SITUATING FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS

Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) comprises of ancient texts, traditions and philosophical ideas transmitted orally, practices, codes of conducts and pedagogical constructs. History has played a crucial role in determining Indian culture, religious practices and shaping identity. Therefore, Indian Knowledge System becomes an archive. However, these archives have primarily been curated and interpreted through patriarchal perspectives. Therefore, it is imperative to trace the gendered epistemology which the wide spectrum of knowledge has. This paper aims to historicize the gendered epistemology and conceptualize the origins of gender inequality in the Indian society. The paper identifies the dominant narratives in classical Indian literature and foundational philosophical texts which contributes to women's position at the margins in the society. Lastly, the paper identifies the transition from the classical and Vedic age into the post-classical and modern age, which the paper tries to elucidate.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Vedic, Tradition, Knowledge, History

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I. WOMEN IN CLASSICAL INDIAN LITERATURE

There is a vast literature on the position of women in the classical Indian literature. The scholarship prior to the emergence of feminist historiography was driven, ideologically, to assert the superiority of Indian culture and therefore laboured to construct a glorious past in which women were celebrated and the gender-equations in the society were egalitarian. This entire project was known as the Altekarian paradigm, called so after the book by the historian A S Altekar called *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*.[1] Feminist revisionist historiography challenges this paradigm, most notably in the works of Uma Chakravarti and Lata Mani.[2] However, the following discussion on the history of women's social positioning is largely drawn from the work of Upinder Singh.

The earliest time period which traced the position of women in India is roughly from 2000 B.C. or during the Rig Vedic period. The information regarding the position of women in India cannot be proven with certainty because the Harappan period has not left enough literary or archaeological data for that purpose. The only available evidence of that period was the terracotta figurines of female deities, which they probably used to worship, but the overall position of women in the society of that period cannot be deciphered conclusively from such limited sources. Various other terracotta figurines depicted ordinary mortal women engaged in various kinds of food processing activities like kneading and grinding. Among these, some depicted motherhood including representation of pregnant women and women carrying infants close to their breasts. From these sources, historians can deconstruct women's position during this period conclusively. Thus, when we historicise the actual understanding of the position of women in India, we infer that it can be located from the Rig Vedic period.

II. REINTERPRETING THE VEDIC AGE

Historians have often concluded that the Vedic age is considered the golden age for women. The 19th-century socio-religious reformers often pointed out the Vedic goddesses, the hymns composed by women, women sages, rituals where women took part along with their husbands, women participated in chariot races and social gatherings in order to prove the British that women of India were in a better position in the ancient times than their Western counterparts. However, recent historical studies have tended to think otherwise. Although Rig Veda mentions the achievements of certain women, they usually belong to the higher classes while ignoring the experiences of women who belong to the margins. Certain female goddesses were celebrated, but it was not as essential or infamous as their male counterparts. The number of hymns attributed to women were relatively small, and so was the number of women sages. They had minimal access to education, and women priests were not mentioned in the Rig Veda. They participated with their husbands in various sacrifices but did not have

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[1] A.S. Altekar, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation* (Benaras: The Culture Publication House, 1938).
[2] Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).
   Mani, Lata. "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 119–56. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354153.

the right to perform such sacrifices independently, nor could they be the receivers or givers of *dana* and *dakshina*.[3]

In the early Vedic patriarchal society women did not reap the benefits of many material resources. Through the ingraining of norms of what was considered to be the proper behaviour, reproductive resources and their sexuality were controlled. The birth of a daughter during this period was abhorred. Thus all the prayers of the Rig Veda were dedicated to sons and not daughters. Various types of marriages, like monogamy, polygyny, and polyandry, are also mentioned. We find historical references of women choosing their husbands; widow remarriages and unmarried women in the society. In the later Vedic era, which started from 1500 BC onwards, women were exposed to severe criticism as well as celebration. The *Satapatha Brahmana* (5.2.1.10) mentions that the wife is half her husband and completes him, and certain rituals for obtaining a learned daughter can be found at the *Brihadaryanaka Upanishad* (6.4.17).[4] On the other hand, women's education was restricted as they were forbidden to study the Vedas. The Vedas were only read by men of the upper-class society.

