



Silenced Scholars: Recovering Women's Intellectual Contributions In Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the marginalization of women's intellectual contributions within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Bhakti, and indigenous traditions. Challenging the dominant perception of IKS as inherently male-dominated, the study argues that such representations are the result of historically embedded processes of erasure, patriarchal transmission, and selective canonization rather than the absence of women as knowledge producers. Drawing on the framework of epistemic injustice as theorized by Miranda Fricker (2007), the paper demonstrates how women were systematically denied recognition as credible knowers and excluded from dominant interpretive frameworks.

Through a critical analysis of textual traditions, oral knowledge systems, and socio-historical structures, the study identifies key mechanisms of silencing, including patriarchal canon formation, the privileging of written over oral knowledge, colonial epistemological interventions (as discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000), and restricted access to education and linguistic capital. It further highlights the presence of women as philosophers, poets, and custodians of indigenous knowledge, whose contributions have been marginalized or anonymised within dominant narratives.

The paper argues that recovering these "silenced scholars" is essential for achieving epistemic justice and for reconfiguring IKS as inclusive and plural knowledge systems. It calls for a reconceptualization of knowledge that values oral, experiential, and vernacular traditions, alongside a critical re-evaluation of canonical texts through feminist and decolonial lenses. By foregrounding women as active agents in knowledge production, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize knowledge systems and transform contemporary educational practices into more equitable and inclusive frameworks.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, epistemic injustice, women's knowledge, feminist epistemology, oral traditions

1. INTRODUCTION

This study begins from the premise that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)—encompassing Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Bhakti, and diverse folk traditions—have historically been represented as male-dominated intellectual domains. Such representations, however, do not simply reflect the actual distribution of intellectual labor in premodern India; rather, they are the product of historical processes of erasure, patriarchal transmission, and selective canonization (Chakrabarty, 2000; Thapar, 2013).

The apparent absence of women from canonical knowledge traditions is therefore not an indication of non-participation but of systematic marginalization within knowledge production and preservation structures. As Chakrabarty (2000) argues, the writing of history itself is shaped by power, privileging certain voices while rendering others invisible. In the context of IKS, this has meant that male-authored Sanskrit texts were elevated as authoritative, while other forms of knowledge—particularly those associated with women, vernacular traditions, and oral cultures—were either excluded or devalued.

1.1. Historical Erasure and the Politics of Knowledge

The notion of *historical erasure* refers to the processes through which certain contributions are omitted, minimized, or rendered invisible in historical narratives. In Indian intellectual history, this erasure operates at multiple levels such as:

- **Textual exclusion:** Women's works were less likely to be recorded, preserved, or transmitted within formal textual traditions.
- **Attributional erasure:** In some cases, women's contributions were absorbed into collective or male-authored traditions, obscuring individual authorship.
- **Interpretive marginalization:** Even when women appear in texts, their roles are often framed as secondary or symbolic rather than intellectual.

Romila Thapar (2013) emphasizes that the formation of historical traditions in early India involved selective preservation, where certain texts and voices were canonized while others were excluded. This process was deeply influenced by social hierarchies, including gender, which shaped what counted as legitimate knowledge.

1.2. Patriarchal Transmission and Canon Formation

Knowledge in premodern India was transmitted through institutional and social structures such as gurukulas, monastic communities, and courtly assemblies. These spaces were often gender-restrictive, limiting women's access to formal education and intellectual participation (Altekar, 1959). As a result, the transmission of knowledge became patriarchal in both structure and content because men have dominated authorship and interpretation, controlled the preservation of texts any form of intellectual authority was associated with male scholars of the upper brahminical castes. This led to what can be described as a gendered canon, in which texts produced by men were elevated as universal, while women's contributions were relegated to the margins. Over time, this canon came to define the very boundaries of Indian Knowledge Systems, reinforcing the perception of male dominance. Feminist scholars argue that canon formation is not neutral but is instead a site of power, where inclusion and exclusion reflect broader social inequalities (Harding, 1991). In the case of IKS, this has resulted in the systematic underrepresentation of women as knowledge producers.

