

Women's Empowerment in Indian Knowledge Traditions: A Study of Culture, Values, and Social Justice

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Abstract:

Indian knowledge traditions are a plural and contested heritage of philosophical texts, religion, literature, ethics and social institutions. In this paper, these traditions are explored as they have influenced notions of women's agency, dignity, education, spirituality and social involvement, and as they can be seen to have perpetuated hierarchy and gendered limitations. The study involved a qualitative literature review approach which involves reading and probing selected Vedic and Upanishadic texts, Buddhist texts, Jain traditions, Bhakti traditions, reformist literary works, anti-caste literature and contemporary empowerment theories with reference to culture, values and social justice. The analysis in this paper reveals that Indian traditions are not limited to the emancipatory or patriarchal approaches. They, however, are loaded with conflicting normative resources. Gargi, Maitreyi, early Buddhist nuns, Mirabai, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule, and B. R. Ambedkar are different figure-types that represent various approaches to claiming knowledge, spiritual authority, education, voice, and equality. Brahmanical patriarchy, caste endogamy, narrow reading of dharma, and unequal access to institutions, on the other hand, restricted women's autonomy. The paper proposes looking at the empowerment of women in Indian knowledge traditions through a critical-hermeneutic approach: valuable principles – knowledge, dignity, compassion, self-realization, and justice – should be retrieved rather than romanticized. These traditions can help to build socially inclusive and culturally grounded empowerment models when read in the context of equality of citizens and contemporary conceptions of what capabilities are.

Keywords: Indian knowledge traditions, women's empowerment, culture, values, social justice, gender equality, caste, Bhakti.

Introduction

Empowerment is not just about getting more jobs, better education or a seat in the House of Representatives; it's about being able to make a decision that counts, have a voice, challenge a dominant group and live with dignity. There are three different ways in which Kabeer (1999) has defined empowerment: in terms of relationships between resources, agency and achievements; in terms of substantive freedoms; and in terms of capabilities. Kabeer (1999) has defined empowerment in three ways: in terms of the relationship between resources, agency and achievements; in terms of substantive freedoms; and in terms of capabilities. The views are very pertinent to India as women's agency has always been discussed and negotiated more in cultural and moral terms than in formal ones.

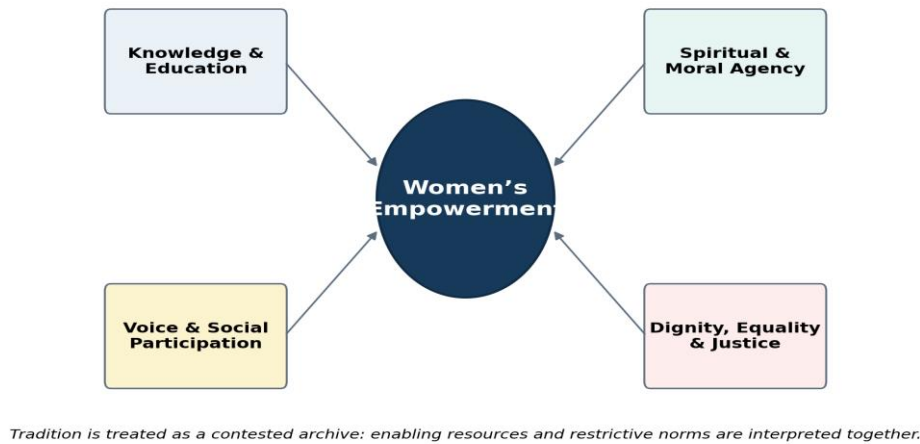
Indian knowledge traditions (IKT) range from texts and ideas from the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions to Buddhist and Jain philosophies, classical legal and ethical writings, devotional movements, vernacular literatures, reformist traditions, and anti-caste intellectual currents. They are internally diversified, and they have undergone change over time. Any research which considers them as a uniform and unchanging system will fail to account for the regional, caste and community, sect and period differences between them. In addition to the evidence of learned women and philosophical discussions found in ancient texts, there are restrictions on sexuality, inheritance, marriage, and mobility that are recorded in normative legal traditions. Other devotional movements allowed women to engage in religious practice in new ways, but social life might not be any different. Both colonial and modern reformers used indigenous ethical principles and contemporary rights discourse to attack racial inequalities in institutional practices (Chakravarti, 1993; O'Hanlon, 1994; Ramabai, 1887).