Women were also criticised for their bodily experiences. The menstrual blood of a woman was considered polluting, and they were not allowed to take part in any sacrifices during that period. They were expected to perform a docile role as the *Satapatha Brahmana* (10.5.2.9.) which defines a 'good woman'. The definition of a good woman was one who is able to delight her husband, give birth to male children, and remain submissive to the husband. The birth of a daughter has been deplored in the Atharva Veda (1.14.3), which also states that spinsterhood is the greatest curse for a woman. The *Aitareya Brahmana* considers women to be the greatest source of misery and that the only savior of a family is the son.

During the 6th century BCE, regulating women's sexuality and reproduction became significant for the purpose of transferring property along patrilineal lines and for the perpetuation and maintenance of the endogamous caste structure. This was an effective means for maintaining control, strengthening patriarchy within family and emphasising codes of conduct relating to the virtues of women and marriages. The Buddhist texts informs that the most approved form of marriage is the one which is approved by the parents and where both the bride and groom are chaste and young. The Buddhist text *Vinaya Pitaka* mentions ten different kinds of union between a woman and a man. The *chhandavasini* union was considered the union where the woman stays with a man by her own wish. Except the *chhandavasini* union, all other unions involved either a sort of financial exchange or the woman remained in a subordinate position.[5] On the other hand, the *Dharmasutras* mention eight different forms of marriages, the *Brahma* being considered the most celebrated form while the *Paishacha* being the most criticised.[6] It's classification of various forms of marriages suggests the prevalence of various kinds of marriage practices, including bride price and dowry. The *Gautama Dharmasutra* (18.20-23) identifies that it is sinful for a father

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[3] Cited in Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson India, 2009), 193.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, 295.
[6] *Dharmashastra*, the Sanskrit text dealing with dharma, are divided into three parts. The first two parts that were composed between 600-300 BCE are collectively called the *Dharmasutras*. The *Dharmasutras* are a part of both, the *Dharmashastra* corpus as well as the Vedanga literature.

if he does not marry off his daughter within three months after she has attained puberty.[7] According to *BaudhayanaDharmasutra* (4.1.12), a father should marry his daughter to any man, even if he does not possess any qualities, rather than keep her at home. Although the early *Dharmasutras* did not recommend widow remarriage, it specified the time period that the wife should wait for her husband to return before she could remarry.[8] In matters related to *niyoga*, which is the ancient custom of a wife living with her brother-in-law or any other man in order to give birth to sons, these early texts have varied attitudes.[9] While *Gautama Dharmasutra* (2.2.40) accepts such sons to be the legal heirs of property, the *BaudhyanaDharmasutras* does not.

In matters related to property inheritance, both the Brahmanical and Buddhist texts have similar beliefs. The Buddhist texts state that the property of both parents should go to the sons; if they do not have a son, then the property should go to the next of kin or the state. The *Dharamsutras* included the man's brother, son, grandson, and great-grandson. However, it does mention daughters as inheritors, but it does not mention anything about wives. There was also a category of property that the wife brought from her paternal house called the*stridhana*.[10] Although the *Dharmasutras* believed that this property was transferred from mother to daughter, it rejected the idea of it being the permanent property of the wife.

A significant common feature between the Vedic era and 6th century BCE was that the people longed for sons, not daughters. Both in Buddhist and Brahmanical texts, preference has been given to sons over daughters in all aspects of life. Even the Buddhist text *SamyuttaNikaya* shows that Buddha himself supports the birth of a daughter because, in the future, she will become a loyal wife and give birth to male offspring.

III. HISTORICISING THE GENDERED EPISTEMOLOGY THROUGH PHILOSOPHICAL AND FOUNDATIONAL TEXTS

Texts like *Manusmriti* has both praised and abhorred women. When discussing the husband's role in guarding his wife, *Manusmriti*describes women as hard-hearted, fickle, and lustful. On the other hand, the text also discusses how a man should respect women and states that it pleases the Gods where the women are being respected. It emphasises how a man should control his wife and her property but also records that she could not be sold or treated like cattle. The *Dharmasastra* works of this period have shown the subordinate nature of women, which can be seen from their withdrawal from the public domain, increased dependence on male relatives, and limited access to education.[11] Sons are preferred over daughters, and women are relegated within the domestic spheres. Restrictions on their sexuality can be

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7 Cited in Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson India, 2009), 296.

