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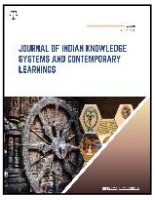

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Reclaiming Women's Voices in Indian Knowledge Systems: A Feminist Re-reading of Agency

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ABSTRACT

Women's epistemic agency and their contributions are still an remain under-investigated topic, even as Indian Knowledge Systems are being re-emphasized again. This study uncovers a feminist perspective on the production, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, and how this knowledge is validated and recognized in different epistemic contexts. The study is based on contemporary epistemologies and feminist theories, as well as traditional Indian epistemology and Indian feminist and anti-caste thinking and research, through an approach of theory building. The proposed framework highlights that women's involvement in knowledge practices does not lead to institutional validation, formal recognition, and epistemic agency. Rather, their knowledge, power and visibility are determined by the intersection of sociological, cultural and institutional structures. The framework is practically useful to researchers and educators who would like to study women's contributions to knowledge that lie outside the traditional texts and would like to advocate for more inclusive efforts of catalyzing the revitalization of Indian Knowledge Systems. The originality of its five-dimensional approach goes beyond the focus on the role of women in the production of knowledge, to the investigation of social and epistemic processes that influence the agency, authority, recognition, and visibility of women.



Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems; women's epistemic agency; integrative theory-building; knowledge production; knowledge transmission; epistemic injustice; intersectionality.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been receiving renewed scholarly, institutional, and policy attention in India. Spread across multidisciplinary fields encompassing philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, governance, linguistics, ecology, architecture, education, and the arts (Prakash, 2025), this renewed interest in IKS has been associated with efforts to recover indigenous intellectual traditions, critically engage with epistemological frameworks, and reposition India's intellectual traditions within present-day academic discourse. The announcement of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

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marks a crucial milestone in this revival (Yadav & Ranjan, 2025). This policy envisions IKS as a dynamic source of knowledge that can help resolve contemporary challenges in education and other fields (UGC, 2023).

Despite this resurgence, women's epistemic contributions in IKS remain relatively underexamined (Pandit, 2025). Although scholars have documented individual women's contributions to Indian intellectual traditions, much of this work remains dispersed across disciplinary fields (Ghosh Samanta, 2026). In contrast, little is known about women's contributions to the production and transmission of informal and community-based knowledge forms in which women played significant roles as custodians and practitioners (Dixit, 2026). Moreover, the intersecting structures of caste, class, region, language, religion, and social location that determined women's access to knowledge and epistemic authority (Collins, 2019) need greater attention if the objective is to reclaim women's epistemic agency in IKS.

Against this backdrop, this conceptual paper argues that only documenting individual female scholars or spiritual figures may not reclaim women's voices within IKS. It needs to examine women as epistemic agents not only across textual traditions but also across informal and community-based knowledge traditions, with an intersectional perspective.

The research questions, therefore, are: How can the epistemic agency of women within Indian Knowledge Systems be conceptualized beyond historical representation? What social and epistemic processes influence the production, validation, transmission, and recognition of women's knowledge?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Indian Knowledge Systems

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) comprises a diverse intellectual, philosophical, scientific, artistic, social, and practical tradition developed in the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. It is deeply ingrained in ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Smritis, and classical works (Prakash, 2025) and was transmitted through textual, oral, institutional, community-based, and embodied practices. For the present study, these epistemological traditions' significance lies not only in their plurality of valid means of knowing, but also in understanding who historically held the authority to organize, interpret, and transmit such knowledge.

Knowledge Production and Transmission in IKS

Another crucial aspect of IKS is knowledge production and preservation. The social organization of ancient knowledge in India has two branches: the classical (*Shastriya*) and folk (*Loka*) traditions . They do not contradict; instead, they form a fluid, complementary spectrum.

Classical knowledge production/organization focused on documenting knowledge and disseminating it through *guru-shishya parampara* (Asagar, 2025), a practice of spiritual and practical knowledge transfer through oral tradition (*shruti*) and direct monitoring, and holistic growth (Namhata & Behera, 2023). This study raises questions about women's access to those structures and their authority within them.

Ghosh Samanta (2026) identified prominent female scholars within the formal knowledge system who participated in philosophical debates and erudite conversations. In their research, Macdonell and Keith (1912) identified female figures associated with Vedic learning and teaching across several domains of

knowledge. Biswal (2025) further noted that Patañjali's works mention female teachers who taught Sanskrit grammar. These accounts suggest that women participated in knowledge production and transmission within some intellectual traditions of ancient India. However, the extent and conditions of their epistemic authority and recognition need further examination.

The *Loka*, or the folk tradition of knowledge organization, primarily depended on verbal teachings, rituals, and community and/or household practices. This decentralized framework preserves knowledge and wisdom through local languages, folk arts and songs, speeches, proverbs, performances, and ecological markers, passing it across generations . The community or village owned this knowledge system, and they preserved, practiced, modified, and transmitted it to following generations (Sreedevi & Mini, 2023). Bera (2026) elaborated on women's role in generating, preserving, and transmitting informal knowledge on Ayurveda, childcare, and preventive health practices within families and communities. Their experiential knowledge was a rich source of Ayurveda and healthcare during that period and was passed across generations. Women also served as custodians of *Loka* knowledge, which remained largely unrecognized (Devi, 2022).

Women's epistemic agency outside the textual tradition

This research values informal knowledge precisely because it is not always linked to a single identifiable author or preserved in a recognized text. Instead, much of it is developed collectively, with succeeding generations preserving and modifying the same (Dixit, 2026). Therefore, if epistemic agency is defined only through the production of named texts, participation in formal philosophical debate, or recognition as an individual intellectual authority, substantial forms of women's knowledge remain overlooked. Therefore, a feminist re-reading of IKS must look beyond named female authorship and conventional intellectual practices. The absence of names in informal knowledge does not automatically mean an absence of women's intellectual contribution.