The central thesis in this paper is hence that the study of women's empowerment in Indian knowledge traditions should be an area of contestation. Enabling values and disciplinary norms are embedded in tradition. A social-justice approach questions who was able to access knowledge, who was the authoritative voice, and how agency was available and impacted by caste, class, community and gender. This paper brings together these different strands of classical and vernacular traditions, with contemporary feminist empowerment theory and constitutional equality, to uncover cultural resources which can aid in women's liberation, and to critically examine the exclusionary discourse.

Methodology

The design in this study is a qualitative, interpretive literature-review. There are twelve foundational translations and works by scholars, called the core corpus: Jamison and Brereton have translated the Rigveda (2014); Olivelle the early Upanishads (1998); Olivelle the Manava-Dharmasastra (2005); Chakravarti has written on Buddhism and Brahmanical patriarchy (1987, 1993); Hallisey has translated the Therigatha (2015); Hawley criticized the conditions of high-caste women (2005); O'Hanlon has researched and translated Tarabai Shinde (1994); the anti-caste critique of Ambedkar (1936/2014); the empowerment framework by Kabeer (1999); and the capabilities approach by Nussbaum (2000). Social justice is related to the historical discussion with the help of Sen (1999), Rege (2006), and other supportive scholarly works.

They were analyzed based on thematic coding as opposed to statistical meta-analysis. They have found five common dimensions that are knowledge and education, spiritual/moral agency, voice and participation, dignity and equality, and resistance to structural injustice. Figure 2 shows coding using the binary yes/no questions on how well each theme is treated in a core source. It is a tool of analysis and cannot be taken as an evaluation of the condition of women in a past population. The approach also imposes a critical-hermeneutic principle: sources are read as a part of society, in connection to the emancipatory possibilities, as well as exclusions.

Conceptual framework: empowerment through critical engagement with Indian knowledge traditions*Figure 1. Conceptual framework for women's empowerment in Indian knowledge traditions.**Note. Author's synthesis based on the literature reviewed in this paper.*

Women, Knowledge, and Authority in Vedic and Upanishadic Traditions

In the modern debates on the history of women, the Vedic and Upanishadic literature is often quoted. Women do speak with intellectual or ritual authority in the textual record. In the Rigveda, hymns are dedicated to female seers, and in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Gargi appeals to Yajnavalkya on the nature of the world, and Maitreyi on the immutability of reality and the limit of material wealth (Jamison & Brereton, 2014; Olivelle, 1998). Episodes are important because knowledge is not seen as inherent to a man, a woman may engage in metaphysical speculations and seek rational explanations.

But examples of good learning for the elite girl should not be extrapolated to the universalisation of gender equality. Social place determined access to learning in the Vedic tradition, while the normative literature further institutionalized greater regulations of women's autonomy. The Manava-Dharmasastra, for instance, associates' women's social status to guardianship, marriage, housekeeping and reproduction by caste (Olivelle, 2005). Chakravarti (1993) states that Brahmanical patriarchy functioned through the intertwining of the control of women and the control of castes, and that marriage and sexuality were under strict control, necessary to maintain the boundaries of caste. The contrast is analytically significant: the same massive civilizational archive may be comprised of a philosophical image of women as knowers, and social norms that limit women's options. Empowerment, therefore, is a retrieval process that is selective and critical, not nostalgic.

Table 1- Empowerment resources and limitations across selected Indian knowledge traditions

Tradition / period	Empowerment resource	Illustrative voices or texts	Critical limitation
Vedic & Upanishadic	Philosophical dialogue and learning	Female seers; Gargi; Maitreyi (Jamison & Brereton, 2014; Olivelle, 1998)	Access was socially unequal; later normative restrictions intensified.
Buddhist	Renunciant community and first-person spiritual voice	Therigatha nuns (Hallisey, 2015)	Institutional rules could subordinate nuns to monks.