8 Niyoga is an ancient Indian custom where the widow starts to live with her brother-in-law or any other man so that she could give birth to a son.

9 Ibid.

10 *Stridhana* literally means 'women's property' but generally referred to moveable property of a special nature that was given to a woman all throughout her lifetime. These gifts include clothes, jewellery, household articles among many other things which were given to the woman at the time of marriage by her parents or her other relatives on other occasions. As per Manu Smriti (9.194) it includes six types gifts including the gifts received before the nuptial fire, given as a token of love, given during bridal procession, or given by her father, mother or brother. However, it does not include inherited properties or self-earned properties.

11 Cited in Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson India, 2009), 418.

through their increasing emphasis on chastity and pre-puberty marriages (Manu 9.94).[12] Several Smritis have promoted the essentialising nature of motherhood and stated that women miss the opportunity of becoming a mothers at every menstruation. This was also considered as *brunahatya*.[13] It has been noted that in matters of inheritance, women of this period did not possess the right to inherit property except for *stridhana*. Patriarchal inheritance continued to dominate the societal norms.

Manusmriti went on to discuss various reasons behind a man being able to abandon his wife. One of the reasons is the state of barrenness. It informs that the husband is allowed to abandon his barren wife in the eighth year. If any child dies, then the husband can abandon the wife in the tenth year, and one who has only produced female children could be abandoned by the husband in the eleventh year.[14] All these instances situate women in a precarious position because of their biological and social experiences. It also states that if a wife speaks harshly to her husband, then she should be abandoned immediately. The *Yajnavalkya Smriti* speaks in favour of polygyny, but the *Manusmriti* has promoted monogamy as the ideal form of marriage for a woman. It has even discouraged widow remarriage and stated that the widows should follow certain strictures throughout their life. It does not even support *niyoga* and considers it as *pashu dharma* (the dharma of animals).[15]

The position of women during the Gupta period did not witness much change from the preceding period. We find images of women, mostly queens of the contemporary Gupta monarchs, in many coins from that period and also the names of the various Vakataka queens in connection to various land grants from that period.[16] However, the experiences of women belonging to the middle class and lower socio-economic groups were far different from royal women. The inscriptions do not provide information regarding ordinary women of this period. However literary sources like the *Dharmasastras* of the period, such as *Narada*, *Brihaspati*, and Katyana's *Kamasutra* were the primary sources. The *Dharmasastras* of the period spoke in favour of pre-puberty marriages, also supported by Katyana.[17] The *Kamasutra* even promotes the idea of marrying a virgin girl of the same varna if the husband plans to gain fame and social approval.[18] *Kamasutra* gives the following description of an

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[12] Ibid, 420.

[13] Ibid.
Brunahatya means killing of the embryo. Several Smriti literatures that were composed between 200 BCE and 300 CE have promoted the idea that a girl has missed an opportunity of bearing child at every menstruation and such a situation has been considered to be equivalent of killing of an embryo or Brunahatya.

[14] Cited in Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson India, 2009), 420.

[15] Ibid. *Yajnavalkya Smriti* is one of the texts of Hinduism that is related to Dharma. It was composed between 3rd and 5th Century CE and belongs to the tradition of the *Dharmashastra*. The author of the text is unknown, but its naming has been attributed to the great sage *Yajnavalkya* of the Vedic period. *Pashu dharma* means the dharma of the animals. The ancient tradition of niyoga, where the widow cohabits with her brother-in-law or other male person in order to give birth to a son, was not supported by the *Manusmriti* and considered it as a despicable practice or dharma of the animals (pashu dharma).

[16] The Vakatakas were a dynasty that flourished in the Deccan region from mid-3rd Century to early part of the 6th Century CE. In course of their reigns, they established matrimonial alliance with the Gupta dynasty as well when Rudrasena II, son of Prithvishena I, married Prabhavati Gupta who was the daughter of the Chandragupta II.

[17] Cited in Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson India, 2009), 505.