1.3. Selective Canonization and Epistemological Hierarchies

The concept of *selective canonization* highlights how certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others. In IKS, this process has historically favoured written over oral traditions, Sanskrit over vernacular languages and Brahmanical over non-Brahmanical knowledge systems. Since women's contributions were often located in oral, vernacular, and community-based contexts, they were less likely to be canonized. Walter Ong (1982) notes that literate cultures tend to privilege written texts as more authoritative, leading to the marginalization of oral knowledge systems. This bias has had profound implications for the recognition of women's intellectual labour. Moreover, colonial scholarship further reinforced these hierarchies by codifying Indian knowledge through textual and philological methods, often ignoring living traditions and non-textual knowledge (Chakrabarty, 2000). As a result, the modern understanding of IKS has been shaped by both indigenous patriarchal structures and colonial epistemology.

1.4. "Silenced Scholars": Reframing Women's Intellectual Presence

The term "*silenced scholars*" serves as a critical intervention that challenges the narrative of absence by foregrounding two key propositions:

1.4.1 Women as Active Knowledge Producers

Women in Indian traditions were not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in its production and dissemination. Some of their roles included

- Philosophers engaging in metaphysical debates
- Poets articulating theological and ethical insights
- Teachers and spiritual guides
- Custodians of oral and ecological knowledge

This perspective aligns with feminist historiography, which seeks to recover hidden or marginalized contributions and reinsert them into historical narratives (Lerner, 1986).

1.4.2 Marginalization through Structural Processes

Despite their participation, women's contributions were often positioned as secondary or peripheral and thus marginalised, with many women contributing anonymously or entirely being excluded from canonical texts and institutional memory. This marginalization reflects broader patterns of gendered power relations, where access to knowledge production and validation is unevenly distributed.

1.5. Epistemic Injustice and the Denial of Women as Knowers

The marginalization of women in IKS can be understood through the framework of epistemic injustice, as theorized by Miranda Fricker (2007). Fricker identifies two primary forms – testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial Injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unjustly deflated due to prejudice. By not taking women's intellectual contributions seriously and by undermining their authority, IKS has participated in testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical Injustice arises when there is a lack of interpretive resources to make sense of certain experiences. In IKS, women's perspectives were not adequately represented in dominant frameworks and consequently, their knowledge could not be fully articulated or recognized within existing epistemologies. Together, these forms of injustice resulted in what Fricker (2007) describes as a structural exclusion from the domain of knowledge production.

1.6. Toward Epistemic Recovery

Recognizing women as “silenced scholars” is not merely an act of historical correction but a critical epistemological intervention. It involves expanding the definition of knowledge to include oral, embodied, and experiential forms, re-evaluating canonical texts through a gender-sensitive lens and recovering marginalized voices through interdisciplinary research. Such efforts align with decolonial and feminist projects that seek to democratize knowledge and challenge dominant epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011).

2. HISTORICAL PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

2.1 Vedic and Upanishadic Traditions

The presence of women in early Indian intellectual traditions is most visibly recorded in Vedic and Upanishadic literature, where figures such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi emerge as significant contributors to philosophical discourse. Their participation challenges the widespread assumption that ancient Indian knowledge systems were exclusively male domains. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Gargi Vachaknavi is depicted as a formidable interlocutor in the royal court of King Janaka, where she engages in a metaphysical debate with the sage Yajnavalkya. Her line of questioning—particularly her inquiry into the ultimate substratum of reality (*Brahman*)—demonstrates not only intellectual rigor but also a sophisticated grasp of ontological speculation (Olivelle, 1998). Gargi’s philosophical intervention reflects an advanced engagement with abstract metaphysics, positioning her as an equal participant in elite intellectual traditions. Similarly, Maitreyi’s dialogue with Yajnavalkya foregrounds epistemological concerns about immortality and the limitations of material wealth. Her assertion that material possessions cannot lead to *amṛtatva* (immortality) reflects a deeply philosophical orientation toward knowledge as a means of transcendence rather than accumulation (Radhakrishnan, 1953). As Altekar (1959) notes, such representations suggest that women in the Vedic period were not only educated but also actively engaged in śāstric (scholarly) debates, although this participation may have been limited to specific social strata.