Tradition / period	Empowerment resource	Illustrative voices or texts	Critical limitation
Jain	Ascetic discipline and ethical agency	Women ascetics in enduring monastic communities	Sectarian differences over female liberation; wider social constraints.
Bhakti	Vernacular voice and spiritual self-authorization	Mirabai and other women saints (Hawley, 2005)	Exceptional voices did not automatically transform everyday patriarchy.
Reform & anti-caste	Education, critique of custom, equality and dignity	Ramabai; Shinde; Phule movement; Ambedkar	Caste, class, and gender exclusions required institutional reform.

Note. The table is interpretive and does not rank traditions as uniformly “high” or “low” in women’s status.

Buddhist and Jain Traditions: Spiritual Agency and Institutional Limits

Buddhist and Jain teachings broadened the framework of conceptualizing spiritual agency for women to the extent of defining moral and spiritual value through disciplined practice, not just birth or household status. Later Buddhism allowed women to join the monks, establishing a formal if unbalanced avenue out of the home. The Therigatha, a book of poems that are thought to be composed by early Buddhist nuns, shows women speaking about suffering, household chores, loss of loved ones, old age, desire, and liberation (Hallisey, 2015). These poems are of particular significance for empowerment, because they don't depict women as mere symbols of virtue, but as the subjects who are interpreting their experience.

But hierarchy persisted in the institutional world. The rules for nuns, handed down in the monastic tradition, did not provide for their equality with monks, and social factors outside monasteries continued to determine the options available to women. It is thus necessary to be wary of equating religious renunciation with social equality, which is the caution that Chakravarti (1987) warns of. Jain traditions also established long-lasting female ascetic communities and validated women's potential for ethical discipline, but sectarian debates involved whether women could achieve liberation in a female body. The lesson that can be gleaned from the broader picture is this: spiritual equality does not necessarily equal institutional equality. Despite this, however, women renunciators, teachers and authors increase the range of culturally intelligible female agency.

Bhakti Traditions: Vernacular Voice and Devotional Autonomy

The Bhakti movements are amongst the most influential Indian traditions for understanding vernacular voice and religious self-authorization. Bhakti poets frequently expressed the superiority of devotion over ritual standing, academic elitism, and social caste. But women like Mirabai used the language of devotion to create a relationship with the divine that would supersede the expectations of marriage, royalty, and family. Hawley (2005) demonstrates that Mirabai's historical and literary afterlives are complicated, but it is precisely because of the indeterminacy of her voice that she has such power.

Bhakti did not establish a homogenous and equal society. Women saints were extraordinary and the radical voices were sometimes later appropriated by other communities as domesticated or idealized. Nevertheless, vernacular devotion reframed the cultural framework of women's speaking. Poets did not need to study Sanskrit, nor did they need to be in the formal manufactory of the great, nor did they need to be in public office, to express spiritual values in local languages, songs, bodily enactments, and social recollections. This accessibility is important for empowerment, for voice is a resource. Kabeer (1999) conception of agency is not just the visible dimensions of decisions, but also the capacity to set goals and take action. Bhakti

traditions offer culturally familiar examples of female appropriation of moral and spiritual aspirations that go beyond the domestic explanatory category.

