



A STUDY ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP THROUGH INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS : A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT), rooted in centuries of philosophy and ethics, offer a rich framework for understanding women's leadership and empowerment. Beyond religious doctrine, IKT embraces holistic concepts like Shakti (power), Vidya (knowledge), and Dharma (ethical duty), supporting women's dignity and capability. This study uses qualitative analysis of ancient texts such as the Rig Veda, Upanishads, and Arthashastra, alongside contemporary policies like NEP 2020 and Ministry reports, to explore IKT's role in shaping women's empowerment. Figures like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Rani Ahilyabai Holkar exemplify empowered leadership within this tradition. Findings reveal that IKT provides culturally relevant models of inclusive leadership and female agency. The paper advocates integrating these values into education, leadership, and policy to promote sustainable, authentic empowerment aligned with gender equity and social transformation.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, women empowerment, leadership, holistic education, cultural values.

INTRODUCTION

India's vast intellectual heritage, rooted in the Vedas and the guru-shishya tradition, once fostered a rich culture of value-based, holistic learning. Institutions like Nalanda, Takshashila (Taxila) were global centres of integrated education, blending spiritual wisdom with scientific inquiry. Over time, however, colonial influence and Western-centric educational models have marginalized these traditions, leading to a disconnection from India's indigenous frameworks of knowledge and leadership (Sharma, S.,2022). The National Education Policy 2020 represents a pivotal opportunity to reconnect with this legacy. By promoting learner-centred, multidisciplinary, and ethically grounded education, NEP 2020 seeks to align modern pedagogy with India's civilizational values. A core aspect of this revival

involves the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems—including philosophical principles like Shakti (power), Vidya (knowledge), and Dharma (ethical responsibility)—into education and policy (Chaithanya, E.P.,2022). This paper engages with how these indigenous frameworks influenced women's knowledge and authority in the past—as demonstrated by individuals like Gārgī, Maitreyī, and Ahilyabai Holkar—but can also be leveraged for women's empowerment and inclusive governance in the present. For NEP 2020 to have its transformative impact, it must include curricular changes, cultural awareness, and gender-sensitive practices, especially for learner identities. By re-centring on India's historic knowledge systems, we may create a culturally relevant, prepared, and ethical Indian society of the future.



SECTIONS OF THE PAPER:

Section I: Introduction; Section II: Literature Review; Section III: Objectives of the Study; Section IV: Research Methodology; Section V: Suggestions; Section VI: Conclusion

LITERATURE REVIEW

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the role of Indian Knowledge Traditions in promoting women empowerment and leadership.
2. To identify and interpret key concepts—Shakti, Vidya, and Dharma—that empower women within IKT.
3. To explore historical examples of women leaders nurtured by these traditions.
4. To suggest culturally relevant strategies for integrating IKT into modern educational and policy frameworks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach using thematic content analysis of secondary data. The primary sources of data included ancient Indian texts (for example, Rig Veda, Upanishads, Arthashastra), and contemporary policy documents (for example, National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020). This qualitative secondary data approach allows data to be contextualized when determining women empowerment and women in leadership from an Indian Knowledge Traditions and cultural context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Shakti: Power and Feminine Energy

The idea of shakti in Hinduism is about feminine divine power that is fundamental to creation, initiation of spiritual awakening and the overall balance of the universe. She is honoured in the form of Great Goddess, Shakti as both a metaphysical force and a personified goddess, having attributes such as wisdom, compassion, and strength. This ideology gives ways to women as sacred representations of divine energy, which serves as a double-edged sword — a strong counter-narrative against patriarchal customs, as well as a

liberation spiritual archetype (Morales, F.,2005). "She is not subordinate to the divine—she is the divine" speaks to the heart of Shakti philosophy that places the feminine in its role of divine power. It challenges patriarchal views that assert that the Goddess is not secondary or inferior, but central to both creation and spiritual truth. This perspective redefines the feminine as sacred and sovereign and spiritually whole (Morales, F., n.d.).

