



Evaluating Women's Empowerment in the Context of the Indian Knowledge Tradition

Kamlesh Kumar Chawale, Assistant Professor, Political Science
Government Chandravijay College, Dindori M.P.

Email - chawlekamlesh@gmail.com

Summary:- The Indian Knowledge Tradition (IKT) is a vast and complex body that encompasses the accumulated knowledge of philosophy, art, social structure, education systems and legal codes over millennia. A critical appraisal of the Indian knowledge tradition in the context of women's empowerment necessarily examines two poles of this tradition: First, the exaltation of the philosophical ideal that is found in the Vedic and Upanishadic texts (sruti); And secondly, the collapse of socio-legal barriers which is reflected in Dharmashastras and Smritis (memory). The purpose of this study is to present an in-depth, scholarly analysis, not limited to glorification or condemnation of the Indian knowledge tradition. The method of evaluation is based on Dialectical Analysis, the focus of which is the exploration of the inherent dissonance between the spiritual theory of power and the socio-economic reality. This approach examines in depth the structural barriers and patriarchal interpretations that led to the social subjugation of women despite ideological ideals. To recover the resources of the Indian knowledge tradition for women empowerment, it is imperative to understand this complex history and anomaly.

The key words - women empowerment, Indian knowledge tradition, patriarchy, representation, spirituality.

The transcendental principle of power:- Goddess as the supreme power - In Hindu philosophy, Shakti represents the divine feminine energy, which is considered to be the basic kinetic energy of creation. Power is the ultimate entity responsible for the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. This fundamental concept establishes womanhood in spiritual texts as the supreme, infinite, and soul of consciousness (Brahman). The Devi Sukta of the Rig Veda is the earliest Vedic evidence of this theory, which declares feminine energy to be the essence of the universe. The culmination of this philosophical ideal is seen in the doctrine of Ardhanarishvara, which symbolizes the inseparable union of Shiva (male) and Shakti (female) energies. This form not only celebrates both duality and unity, but also indicates that it is important to achieve a balance between the masculine and feminine energies inherent in every individual for complete self-realization. This principle provides a philosophical basis for inclusiveness and temporal balance.

The Spiritual Equality: - The Supremacy of Brahman and Knowledge – The Spiritual Equality: In the early Vedic period, there were no restrictions for women in the field of knowledge and education. This is evidenced by the presence of more than 35 rishis (female sages) who themselves composed the sukta in the Vedas. For example, Romasha wrote the 126th Sukta of the first Mandala of the Rigveda and Lopamudra wrote the 179th Sukta. This fact is important because the participation of women in the Shrutis (Vedas), who are the highest religious and philosophical authority, establishes them not as mere passive recipients of knowledge, but as active creators and revelers of knowledge. This is the highest point of empowerment, indicating that the collapse was the result of social / political manipulation rather than a philosophical error. In the Upanishadic period, scholars such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi became symbols of Indian intellectual women. She was as well versed as men in the knowledge of the Vedas and the Upanishads and had the ability to participate in scriptures with male philosophers.

Critical analysis of the Maitreyi:- Yajnavalkya dialogue - A critical analysis of the Maitreyi-Yajnavalkya dialogue in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (c. 700 BCE) establishes the core of Advaita philosophy (oneness of Atman and Brahman). This dialogue begins when Yajnavalkya offers to divide his property between his two wives before becoming a sannyasi. Maitreyi rejects wealth, saying it will not grant her 'immortality', and instead expresses a desire to attain enlightenment. She asked: If this whole earth, full of riches, were to become mine, would I thereby become immortal? ". Maitreyi's preference for knowledge over wealth establishes a fundamental principle within the Indian knowledge tradition: The search for self (i.e. knowledge) is superior to worldly possessions or social status. If tradition associates the highest potential of the individual (immortality) with the search for the Self, and women are allowed to participate fully in it, depriving them of worldly legal rights (such as property rights) later on is fundamentally at odds with the highest spiritual goal of the Indian wisdom tradition. Maitreyi's objecting to Yajnavalkya's explanations and asking for further explanations shows her high theological aptitude and intellectual courage, which contrasts with the disciple's passivity.