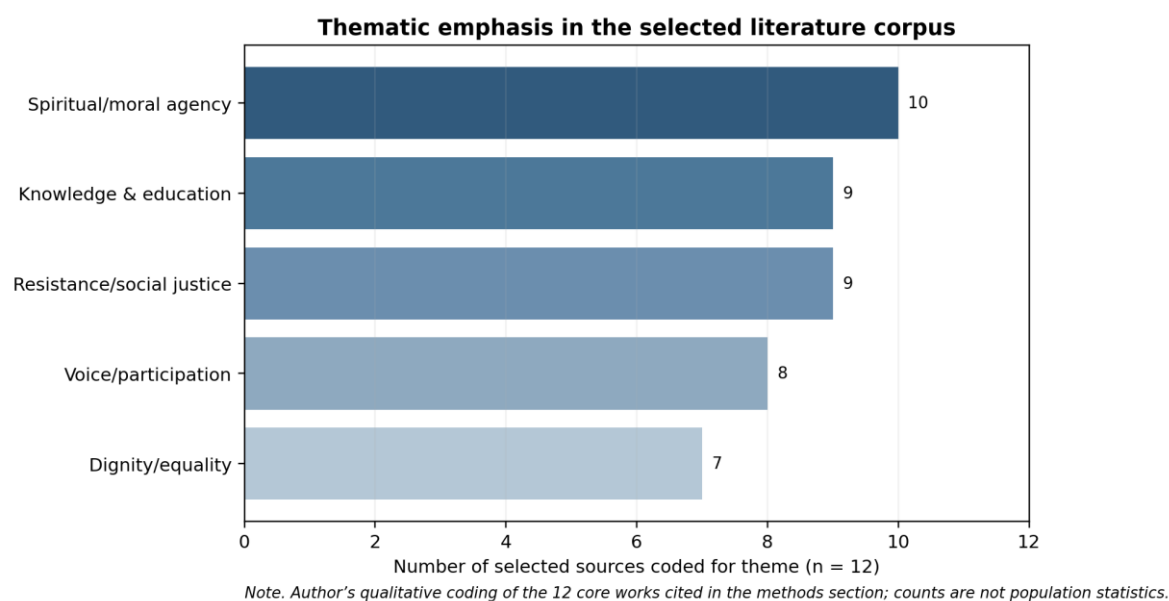


Figure 2. Thematic emphasis in the selected literature corpus.

Reform, Anti-Caste Thought, and the Politics of Education

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women reformers and anti-caste thinkers redefined the concept of tradition, making matters such as education, caste, widowhood, marriage, and legal equality open to public debate. The High-Caste Hindu Woman by Pandita Ramabai highlighted the powerlessness and helplessness resulting from child marriage, enforced widowhood and the lack of education of women (Ramabai, 1887). In her critique she shows an important principle: cultural belonging does not mean silence on issues of injustice. The tradition can be appropriated from the inside and from the outside of intellectual traditions, and oppressive institutions can be revealed.

Tarabai Shinde's 1882 *Stri Purush Tulana* challenged the double standards to which women's sexuality and morality were held as opposed to men's. O'Hanlon (1994) places Shinde's intervention in the new political dynamics of caste and gender in western India. The work of Savitribai Phule in the field of education of girls, along with the anti-caste movement of Jyotirao Phule, brought the idea of literacy in direct opposition to hereditary inequalities. Rege (2006) later pointed out that caste and gender cannot be studied separately and focusing on Dalit women's experiences is important because of the possibility of masking inequalities under general terms such as "Indian woman".

Ambedkar's discussions on caste also sheds light on the concept of social justice which is inseparable from women empowerment. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he posited that caste is perpetrated by socially created boundaries that are reinforced through religious sanction and that it needs structural, not just moral reform (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). His work broadly related to dignity, equality, representation and the reform of family law. This intersectional approach is important because women's freedom is curtailed when caste endogamy, economic dependence and educational exclusion are compounded by patriarchal authority.

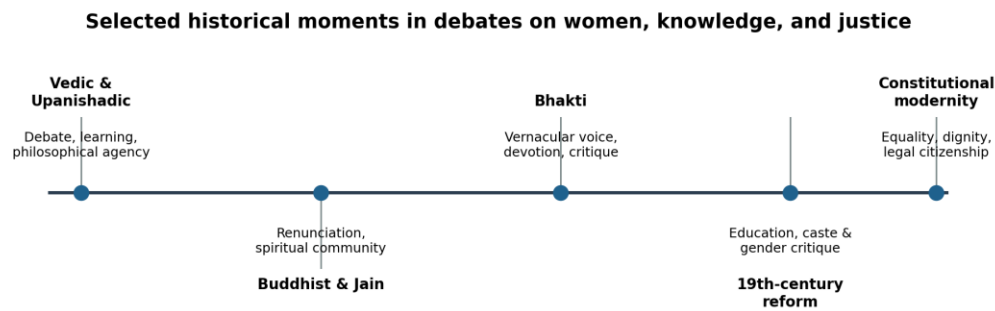


Figure 3. Selected historical moments in debates on women, knowledge, and justice.