Vidya: Knowledge as Liberation

Indian educational philosophy represents a holistic and life-long process stemming from intertwined cultural and spiritual and moral development. It addresses the relationship between philosophy and education as well as individual development, social responsibility, and cultural preservation. Swami Vivekananda educational ideals are focused on character-building, self-realization, and universal harmony as are Tagore's (Ambill, S., 2017). In Indian thinking on education, development is defined organically, as an all-round growth fused with cultural, moral, and spiritual maturation. Philosophy and education were linked to facilitate and support individual development, community well-being, and cultural continuity. Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore see education focused on character, self-realization, and harmony with the universe (Das, B. N.,1995). The Mundaka Upanishad distinguishes Apara Vidya (lower knowledge– ritual, scriptures) from Para Vidya (higher knowledge– realized Brahman) and importantly makes the claim that liberation does not come from ritual but realization of self with the eternal Brahman. Employing metaphors, a deep understanding of humanity and world, the Mundaka Upanishad guides seekers of wisdom, through knowledge, self-realization and spiritual awakening toward liberation in life and ultimate freedom (Anaadi Foundation., n.d).

Dharma: Ethical Responsibility

The Mundaka Upanishad distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom as two forms. There are lower types of knowledge called Apara Vidya consisting of rituals, texts, and rules of language. The higher knowledge is Para Vidya and that leads to the ultimate knowledge of reality. The Munkada



Upanishad conveys the message that one is not liberated through rituals or by an intellectual study of truth but realized through self-realization and a pure inner self and contemplative meditation. The Upanishad illustrates, by way of vibrant metaphors a way for seekers to understand the imperishable Brahman who is the source of all existence (Kumar, R., 2019). Kautilya's Arthashastra stresses that ethics and justice (dharma) are necessary for good governance and leadership, and emphasizes how ethics can build trust and stability in political systems that are meaningful even today. (Roy Chowdhury, Kakali., 2022).

Women in Ancient Texts and Historical Context Vedic Intellectuals

The exchange between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya in the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad possesses significant philosophical and feminist content. The context of the dialogue, held in King Janaka's palace, concerns a debate on Brahman, with Gārgī being the only female participant among a group of male scholars. Gārgī questions Yājñavalkya regarding the fundamental nature of existence, specifically she asks about "that" which supports the animal and plant kingdoms beyond just water and space. What develops is a discussion on the Imperishable (Para-Brahman), which represents the transcendent reality beyond human capacity for thought. After Yājñavalkya puts her off with a warning that it was likely to confuse people, she asks two more questions to Yājñavalkya, showing courage in her intellectual authority and that she was not willing to accept incomplete answers. When she shifts from questioner to stating her overall evaluation to all, she exhibits leadership to foster her authority over the discourse. Gārgī later refers to herself as a warrior, defying gender conventions for women, and asserting potential authority over men. Her questions build in precedent, and signify the refusal to accept the disparity of intellectual merit ascribed to women. Her questions speak to more than philosophical propositions; they represent feminist resistance in Indian philosophy by declaring that women also possess the capability to fathom the high truth. Gārgī always recognizes Yājñavalkya as composed of wisdom, and as a good philosopher

who elevated the discourse rather than shutting it down as part of the patriarchal knowledge system, but her value is regarded as elevating the quality of the conversation and the relevance of thought itself proves that it is not limited in value to one specific gender or socio-cultural milieu. Gārgī's contribution create a challenge to the zeitgeist of her time, and affirms the benefit of persistent distrust of limitations for truth in both philosophy and society (Prahasan, M., 2025). Maitreyī, a noteworthy female philosopher in the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, is engaged in profound conversation with Yājñavalkya at a moment of great transition in his life, as he is about to step away from worldly life. When offered wealth, Maitreyī asks: "Can wealth separate me and immortality?," thereby indicating her ultimate desire for spiritual knowledge, not material wealth. In response to Maitreyī's question, Yājñavalkya explains that wealth is impermanent, and he explains wealth briefly as well as the soul (ātman) and that immortality is only accomplished in knowing that ātman is all and is one with Brahman. Even though Maitreyī's questions are few, they are subtle and cutting, allowing Yājñavalkya to explicate various deep metaphysical truths. Similarly, her continuous asking of questions about knowledge rather than seeking of pleasure is indicative of a philosophical heart seldom accorded to women in her age. Even while Soumya expresses that she does not know what she knows, she still has knowledge nonetheless. For expressing the desire for knowledge and deep inquiry to philosophy, Yājñavalkya tells her that she is "even more beloved," as a mundane reality when compared to a devoted student. By presenting Maitreyī as a Brahmvādinī, a seeker of truth, and Kātyāyanī as a representative of private domestic life, Manu also decisively affirms the prior significance of women who were scholars or learned women in the Vedic tradition, in contrast to what would become normative later with patriarchal culture in India. Further, this dialogue confirms that the path to spiritual enlightenment transcends gender, and that inquiry to wisdom and pursuit of philosophy are equally available to women (Prahasan, M., 2025). Gārgī and Maitreyī are both examples of how Indian Knowledge



Traditions validated women as intellectual and spiritual leaders while challenging patriarchy. Their philosophical dialogues reaffirm that the pursuit of Vidya and Dharma are not restricted by gender and are empowering ideologies of Indian tradition.