The historical downfall:- Change in status from Vedic period to Dharmashastra period - After the co-productivity of knowledge-creation of the Vedic period, there was a systematic decline in the status of women in the post-Vedic period and the epic period. This decline was not sudden but the result of the hardening of socio-cultural and legal structures.

Factors of Decline in the Post:- Vedic and Epic Period - The decline in the status of women was mainly due to a number of socio-legal restrictions and institutional changes.

Financial Deprivation:- In the epic period, women were denied property rights. There was a famous

saying in the then society that "wife and slaves cannot own property." This provision cripples women economically, contrary to modern principles of empowerment.

Religious restrictions:- Women were restricted to the religious sphere. They were not allowed to perform yajnas and prayers and to undertake pilgrimages.

The hardening of social structures:- The main factors of decline were the imposition of Brahminical culture on the entire society, the rigid restrictions imposed by the caste system and joint family system, and the lack of educational facilities for women.

Partial Reformation in the Buddhist and Later Periods - Although decline was the dominant trend in the Buddhist and later periods, some periods also saw partial reforms. The rise of Buddhism loosened some of the strictures, as the Buddha preached equality. During this time women were allowed to study and become hermits. Many women entered the Buddhist Sangha and became 'Theri-Bhikkhunis'. She established her own association (Bhikkhuni Sangha), which provided her with institutional avenues for participation in cultural activities, social services, and public life. This phenomenon shows that when the religio-philosophical structure changes, new institutional opportunities can arise for women, even if the established socio-legal order (dharmashastra) remains unchanged. To understand the gradual change of historical status, the following table shows the comparative differences in the status of women from the Vedic period to the modern period.

Critical Text and Patriarchal Institutionalization of the Scriptures

Manusmriti:- The principle of dependency and the negation of property - The Dharmashastras, especially Manusmriti, represent the most stringent legal barriers against women's empowerment within the Indian knowledge tradition. The principle of dependency and the negation of property, while fundamentally denying a woman's right to liberty, placed her under constant protection. Verse IX. 2-3 clearly decrees that a woman must be subjected to men (father, husband, son) day and night, and "a woman is never fit for freedom." Although some verses of the Manusmriti (III. 55-59) command respect for women, declaring that "where women are respected, the gods dwell," this respect is conferred within the realm of patronization. The patriarchal system replaced the right to liberty with the duty of 'protection'. This protection is given only when the woman performs rigid gender roles (e.g. home management, religious duty). It is necessary to replace this concept of protection with autonomy for empowerment. With regard to economic freedom, verse 416 of the Manusmriti clearly contradicts the right to property: "Wife, son and slave, these three are not considered independent property owners. The money earned by them is considered to belong to the person on whom they are dependent. These

provisions cripple women economically and limit them to the realm of material dependence, contrary to the spiritual principles (superiority of knowledge) of the Upanishadic period.

Modern scholarly debate on inconsistency and authenticity - Modern scholarly debate on inconsistency and authenticity Modern scholarship considers the Manusmriti to be more of an idealistic and holistic work than a legal code. There are internal inconsistencies in this text - such as verses that command respect and verses that deny freedom. Scholars believe that this text was compiled over a long period of time by several authors, and more than fifty known manuscripts of it are inconsistent with each other. This principle of multi-author and interpolation is important. Some researchers argue that a large part of the original text, which includes the most stringent restrictions against women, may have been added or changed later. Mahatma Gandhi also acknowledged several contradictions in the printed Manusmriti, remarking that "no one is in possession of the original text." In this perspective, the struggle for women's empowerment is an attempt to address an intrinsic discrepancy within the Indian knowledge tradition itself: Prioritising the rule of idealistic sruti (Vedas / Upanishads) over the exclusionist smriti (Dharmashastras).