Note. Schematic timeline; it does not imply linear historical progress.

Culture and Values as Resources for Empowerment

Critical interpretation of concepts in the ethical lexicon of Indian knowledge traditions can serve to empowerment. Vidya, the knowledge, emphasises learning as a transformative good. Dharma is not just duty but also order and morality; however, it shouldn't be turned into a status quo of unequal social roles. Ahimsa teaches us not to harm others, and gives us strong vocabulary for resisting violence, coercion and humiliation. Several philosophies have notions of self-realization that question the person's definition limited to a social identity. Through Bhakti, Bhagavadgītā gives the values of devotion, inner conviction, and the possibility of the spiritual value outstripping the inherited hierarchy. Moral concern for vulnerable persons is also fostered by Buddhist compassion or Jain non-violence.

Only with agency and institutional change do these values become empowering. But development cannot be limited to resources without considering what people are able to be and what they can do (Sen 1999). In the case of women, Nussbaum (2000) suggests that there are specific thresholds for women's capabilities in terms of bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, education and political participation. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) demonstrates that resources cannot be said to have given empowerment unless they increased the level of choice. Even though they have been developed in recent times, these models are used here as a test to the reinterpretation of tradition: is it an offer to the cultural values which increase the real freedom that women have, or just a possibility to label it as ancient or authentic?

Social Justice: Caste, Gender, Law, and Substantive Equality

Three longstanding issues need to be addressed in a reading of Indian knowledge traditions from a social-justice perspective. The symbolic worship of femininity does not ensure rights for real women. Festivals of goddesses, mothers or ideals of feminine power can exist along with limitations on mobility, property, education, or sexuality. Second, the term "tradition" is often used by the dominant groups to define their own practices. Chakravarti (1993) has examined Brahmanical patriarchy and Rege (2006) has analysed the relationship between caste and gender, and both indicate that the voices of those who are culturally and socially excluded by caste and class must be heard to achieve empowerment, not just the voices of elite textual traditions. Thirdly, cultural legitimacy and enforceable institutions are necessary for reform. While moral ideals are good, equality also requires legal, educational, health, economic opportunity, safety, and political representation.

This synthesis is also guaranteed by a modern normative charter in the Constitution of India, as reflected in the guarantees of equality before the law and prohibition of discrimination including sex discrimination (Constitution of India, 1950, arts. 14–15). Cultural practices do not have to be eliminated; constitutional morality just provides a yardstick for judging cultural practices. When viewed from this angle the most

fruitful relationship between IKT and women empowerment is dialogical. Traditions provide languages of knowledge, dignity, discipline, compassion and ethical responsibility, and constitutional/capabilities approaches demand that these languages are accessible to all individuals, regardless of gender and caste.

Table 2-*From cultural value to social-justice application*

Value / concept	Empowerment interpretation	Contemporary social-justice implication
Vidya (knowledge)	Women as learners, interpreters, teachers, and producers of knowledge	Equal educational access, curriculum inclusion, digital and professional learning
Ahimsa / compassion	Freedom from harm, coercion, humiliation, and preventable suffering	Gender violence; dignified institutions and care
Dharma / ethical responsibility	Responsibility interpreted through justice rather than fixed gender roles	Accountable families, communities, workplaces, and public institutions
Self-realization / spiritual agency	A person's moral worth exceeds inherited status or prescribed social identity	Freedom of conscience, bodily integrity, and meaningful life choices
Equality and dignity	Moral and legal recognition of women as full persons and citizens	Anti-discrimination, property rights, political voice, and caste-gender justice

Discussion

The analyzed sources demonstrate a common denominator: The empowerment of women widens as soon as women are not seen as objects of interpretation but viewed as interpreters. They present Gargi and Maitreyi as philosophical scenes of dialogue; Therigatha features the first-person narrations of liberation by women; Mirabai delivers a voice of devotion declaring moral independence; Ramabai and Shinde reveal gendered injustices; anti-caste movements relate education and dignity to structural change. In these instances, the act of empowerment has an epistemic agency i.e. the power to know, speak, interpret and challenge.