However, it is important to recognize that these examples, while significant, are exceptions preserved within textual traditions, raising questions about the broader accessibility of knowledge for women. Feminist historians argue that the visibility of Gargi and Maitreyi should not obscure the structural limitations imposed by patriarchal norms, which increasingly restricted women’s participation in formal learning over time (Thapar, 2013).

2.2 Buddhist and Jain Traditions

The Buddhist and Jain traditions provide more explicit evidence of women’s intellectual and spiritual agency, particularly through texts such as the *Therīgāthā*, a canonical collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns. This text is remarkable not only for its antiquity but also for its status as one of the earliest recorded corpora of female-authored literature in the world (Blackstone, 1998).

The verses in the *Therīgāthā* articulate a wide range of themes, including:

- Self-realization: Many nuns describe their journey toward enlightenment, emphasizing introspection and detachment from worldly suffering.

- Ethical inquiry: The poems often engage with moral dilemmas, highlighting the transformative power of Buddhist teachings.
- Social critique: Several verses critique the constraints of domestic life and patriarchal expectations, framing renunciation as both a spiritual and social act.

For instance, some nuns recount their experiences of widowhood, loss, or domestic oppression, transforming these personal narratives into philosophical reflections on impermanence and liberation (Murcott, 1991). This blending of lived experience and philosophical insight aligns with feminist standpoint theory, which emphasizes the epistemic value of marginalized perspectives (Harding, 1991).

In Jain traditions, women also participated as ascetics and teachers, though their voices are less directly preserved. As Dundas (2002) notes, Jain texts often mediate women's contributions through male-authored narratives, indicating a gendered asymmetry in textual preservation. Nevertheless, the presence of female renunciants underscores the plurality of intellectual participation in non-Brahmanical traditions.

2.3 The Bhakti Movement: Devotion as Intellectual and Social Intervention

The Bhakti movement represents a transformative phase in Indian intellectual history, characterized by the vernacularisation of knowledge and the democratization of spiritual discourse. Within this context, women's voices gained unprecedented visibility, particularly through devotional poetry that combined theological reflection with social critique. Figures such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Andal exemplify the intellectual richness of women's contributions during this period. Mirabai's poetry, composed in Rajasthani and Braj, articulates an intense personal devotion to Krishna while simultaneously rejecting the constraints of royal and marital expectations. Her refusal to conform to patriarchal norms can be interpreted as a form of spiritual resistance, wherein devotion becomes a means of asserting autonomy (Hawley, 2005). Akka Mahadevi's *vachanas* (prose-poems) in Kannada challenge both material attachment and gender norms. Her rejection of clothing, often interpreted symbolically, reflects a radical critique of bodily and social constraints, positioning her as a philosophical dissenter within a devotional framework (Ramanujan, 1981). Andal, the only female Alvar saint in the Tamil Vaishnava tradition, composes highly sophisticated devotional poetry that integrates theological insight with poetic innovation. Her works, such as the *Tiruppavai*, demonstrate an intricate understanding of ritual, devotion, and divine love, contributing to the development of Vaishnava theology (Narayanan, 1994).

Collectively, these figures illustrate how the Bhakti movement created alternative epistemic spaces, where women could articulate intellectual and spiritual authority outside the constraints of formal institutions. As Ramanujan (1981) argues, Bhakti poetry represents a "counter-tradition" that challenges hierarchical structures of knowledge and access.