Colonial legal codification and its negative impact - Colonial legal codification and its negative impact the most important and negative turning point in the history of Manusmriti came during the colonial period. In ancient and medieval India, the Manusmriti was not universally applicable as a legal code; It was considered a Brahmanical ideal picture, while other texts such as the Yajnavalkya Smriti were more widely used. In 1776, Manusmriti was translated into English by British philosopher Sir William Jones and adopted as the "Institutes of Hindu Law" for the territories administered by the East India Company. This decision, which the colonial authorities took with the help of Hindu and Muslim religious elites, disrupted the dynamic and evolving traditional legal systems. As a result, the Manusmriti gained more legal force than its actual historical position, and was established as a stable and unchangeable source of law for non-Muslims. This codification served to limit or restrict the status and rights of women. Thus, the legal restrictions considered to be the most draconian against women's empowerment are partly a colonial legacy - The result of submitting and incorrectly applying a historical text.

Feminist critique of the discrepancy between spiritual ideals and social reality - The central paradox of the Indian enlightenment tradition - where the highest philosophical position is occupied by feminine energy (shakti), but in real life women are subjugated - India is a major centre of feminist scholarship.

Power Worship vs Social Subjection- Power worship versus social subordination Shakta philosophy reveres woman as the supreme temporal power, but feminist critics have examined why, despite this spiritual uplift, this theory failed to lead to real social empowerment. The problem arises when the feminine gender used for divine power is superimposed on the worldly human gender. Critics argue that this power-worship leads society to label women in rigid, polarized categories ('good' or 'bad' woman). Society expects women to adhere to rigid gender ideals like nutrition, care and selflessness so that they can embody the qualities of 'Shakti'. When women do not conform to these rigid definitions, they are seen as deviating from the norm. Divine energy, in its transcendental form, is the essence of the Supreme Being devoid of gender or qualities. But when it is interpreted within a patriarchal framework, it becomes a tool restricting the social obligations of the woman. Feminist studies examine this discrepancy to highlight the gender biases inherent within the Indian knowledge tradition and to recover alternative, empowering narratives.

The contemporary restoration: Modernization and Policy Integration of Indian –

Knowledge Tradition - Women's empowerment efforts in contemporary India are being seen as a restoration of the inclusive principles of the Indian knowledge tradition, and not merely as an adoption of Western ideas. This process is an attempt to correct historical anomalies and re-establish the core philosophy of IKT.

The Restoration of the Ancient Right through Education- Modern research combines Indian wisdom tradition philosophies with contemporary empowerment theories, the focus of which is the confluence of power / strength and Shiksha. Scholars see women's education not just as a modern necessity, but as the 'restoration of an ancient authority', as evidenced by the lives of philosophers like Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra. This restoration is reflected in the current policy frameworks. Policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) emphasis the inclusion of the Indian knowledge tradition and gender justice. This effort is important to encourage inclusive pedagogy and reclaim the intellectual tradition where women were historically highly respected.

Economic Empowerment through Indigenous Knowledge Systems- Contemporary approaches to economic empowerment from indigenous knowledge systems do not confine the Indian knowledge tradition to philosophical texts alone, but extend it to indigenous and community knowledge systems (IKS). This approach recognizes women's traditional agricultural knowledge, herbal medicine, and eco-friendly farming as effective avenues for economic participation and empowerment. The implication of this broad view is that empowerment is not limited to formal education or legal reforms, but can also be achieved through practical knowledge and economic activity. Integrating these aspects of the Indian knowledge tradition into the modern education system and development

programmes is considered an important tool to promote gender equality, so that traditional knowledge systems can contribute to combating gender discrimination.

Future directions and recommendations - The following important recommendations are made to translate the principles of Indian knowledge tradition into social reality-

Academic Reconstruction and Textual Criticism:- Academic courses should integrate scholarly debates on the feminist lessons of the Indian wisdom tradition, the contributions of the Brahmadini sages, and the interpolations in the Dharmashastras. This will make students aware of the complexity of the texts and the colonial influence, and they will be able to understand which restrictions were purely social and which were fundamental philosophical.