Ethical Governance

Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar reigned over Malwa (1767–1795) in a way that was visionary, ethical and in support of women's self-respect and justice. She ruled despite the cultural expectations of patriarchal norms and did so in a caring, inclusive, and wise way. She helped to develop women's right to an education, economic and legal support and challenged oppressive practices like Sati. Her rule produced important infrastructure developments, trade networks, and temple renovations including the Kashi Vishwanath and Somnath temples. She was known for being fair and accessible, which meant that justice prevailed for all, regardless of caste or gender. Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy lives on and inspires contemporary movements for gender equality, social reform and ethical leadership across India (Chaudhary, S., 2025).

Women in the Arthashastra

Kautilya's Arthasāstra and Kālidāsa's Abhijñāna śākuntalam provide points about women's rights, decision-making roles, and ethical agency in ancient India. Through comparative and critical analysis, the texts elucidate empowered female characters with rights mirroring modern constitutional rights. Although the two texts reflect different genres and articulate ideas from different times, the two texts share a focus on gender, morality, and social order. The insights provided by the two texts offer a context to inform present-day conversations about women's empowerment, embedded in Indian tradition (Bandyopadhyay, J., 2019).

Contemporary Relevance and Policy Implications NEP 2020 and Holistic Education

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach aims to respond to students' authentic lives in the 21st century. NEP 2020 aims towards holistic, multidimensional education which produces critical thinkers who will develop

comfort in managing all aspects of their intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual development. Building upon ancient learning institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila, NEP 2020 promises a new style of education integrating knowledge of the arts, sciences, vocational and professional skills, utilizing multi-sensory learning, creativity, innovation, and advocacy, and lifelong learning as an essential part of the student's educational journey. The foundation of a student-centered education is based on a flexible capacity-based and purposeful education system, where the government plays a significant role in supporting entrepreneurship to enable employability. The ultimate goal of NEP 2020 is to create an inclusive, innovative, and future worthy educational system for a 21st-century India (Shanmugapriya, S., & Subramani, P., 2024).

Decolonizing Curriculum through Indigenous Knowledge Systems

India's political science education, shaped by colonial-era paradigms and Western frameworks, now requires a shift toward indigenous perspectives rooted in the country's own traditions and historical experiences. Ancient texts like Kautilya's Arthashastra and the Mahabharata introduced original concepts such as Danda Niti and Raja Dharma, highlighting a long-standing tradition of political thought. Contrary to the belief that democracy is purely a Western idea, India practiced early democratic forms through institutions like Sabha and Samiti. Colonial constructs such as communalism and race-based theories are increasingly seen as outdated and misaligned with Indian society, prompting calls to revise or replace them in political science discourse. In line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, there is a strong push to integrate Bharatiya Knowledge Systems, adopt culturally relevant pedagogy, and create content that resonates with India's socio-political reality. A national workshop at Rani Durgavati Vishwavidyalaya brought together scholars to explore these reforms, focusing on Indian traditions of political thinking, the Constitution, global engagement, and emerging areas like gender and environmental politics. The overarching goal is to reshape political science



into a discipline that reflects and reinforces India's intellectual heritage and democratic legacy (Vidya Bharati Uchcha Shiksha Sansthan., n.d.). Incorporating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education provides an authentic context to engage ancient wisdom with education today by focusing on holistic values including sustainability, simply living, and interconnectedness, developing critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning, and providing genuine practical measures for establishing holistic, culturally-laden approaches to education (Mahesh Chandra, Tiwari, G., Mukherjee, A., & Mukherjee, A., 2024).

