserve cultural heritage, and contribute to sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Another study titled, “Bridging the gender gap: Empowering women through education and technology in the Indian knowledge system”, by Akash Meher and Annapurna Panda (2024) <sup>[3]</sup>, explains that bridging the gender gap in the Indian knowledge system requires a holistic approach that combines education, technology and indigenous knowledge. Improving digital access, promoting digital literacy, affordable technology and challenging social norms are essential. Such efforts can empower women and help India move toward a more equal and prosperous society.

Further studies such as, “The role of the Indian knowledge system on women’s empowerment in India”, by Jyotirmoy Koley (2025) <sup>[4]</sup> shows that the Indian Knowledge System influences women’s empowerment in both positive and limiting ways. When traditional knowledge is combined with modern education, policies and institutions, it supports women’s economic participation and social recognition. However, social norms and structural inequalities still restrict gender equality. Gender-sensitive and culturally informed approaches are essential for promoting women’s empowerment in India. Dibya Dan (2025) <sup>[5]</sup> in the study titled, “Role of Indian knowledge systems in promoting gender equality and empowerment”, highlights that the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) includes traditions related to agriculture, governance and social life, some of which support women’s empowerment. Examples such as matriarchal societies and women’s agricultural knowledge show that IKS can provide women with economic and social power. However, many practices also reflect patriarchal norms that limit gender equality. Therefore, IKS needs critical evaluation to preserve empowering elements and reform restrictive ones. Integrating gender-sensitive aspects of IKS into education and policy can promote women’s participation and equality in Indian society.

According to Malek Sabnurbanu Maiyuddin (2025) <sup>[6]</sup> Ensuring gender justice requires empowering women socially, economically and politically. Social empowerment needs literacy, awareness and legal education. Economic empowerment requires skills, credit and livelihood support. Political empowerment demands affirmative measures to

ensure women’s representation. A comprehensive empowerment strategy remains a key challenge for both policymakers and women themselves. Further a recent study by Dr. Roshan Kumar Jhariya (2025) <sup>[7]</sup>, “Women’s education in Indian knowledge tradition and its impact on society”, concludes that people’s attitudes toward women’s education strongly influence national development. Educating women benefits the whole society by improving their livelihoods, job opportunities, public participation and social status. Although progress has been made, many women in India still face challenges in accessing literacy and education.

### Methodology

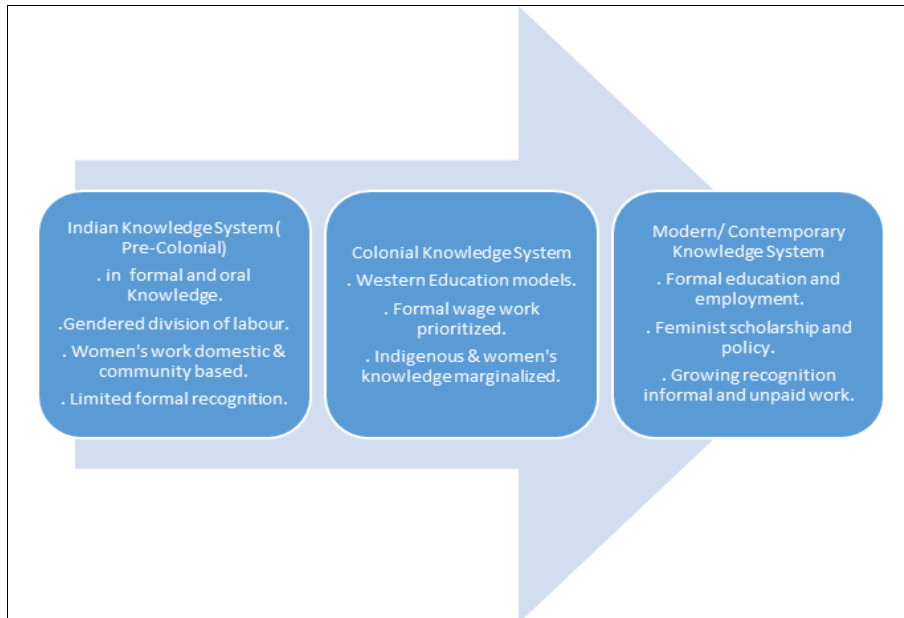
On the basis of the above studies, this paper is a descriptive study and utilises secondary data including historical writings and scholarly articles. It integrates different views surrounding Indian knowledge system and working women.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To study the relationship between working women and Indian knowledge system.
2. To highlight the factors that brought changes in the role of women through the social organization of knowledge.
3. To align traditional knowledge system with contemporary scenario to bring more gender equality.