[18] Ibid, 506

ideal wife: a good wife serves her husband diligently, keeps the house clean and well decorated, and manages the servants and household finances diligently. She is dutiful and submissive. She waits for her husband and attends any social events after her husband gives her permission. When the husband is away, she leads a very restrained life, wears minimum ornaments, and performs fasts and religious rituals. If her husband has another wife, she must also look after her as a sister or mother, depending upon her age.[19]The *Sashtras* of this period did not support widow remarriage. While the *Dharmasastra* believes that a widow should lead a very restricted life, the *Brihaspati Smriti* (verses 483-84) states that a widow should burn herself with her husband on the same funeral pyre just like Madri, wife of King Pandu, did in the Mahabharata. However, women's position improved in terms of inheritance rights, particularly associated to various forms of *stridhana*.[20]

IV. THE POST-CLASSICAL AND THE MODERN PERIOD

During the early medieval period, roughly from the 9th to 13th century, the condition of women continued to remain in a subordinate position. The only exception to this was their improvement in matters related to inheritance. In this period the right to property inheritance of male relatives were given to women. The purpose was to preserve the property. Widows were also given the right to inherit her deceased husband's property, provided he died sonless. Daughters were now given the right to inherit the properties of a widow.[21]

The smritis of this period reduced the marriage age for women between six and eight or before they attained puberty. Remarriage was allowed but only under certain circumstances, including instances of the husband's death; the husband deserting the wife; if the husband was biologically impotent or lived a life of a recluse. The practice of *sati* was still in vogue, but whether it was obligatory, or voluntary is still a matter of debate. The wife was considered to follow the husband's authority and was expected to remain at his service as a servant. They had minimal access to education, and only women of the royal family or female representatives of the court had the chance to attain an education. However, they were still deprived of possessing the right to study the Vedas.[22]

During the Sultanate period, the position of women remained pretty much the same as that of its preceding period except for the fact that the *purdah or* veiling of the face of women in front of outsiders, became in vogue. However, during the early medieval period, we do not come across the concept of *purdah* or veiling of women. A 10th century Arab traveller, Abu Zaid, pointed out that Indian princes allowed women to come to their court and meet with the people present there, including the foreigners, without any *purdah*. But the Sultanate period witnessed its growth and popularity, especially among upper-class women. The reasons behind this were many, including hiding the women from the invaders who usually used to take away the women as a prize; some, who considered it venerable, tried to copy it while others followed it due to religious justifications. Initially, this practice was prevalent in countries like Greece and Iran, from where the Turks and the Arabs brought to India.[23]

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[19] Ibid, 507
[20] Ibid.
[21] Satish Chandra, *History of Medieval India (800-1700)* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014), 47
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

The Mughal period also witnessed the dependency of women on husbands, fathers, or sons and the harmful effects that a patriarchal society had on all over India. However, despite such a situation, there was a wide discrepancy in the lives of upper-class and ordinary working women. Despite being confined to the inmates of *haram* and sharing their husbands with multiple wives and mistresses, the upper-class women led luxurious lives and received education. Some of these women, like Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar, Rani Durgawati of Gondwana, Nur Jahan, Jahanara, also played active in politics. However, one of their significant roles during this period was to give moral and cultural tone to the society. They influenced patronage and royal tone and also patronised various singers and artists of that period. Many of them, like Jahanara, had literary credits to her name, which she wrote under the pen name 'Makhfi'.[24]Women continued to be the victims of various social evils of the age. They were victims of child marriages, and they were even denied the right to inherit her parent's property. The common women were engaged in various kinds of work, including spinning and building. The wage discrepancy between men and women during this period was huge. Women worked the same amount of labour as men but received meagre wages than men. The muslin work of Bengal and the *Chikan* work of Awadh were confined mainly to women because of their good, fine eyesight and delicate fingers. All of these women worked under the strict supervision of a merchant or a master craftsman.[25]

The colonial period, however, saw major transformations in child marriage and age of consent, which are important to refer to, for determining women's status in India. In the colonial period, child marriage became a debatable issue. Various social, cultural and legal trajectories were involved in this debate. Child marriage was perceived to be detrimental to the health of girls. Various Indian reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy vehemently protested against this. Consequently, 'The Age of Consent Act' of 1891 was introduced.[26] This was a significant legislative initiative addressing the child marriage. According to this legislation, the age of consent for girls increased from ten to twelve years. This legislation was initiated as an aftermath of Phulmoni Das's death. Phulmoni Das was a young girl who died as a result of the bodily injuries inflicted upon her by her husband. This case became instrumental in the implementation of the Age of Consent Act of 1891. Relevant to this, 'The Child Marriage Restraint Act', also known as the 'Sarda Act', was introduced in 1929 by the Imperial Legislative Council.[27] This Act regulated the minimum age of marriage for girls as 14 and boys as 18. This was further amended by raising the age of marriage for girls as 18 and 21 for boy. This was replaced with 'The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006' with new provisions.[28]