Women Empowerment and Policy Integration

Women in India still suffer from social, economic and political inequalities although they form nearly half the population of the country. They are still deprived of access to education, employment and day-to-day safety. A number of government initiatives are being implemented to improve the status of women. As an example there are many policies, acts and schemes being made available by the government such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, One Stop Centre Scheme, Women helpline and STEP (Support to Training and Employment Programme). These schemes are intended to bridge the gap in girls' education status; address the issues of poverty, safety and employability and build the financial independence of girl children. There are many legal safeguards made available to women and girls like the Domestic Violence Act and The Dowry Prohibition Act, which support these schemes. However, due to literacy rates, lack of advertising and implementation women are still not aware of these schemes. Some solutions to addressing these issues include: focusing on girl-child and preventative education, establishing equal or similar pay, ensuring entrepreneurship is a viable option, creating awareness programming, and ensuring the rule of law is followed. For the development of any country, women must be empowered, but women empowerment has to go beyond these government schemes. Women empowerment needs support from the government, active participation from women and self-awareness from women to empower themselves. The future of India depends

on the need to create and develop empowered women and men who can positively contribute to society (Bindlish, M., Singh, S., & Singh, G., 2022).

Leadership Development and Social Capital

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore women leadership development and experiences in upper-level positions at Central Mindanao University (CMU). This study also underscored the prominence of educational credentials, particularly terminal or doctoral degrees, as factors contributing to women's leadership opportunities. Overall, this study illustrated that women in the academic setting obtain social capital through their academic success, commitment to service, and self-efficacy. Once women gain the confidence to provide leadership, they can come to terms with the barriers to success in an academic setting, as they can focus on their trust in the challenges and obstacles. A semi-structured interview methodology, and thematic analysis, identified patterns in participants narratives. The emergence of themes in this study addressed women's leadership characteristics, institutional barriers, and the value of social capital through mentoring or creating mentoring-like conditions to support women in leadership. Gender bias, equitable opportunities for women, and equitable hiring practices are shown to limit women's leadership journeys within higher education, not only at CMU but also in other academic institutions (Violon, J. M., & Prado, N., 2024). The leadership of Women's Movements in India, shaped by elite social positions and inherited colonial ideologies, continues to engage with religion and secularism in ways that reflect their predominantly urban, upper-caste, Hindu, English-speaking, and professionally educated backgrounds, limiting their ability to fully address religious and social diversity in postcolonial India (Rathnam, R., 2024). India's ancient Vaidik education emphasized holistic development, ethical values, and cultural preservation, while NEP 2020 focuses on flexibility, inclusivity, and skill development. Both have distinct strengths in pedagogy, curriculum, and societal impact. Integrating traditional wisdom with modern approaches can create a balanced, future-ready education system (Bhatt, B. S., 2025).



SUGGESTIONS

1. The concept of Shakti redefines feminine power as divine and spiritually central. Promote Shakti-based frameworks in education and leadership for women empowerment.
2. Vedic women like Gārgī and Maitreyī were acknowledged as intellectual and spiritual leaders. Include women philosophers in curricula to promote gender equality in intellectual traditions.
3. Indian education historically emphasized holistic development—moral, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual. Implement NEP 2020 in a way that revives holistic, value-based education.
4. Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model demonstrated ethical leadership and women empowerment. Use her example to shape inclusive and ethical governance education.
5. Ancient texts like Arthaśāstra and Abhijñānaśākuntalam showcase women's ethical and decision-making roles. Incorporate these texts into education to reinforce women's historical agency.
6. Many women remain unaware of or excluded from government empowerment schemes due to poor implementation. Improve awareness, simplify access, and ensure delivery of women-focused policies.

7. NEP 2020 needs deeper integration of indigenous knowledge systems and gender-sensitive pedagogy. Enhance NEP by fully integrating Bharatiya Knowledge Systems and inclusive teaching approaches.
8. Women in academia face structural barriers to leadership despite qualifications and efforts. Establish mentoring, enforce equitable hiring, and promote leadership opportunities for women.

CONCLUSION

This research offers important insights into how Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) provide a culturally relevant and spiritually nourishing foundation for leadership and women empowerment. The constructs of Shakti, Vidya, and Dharma clearly identify women's dignity, wisdom, and moral courage – as seen with Gargi, Maitreyī, and Ahilyabai Holkar – as necessary expressions of leadership assets. IKT, combined with policy and educational practices such as NEP 2020, can generate more holistic, inclusionary, and contextually applicable forms of empowerment. By addressing levels of systemic disadvantages through awareness, curriculum change, and institutional change, it is likely that gender equity can be maintained. IKT provide a critical means for transformative leadership and inclusive nation-building.

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