2.4 Folk and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Beyond textual traditions, women have historically played a central role in the preservation and transmission of folk and indigenous knowledge systems, which are often rooted in everyday practices and community life. These knowledge systems encompass a wide range of domains, including herbal medicine and healing practices akin to home remedies, agricultural knowledge and seed preservation, ritual and ceremonial traditions and storytelling, folklore, and ecological knowledge. Such forms of knowledge are typically transmitted orally across generations, making women key custodians of cultural memory and ecological sustainability (Shiva, 1989). For example, rural women's knowledge of medicinal plants reflects a deep understanding of local ecosystems, often developed through centuries

of observation and practice. However, the epistemic status of these knowledge systems has been historically undermined by the privileging of written, codified, and institutionalized forms of knowledge. As Ong (1982) argues, the transition from orality to literacy fundamentally reshapes perceptions of authority and legitimacy, often marginalizing oral traditions as “informal” or “unscientific.”

Feminist scholars contend that this marginalization reflects not only epistemological bias but also gendered hierarchies, wherein knowledge associated with women is systematically devalued (Shiva, 1989). Recovering these traditions, therefore, requires a reconceptualization of knowledge itself—one that recognizes the validity of embodied, experiential, and community-based epistemologies.

3. MECHANISMS OF SILENCING: STRUCTURES OF EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION

The marginalization of women within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is not incidental but is produced through historically embedded structures of epistemic exclusion. These structures operate through interrelated processes—canon formation, epistemological hierarchies, colonial mediation, and institutional barriers—that collectively determine whose knowledge is preserved, legitimized, and transmitted. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for uncovering how women’s intellectual contributions were systematically silenced.

3.1 Patriarchal Canon Formation

The construction of authoritative knowledge within IKS has historically involved processes of selection, preservation, and interpretation, largely controlled by male elites. Canon formation is not a neutral or purely intellectual process; rather, it is deeply shaped by social power relations, including gender (Thapar, 2013). In early Indian contexts, textual authority was often linked to Sanskrit literacy, brahmanical scholarship and institutional access (gurukulas, courts, monastic centers) which often excluded women and both men and women from the lower castes. These domains were predominantly male-dominated, which meant that men controlled the mechanisms through which knowledge was recorded and transmitted. As a result, texts authored by men were more likely to be preserved across generations, commented upon and expanded and integrated into the canon of “authoritative knowledge”. But women’s contributions, by contrast, were often by being excluded from formal textualization, subsumed under collective or anonymous traditions and reinterpreted through male-authored frameworks. Romila Thapar (2013) argues that historical traditions in India were shaped by selective preservation, where certain narratives were privileged while others were marginalized. This selective canonization created what may be termed a gendered archive, in which women’s intellectual presence was either minimized or erased. From a feminist epistemological perspective, this process reflects what Sandra Harding (1991) describes as the “partiality of dominant knowledge systems,” wherein knowledge produced by socially dominant groups is universalized, while marginalized perspectives are excluded. Thus, patriarchal canon formation not only silenced women historically but also shaped modern perceptions of IKS as inherently upper class -male-centric.

3.2 Oral–Written Divide and Knowledge Hierarchies

A critical mechanism of epistemic exclusion lies in the hierarchical distinction between oral and written knowledge systems. Across many intellectual traditions, written texts have been privileged as more stable, reliable, and authoritative, while oral knowledge has been viewed as ephemeral and less rigorous (Ong, 1982). In the Indian context, this divide has had significant gendered implications. Women’s knowledge was often transmitted through oral storytelling, ritual practices, songs, folklore, community traditions and embodied practices such as healing and agriculture. Because these forms of knowledge

were rarely codified in written texts, they were excluded from formal systems of validation and scholarship. Ong (1982) notes that literate cultures tend to associate writing with permanence and authority, leading to the systematic devaluation of oral traditions. This epistemological bias contributed to:

- The marginalization of women's knowledge as "informal" or "folk"
- The exclusion of experiential and embodied knowledge from academic discourse
- The perception that legitimate knowledge must be text-based and institutional

Feminist scholars argue that this hierarchy reflects not only epistemological preferences but also gendered power structures, as women were more likely to be situated within oral and domestic spheres (Shiva, 1989). Consequently, the oral-written divide functioned as a mechanism through which women's intellectual labour was rendered invisible.