Katherine Mayolocated the origin of social evils such as child marriage.[29] Mayo's criticism is based on the fact that these evils generated from the intrinsic backward culture of the Hindu society. Mayo's book primarily became a colonial discourse that identified India as incapable of self-governance. However, Mrinalini Sinha's study of Katherine Mayo's Mother India critiques that despite the colonial discourse that Mayo's book attempted to carry forward, it

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[24] Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanate to the Mughals Part - II* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2009), 371

[25] Ibid.

[26] "The Age of Consent Act "(1891).

[27] "The Child Marriage Restraint Act" (1929).

[28] "The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act" (2006).

[29] Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (New York: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

becomes a point of rupture in the history of colonial rule.[30] According to Sinha, the private and the public boundaries were dissolved. Women, who were considered to be a part of the 'private' sphere of the community, started identifying their individual rights and demanded it in the public sphere. There was a break in private and public distinction used by the community to maintain control. Mrinalini Sinha examines how women, irrespective of class, caste and community, initiated the demand for legislation against child marriage, thus beginning a new counter narrative.

The historical evidence of the women's social, familial, and economic experiences explores complex intersections of religion, society and law in India. The historical trajectory of India becomes a context towards shaping women's lived experiences particularly experiences socially, culturally and economicallyculminating into their subordination in general.

V. FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION OF IKS

Feminist scholars, particularly from postcolonial contexts, have increasingly interrogated these systems to reveal the deep structures of gender bias embedded within them, while simultaneously reclaiming spaces for women's agency, plurality, and resistance. Feminist reinterpretations of IKS aim not simply to critique patriarchy but use it as a mode of subversion by challenging hegemonic knowledge structures, recovering marginalized voices, and reconstructing alternative epistemologies that truly voice women's experiences. Feminist scholars, particularly Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Sangari, re-engage with IKS to challenge and dismantle patriarchal norms. Through an analysis of textual traditions, socio-religious practices, and cultural representations, these theorists have reinterpretated IKS in order to contribute to both historical revisionism and contemporary movements for gender justice. Feminist scholars argue that IKS—has codified patriarchy under the guise of divine order, moral righteousness, and cosmic balance. At the same time, IKS is not monolithic. It also contains counter-hegemonic strands—such as folk traditions, oral narratives, and Bhakti literature—that feminist thinkers have highlighted to show the possibilities of resistance and subversion from within. Many ancient Indian texts, including the *Manusmriti, Ramayana, and Mahabharata*, have been key instruments in institutionalizing gender roles. In the *Manusmriti*, women's dependence on male guardianship—father, husband, son—is presented as a normative social order. The stridharma or "woman's duty" is often glorified as self-sacrificial, chaste, and obedient. Feminist reinterpretations, however, reveal the construction of these codes. Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy lays bare how control over women's sexuality was essential for maintaining caste purity and social hierarchy. In this view, the subordination of women was not incidental but central to the ideological and structural consolidation of early Brahmanical society.Patriarchy in India is intricately intertwined with caste hierarchies, a fact central to feminist critiques of IKS. Kumkum Sangari, too, highlights how colonial reformmovements often reinforced caste and gender hierarchies even while claiming to modernize Indian society. For instance, the campaign against satiwas framed in terms of saving upper-caste women, while the experiences and voices of lower-caste or rural women were ignored.

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[30]   Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 24.

Feminist reinterpretations of Indian Knowledge System, therefore, does not deconstruct the patriarchy in the repository of knowledge in Indian practices, traditions and norms, they also try to counter these by framing an alternative epistemology. Both the theorists, Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Sangari, have tried to interpret the knowledge system with the intention of rewriting or changing historiography. It moved towards rewriting historiography in such a way that it will focus on the lived experiences of Indian women. Theorists have also tried to form counter-narratives or counter-cannons of women's writing and criticism so that the dominant master discourse is challenged through an objective and universal perspective. The feminist intervention of Indian Knowledge System, therefore, identifies a heterogenous, non-hierarchical and objective discourse.

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