### Indian Knowledge System and Working Women

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents India’s rich intellectual traditions encompassing philosophy, ethics, social organization, economics, health, education and livelihoods developed over centuries. When viewed through the lens of working women, IKS provides both historical validation of women’s work and contemporary pathways for women’s empowerment. Ancient texts such as Vedic literature, Arthashastra and Buddhist texts mentions that women participated in various fields like agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, pottery, food processing and trade. These texts also present the examples of women like Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra who contributed to philosophical discourse which indicating the social recognition of the productive and intellectual labour by women. Women were also engaged in crafts and household industries which resemble today’s unorganized sector occupations. The knowledge created and preserved by women not only helped them develop skills, but also helped them in livelihood support. The domains where their knowledge was central were handloom, handicrafts, embroidery, food preservation, herbal medicine and indigenous agriculture. Many of these activities form the backbone of today’s informal and home-based work, especially for rural and self-employed women. The Indian Knowledge System besides promoting women’s work and labour also promotes the idea of dharma (duty with dignity) and karma (work as moral action) which emphasizes that work is not merely an economic activity, but as a social responsibility, irrespective of gender. It also laid emphasis on stri Shakti (women power) and balancing both the productive and reproductive roles. Thus, Indian Knowledge System follows the ethical framework which supports the idea of decent work, respect for labour and gender equity, which aligns with modern debates on women’s rights at the workplace.



The flow chart above describes the journey and form of women's work during different periods in India

### Factors contributing to changes during ages through social organization of knowledge

- **Expansion of Education and Literacy:** One of the most important factors is the spread of formal education, especially among women. It has significantly altered their social and economic position. Access to schooling and higher education enabled women to acquire certified knowledge, which is socially recognized and rewarded. This shifted women's roles from unpaid and informal work to paid employment in sectors such as education, health, administration and service.
- **Institutionalization of Knowledge:** The institutionalization of knowledge through schools, colleges, universities and training centres privileged formally certified knowledge, while traditional and indigenous knowledge held by women lost recognition. This restructuring lowered the status of many women's traditional occupations, even as it created new professional opportunities.
- **Economic Transformation and Industrialization:** Industrialization has made women shift from agriculture to industries and redefine their labour roles. However, gendered classification of work have put women at unequal footing with men paying them low and unequal wages.
- **State Policies and Legal Frameworks:** Women's participation in education and employment increased during post- independence era due to constitutional rights and welfare policies. More recently, policies supporting skill development, self-help groups, digital inclusion and indigenous industries have helped improve women's access to knowledge and livelihoods.
- **Cultural Norms and Patriarchal Structures:** Traditional patriarchal structure dominated the Indian society and determined how women's status and role is perceived. Women and their work have been considered

secondary and inferior to men. The changes can be brought about by education, employment and social movements.

- **Technological and Digital Advancements:** Digital technologies have reorganized knowledge by making information more accessible. Digital literacy has enabled women to engage in online work, entrepreneurship and learning, although the digital divide still limits many women.
- **Globalization and Knowledge Exchange:** Globalization introduced new ideas about gender equality, labour rights and empowerment. International exposure and global labour markets have influenced social attitudes and expanded women's work opportunities.