Institutional translation of philosophical inclusiveness:- Structural efforts should be made to translate the principles of Atman Ki Ekta and philosophical inclusiveness like Ardhanarishvara into institutional and corporate policies. These principles should be used as a basis for real gender justice and equality in leadership, not just limited to spiritual symbolism.

Legalization and financial support of indigenous knowledge systems:- Traditional women-led indigenous and local knowledge systems (e.g. agriculture, medicine) should be given formal recognition and supported financially. This approach places empowerment at the foundational level of society, where women have been the creators and holders of knowledge for centuries.

The end of patriarchal 'protection':- The concept of patriarchal protection enshrined within the IKT should be explicitly rejected in favour of autonomy and self-reliance, establishing that women should receive respect based on their independence and ability, and not on their status of dependency.

Conclusion:- The Indian knowledge tradition presents a paradoxical legacy for women empowerment. On the one hand, the philosophical basis (Sruti Granth, Shakti Siddhanta, Oneness of Self) venerates women as the Supreme Being and provides complete equality in the field of knowledge. On the other hand, social structural barriers (Smriti texts, Dharmashastras) deprive women of property and freedom, placing them under patriarchal protection. The present struggle for empowerment is essentially an internal struggle within the Indian knowledge tradition. An attempt to establish the sublime but forgotten inclusive tradition (sruti) over the exclusionary and institutionally rigid tradition (smriti). This conflict was further complicated by the colonial legacy, which made the most restrictive texts legally permanent.

Reference list-

1. Status of Women in Ancient India | PDF | Vedas | Sita - Scribd,
<https://www.scribd.com/document/834088719/1-Status-of-Women-in-Ancient-India>
2. VEDAS & WOMEN-EMPOWERMENT & GENDER EQUALITY ...,
<https://vedicglobal.org/vedas-women-empowerment-gender-equality/>
3. Full 9th Chapter of Manusmriti,
<https://web.furman.edu/~ateipen/ReligionA45/protected/manusmriti.htm>
4. A comparative study of Shaktism and Western feminism: Exploring the Śakti cult through Western feminist theories - International Journal of Research in English,
<https://www.englishjournal.net/archives/2025/vol7issue2/PartD/7-2-48-423.pdf>
5. The Role of Shakti in Hinduism | Meridian University,
<https://meridianuniversity.edu/content/the-role-of-shakti-in-hinduism>
6. Women in Hinduism - Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Hinduism
7. Ardhanarishwara: The Divine Union of Shiva and Shakti - Gayatri Heritage,
<https://gayatriheritage.com/blogs/our-blogs/ardhanarishwara-the-divine-union-of-shiva-and-shakti>
8. Maitreyi - Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maitreyi>
9. Gārgī Vāchaknavī - Wikipedia,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C4%81rg%C4%AB_V%C4%81chaknav%C4%AB
10. Manusmriti Women's Rights Insights: Examining Various Perspectives,
<https://hinduinfopedia.org/manusmriti-womens-rights-insights-examining-various-perspectives/>
11. Manusmriti - Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manusmriti>
12. Separating Feminism From Shakti Worship - Svatantra Institute,
<https://svatantra.institute/separating-feminism-from-shakti-worship/>
13. FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ANCIENT INDIAN PHILOSOPHY - GAP Bodhi Taru,
[https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/res/articles/\(378384\)%20FEMINIST%20CRITIQUE%20OF%20ANCIENT%20INDIAN%20PHILOSOPHY.pdf](https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/res/articles/(378384)%20FEMINIST%20CRITIQUE%20OF%20ANCIENT%20INDIAN%20PHILOSOPHY.pdf)
14. Role of Indian knowledge systems in promoting gender equality and empowerment - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT, <https://researchtrendsjournal.com/counter/d/3-2-17/3-2-17.1.pdf>
15. (PDF) Shakti and Shiksha: Women's Education and Empowerment ...,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395999710_Shakti_and_Shiksha_Women's_Education_and_Empowerment_in_Indian_Knowledge_Traditions