3.3 Colonial Epistemology and the Reinvention of Tradition

The advent of colonial rule introduced new epistemological frameworks that further entrenched existing hierarchies within IKS. Colonial scholars, particularly Orientalists, sought to systematize Indian knowledge through textual and philological methods, privileging Sanskritic texts as "classical" sources of knowledge, Brahmanical traditions as representative of Indian culture and written archives as the primary basis of historical reconstruction. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues, colonial modernity involved the imposition of European categories of knowledge, which reconfigured indigenous traditions into static, text-bound systems. This process, often referred to as the "reinvention of tradition," resulted in the selective elevation of certain knowledge forms while marginalizing others. As a consequence, since women's knowledge were profound in vernacular and oral traditions, where women were more active, they were devalued leading to women's contributions being excluded from colonial archives and scholarship because Indian intellectual history was reconstructed as predominantly Brahmanical, male and textual. Moreover, colonial epistemology intersected with indigenous patriarchal structures, producing a double marginalization of women's knowledge. As a result, modern representations of IKS often reflect a hybrid bias, shaped by both colonial and patriarchal modes of exclusion.

3.4 Educational and Linguistic Exclusion

Another critical mechanism of silencing lies in the restricted access to formal education and linguistic capital. Historically, educational institutions in India—whether Vedic schools, monastic centres, or later colonial institutions—were largely inaccessible to women (Altekar, 1959). This exclusion had far-reaching consequences for women's participation in knowledge production. Limited access to literacy and formal training meant that women were less likely to produce written texts, which were the primary medium of intellectual recognition. Furthermore, without institutional affiliation or textual output, women's voices were largely absent from scholarly debates and intellectual networks. This lack of visible authorship contributed to the perception that women were consumers rather than producers of knowledge, reinforcing gender stereotypes about intellectual capacity. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is useful here, as it highlights how access to education and language shapes one's ability to participate in knowledge production (Bourdieu, 1986). Women's exclusion from these resources resulted in their systematic marginalization within epistemic structures. Additionally, linguistic hierarchies—particularly the privileging of Sanskrit and later English—further limited women's participation. Since women were more likely to operate within vernacular languages, their contributions were often excluded from elite intellectual discourse.

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARD EPISTEMIC JUSTICE IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

This study has argued that the marginalization of women within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is not a reflection of their absence but the outcome of historically embedded structures of epistemic exclusion. Across Vedic, Buddhist, Bhakti, and indigenous traditions, evidence demonstrates that women actively participated as philosophers, poets, teachers, and custodians of knowledge. Yet, their intellectual contributions were systematically obscured through processes of patriarchal canon formation, the privileging of written over oral knowledge, colonial epistemological restructuring, and restricted access to education (Thapar, 2013; Ong, 1982; Chakrabarty, 2000). Rather than viewing women as peripheral or absent, this study positions them as integral yet marginalized knowledge producers, whose exclusion reflects broader dynamics of power and representation

Addressing these exclusions requires a transformative epistemic shift. First, there is a need to expand the definition of knowledge to include oral, embodied, and experiential forms, thereby recognizing the legitimacy of traditions historically associated with women (Ong, 1982; Shiva, 1989). Second, canonical texts must be reinterpreted through feminist and decolonial lens, allowing for the recovery of marginalized voices and alternative narratives (Harding, 1991). Third, educational frameworks must move toward inclusive and critical pedagogies that encourage students to interrogate whose knowledge is represented and whose is excluded.

Ultimately, recovering women's intellectual contributions is not simply an act of historical correction but a project of epistemic justice and knowledge democratization. By recognizing women as active agents in the production and transmission of knowledge, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems—one that challenges dominant narratives and opens up new possibilities for research, pedagogy, and social transformation.

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