### Aligning Traditional Knowledge Systems with the Contemporary Scenario for Gender Equality

To promote gender equality for women engaged in informal sector, it is essential to align traditional knowledge with contemporary socio-economic context. Traditional indigenous knowledge in various fields such as agriculture, food processing, healthcare and environmental management, which has been preserved and transmitted by women lacks formal recognition and value in modern knowledge economy. To provide formal recognition to this indigenous knowledge, there is a need to integrate traditional knowledge with formal education, skill certification and digital platforms. Recognizing traditional skills through certification and training programmes enhances women's employability and income opportunities. There is a gap between informal expertise women possesses and formal markets. This gap can be bridged by incorporating the traditional knowledge systems into vocational education and entrepreneurship initiatives.

Policy support plays a crucial role in aligning traditional knowledge systems with contemporary frameworks to enhance women's empowerment. To ensure women's ownership, decision-making power and fair economic

returns, women-centred institutions such as self-help groups, cooperatives, and producer collectives play a significant role. These institutions provide a collective platform for organizing women’s labour, strengthen bargaining power and gain recognition as economic agents rather than unpaid contributors. Additionally, access to technology, institutional credit, skill development and market linkages enables women to transform traditional practices into sustainable and scalable livelihoods. Digital platforms, e-commerce and financial inclusion initiatives further expand women’s access to wider markets and knowledge networks. When traditional knowledge is

supported by contemporary institutional mechanisms, technological innovation and gender-sensitive policies, it can evolve into a powerful tool for economic empowerment, social recognition and gender equality. Such an integrated approach not only preserves indigenous knowledge but also ensures that working women in modern India benefit equitably from their skills, labour and knowledge.

Below is a table describing various fields of women’s work, their contribution to traditional knowledge system and its alignment with contemporary world and contribution to gender equality.

Field	Indian Knowledge System	Contemporary Alignment	Contribution to Gender Equality
Agriculture.	Women’s knowledge of seed preservation, organic farming and mixed cropping.	Modern technology, agricultural extension services and market access.	Economic autonomy and recognition of women as farmers and decision makers.
Handicrafts, textiles and Artisanal work.	Weaving, embroidery, pottery, folk art and indigenous crafts.	Design innovation, branding and e-commerce.	Income security, entrepreneurship and global recognition.
Health, nutrition and care work.	Tradition healing, childcare and midwifery.	Professional nurse work in modern health system.	Certified and professional work with dignity to women.
Education and Knowledge transmission.	Oral traditions, cultural values and life skills transmitted by women.	Inclusion of informal knowledge in formal curriculum and gender sensitive pedagogy.	Challenging male dominated knowledge and inclusive education
Environmental Conservation and natural resource management.	Indigenous Knowledge of forests and biodiversity.	Traditional knowledge can be aligned with contemporary sustainable development goals.	Women’s leadership in environmental governance.

The table above explains that when traditional knowledge is supported by contemporary institutional mechanisms, technological innovation and gender-sensitive policies, it can evolve into a powerful tool for economic empowerment, social recognition and gender equality. Such an integrated approach not only preserves indigenous knowledge but also ensures that working women in modern India benefit equitably from their skills, labour and knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The study highlights the deep and evolving relationship between working women and the social organization of knowledge in India, demonstrating how historical, cultural and institutional structures have shaped the recognition and valuation of women’s work. The Indian Knowledge Systems historically acknowledged women as essential contributors to economic, social and cultural life, whereas patriarchal norms, colonial interventions and the privileging of formal knowledge systems gradually rendered much of women’s labour particularly in the informal sector invisible. Despite significant transformations brought about by education, policy interventions and economic change, women continue to face structural inequalities in access to recognition, resources and decision-making power.

The paper argues that meaningful gender equality cannot be achieved without reorganizing knowledge systems to recognize women as workers, knowledge holders and economic agents. Aligning traditional knowledge with contemporary institutional frameworks, technology and gender-sensitive policies offers a sustainable pathway for women’s empowerment. Such integration not only preserves indigenous knowledge but also enhances women’s livelihoods, social status and agency. Therefore, reimagining the social organization of knowledge through a gender-inclusive lens is essential for building a more equitable and inclusive society in modern India.

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