Meanwhile, the historical record warns against triumphant assertions on the uniformity of ancient India which was egalitarian. Legal restrictions, caste endogamy, household organization (patriarchy), and institutional access imbalances have shown the realization that the empowerment of ideals could not necessarily be translated into social practice (Chakravarti, 1993; Olivelle, 2005). This is the source of tension and, therefore, only in the plural, the idea of Indian knowledge traditions can be use. Schools, movements and communities competing produced alternative possibilities to women.

The work thus offers a critical-hermeneutic framework of empowerment. The initial one comprises retrieval: locate cultural notions and historical voices that acknowledge the knowledge of women, their dignity, spiritual ability, and their participation in the community. The second one is critique: find out ways in which caste, patriarchy and institutional power narrowed the spectrum of those ideals. The third one is reconstruction: reform useful traditions in a manner that is congruent with substantive equality and capabilities. This is a way to avoid two extremes: romanticizing the past as already equal and rejecting all traditions as being always oppressive. Social justice involves a historically accountable two-way system where cultural resources are considered by their implication upon human liberty.

Educational and Policy implications.

The discussion indicates that there are several feasible educational, cultural and policy implications of the analysis. To start with, the curricula on the traditions of Indian knowledge must include women as a social subject as well as thinkers, poets, renouncers, teachers and critics, reformers, etc. The plurality of Indian intellectual history would surely become visible through reading Gargi and Maitreyi, the Therigatha, the Mirabai, the Ramabai, the Shinde and, the Dalit women testimonies and understanding the anti-caste thought. Second, cultural education must not confuse respect to tradition with unquestioning embracing of the inherited order. The students can be trained to contrast normative ideals with social circumstances in which various groups had an opportunity to exercise them.

Third, the programs of empowerment must relate cultural values to Cando Capability. Access to education, absence of violence, health, access to livelihood, rights to property and inheritance, access to digital environments and political space are not extrinsic to culture, but it is under such conditions that ideals about dignity and knowledge become literate (Kabeer, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Lastly, caste and gender must be put forward as the main categories of analysis in institutions that incorporate Indian knowledge traditions in leadership, ethical or citizenship education. This will help avoid the symbolic celebration of women to replace structural change. An approach that is grounded in culture is most robust when it arms women to make their own interpretation of tradition and whereby society upholds their freedom to embrace, modify or oppose the specific norms.

Conclusion

Empowering women in Indian traditions of knowledge should not be perceived as part of a received doctrine but rather as a continuous debate concerning knowledge, power, honor, and equity. Vedic and Upanishadic literature retains powerful images of women as knowledge seekers, Buddhist and Jain traditions disclosed forms of renunciant and ethical agency, Bhakti movements provided vernacular spaces of spiritual self-authorization and reformist and anti-caste authors revealed the social constructions that had deprived women of access to education, to their bodies, and to equal rights as men. They are precious resources, and norms and institutions that are restrictive also accompany them.

In a modern paradigm, a unification of cultural literacy and social-justice commitments must therefore be undertaken. As part of classical, vernacular, reformist, Dalit and minority traditions, women intellectual contributions should be made in education. Religious and cultural values which are in the form of knowledge, compassion, non-harm, self-realization and dignity are supposed to be interpreted in such a manner that will widen the female capabilities. This is most importantly because symbolic respect should be accompanied by material conditions: safety, education, health, property rights, economic opportunity, political voice, and non-caste/gender-based discrimination. What might Indian knowledge traditions offer in this form is not a return to a more ideal past, but provision of ethical and intellectual capital to create a more equal future, to empower women.

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