Contemporary Revival of IKS

The contemporary revival of IKS sits within wider debates about coloniality, epistemic hierarchy, and the historical classification of Indian knowledge traditions. Michel Danino (2011) evaluated IKS and described it as an active scholarly process, which, he emphasized, needed to be freed from Eurocentric dismissal and chauvinistic hyperbole.

Decolonizing the Indian education system involves not only recognizing the excellence of IKS but also de-hypnotizing the system from centuries of colonial education that trained it to depend exclusively on the West for useful sources of knowledge. Smith (2021) showed how research methodologies have historically been implicated in colonial power relations in producing knowledge about indigenous peoples. For India, the challenge is establishing that the country was a prolific knowledge creator rather than a consumer in the pre-colonial era (Rawan, 2025).

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) provides a framework for incorporating IKS into the Indian education system. It replaced the 34-year-old 1986 policy and grounded itself in "The pursuit of knowledge (*Jnan*), wisdom (*Pragyaa*), and truth (*Satya*)" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020: p. 4).

NEP 2020 aims to build a strong sense of pride in Indian culture and develop an Indian identity while imparting crucial knowledge and skills necessary to sustain and grow in an ever-changing, globalized, and technology-driven environment (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020:

p. 6). Among other things, NEP 2020 seeks to revive ancient classical languages, especially Sanskrit, and regional languages to provide better access to the gold mine of Indian ancient knowledge and wisdom (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020: p. 14). It also promotes introducing ancient knowledge systems, such as Ayurveda and Yoga, into school projects to spark curiosity and build awareness among students about the country's heritage (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020: p. 19).

Moreover, NEP 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary research in IKS to explore and integrate the relevance of Indian traditional knowledge into modern science and technology (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020: p. 34–35; Shanwal, 2025).

As IKS enters contemporary school curricula, higher education, and research, the question of women's epistemic agency in knowledge production and transmission becomes important. Some related questions need redressal. They include: whose knowledge is being revived and revitalized? Whose voice is projected through the process of revival of IKS? How is women's agency being reflected in the process? Because institutional revival necessarily involves processes of selection and curricular representation, it also raises questions about which forms of knowledge and which knowers are considered representative of IKS.

Feminist Epistemology and Situated Knowledge

Because this paper focuses on women's voice in IKS, it is imperative to explore contemporary feminist literature that defines, discusses, and examines factors that have shaped women's voice in knowledge production and transmission, as well as their agency.

One of the foremost works of literature related to the paper's theme is "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988). This theory challenged the age-old assumption that knowledge is objective because the observer is rational, detached, and universal. Haraway (1988) claimed that all knowledge is produced from a body, a history, a culture, and a position within power hierarchy. Assuming the observer is "objective" hides power more effectively and conveniently erases other ways of knowing. In this way, indigenous knowledge becomes superstitious, women's experiences and perspectives become an outcome of "emotion," and subaltern voices are suppressed as insignificant.

The concept of "situated knowledge" underpins "standpoint theory," which posits that knowledge originates from social position (Harding, 1986). Combining the theory of situated knowledge with Hartsock's (1983) feminist interpretation of the Marxist proposition—oppressed people tend to have access to knowledge that privileged people do not have—Harding (1996) argued that marginalized social positions can provide distinctive epistemic resources for understanding social relations.

Standpoint theorists do not claim that marginalized people automatically possess superior knowledge. Instead, they argue that marginalized social positions offer unique epistemic resources because people in those positions experience both their own position and the dominant structures that constitute it (Allen, 2017). Women, a historically marginalized group, share the same fate as others. Their perceptions, grounded in lived experience, are equally substantial to knowledge production but are often ignored and/or erased (Smith, 1987).

Social Epistemology and the Validation of Knowledge

Longino (1990) deliberated the consequences of social epistemology in epistemic agency. She argued that knower neutrality is necessary but not sufficient for knowledge claims to gain credibility or validity.

Validity emerges through criticism, scrutiny, and collective evaluation. Therefore, Longino's work raises an important question about the formation of epistemic communities: who historically had the authority to validate knowledge, what processes were followed, and whose knowledge was excluded from validation?

For Indian women's epistemic agency, this perspective adds a new dimension. A systematic examination of the social and institutional conditions is needed to understand how and why some women's knowledge claims gained agency while others remained peripheral or anonymous.

Epistemic Injustice and Recognition

Epistemic injustice, which reviews knowledge production through a justice lens (McWilliams, 2025), complements the preceding discussion. It highlights the wrong done to a knower by unfairly doubting their knowledge capability or credibility based on the speaker's identity (race, gender, class, etc.) and/or rendering their experiences incomprehensible due to prejudice (Fricker, 2007). For example, women may be treated as less credible knowers because society views them as having an inherent credibility deficit (Holgado et al., 2021).

Indian Feminist and Anti-Caste Epistemologies

A feminist analysis of IKS remains inadequate without integrating Indian feminist and anti-caste epistemologies. Chakravarti (1993) examined Brahmanical patriarchy to demonstrate that gender relations cannot be separated from caste hierarchy. Dalit feminist scholarship challenged the inclination to treat "women" as a homogeneous category. It emphasized the experiences and knowledge of so-called "lower-caste" women whose social locations differed considerably from those of "dominant-caste" women (Rege, 2006). Guru (2019) discussed the relationship among caste, experience, and knowledge production. Paik (2021) examined how gender and caste differentiated access to education, intellectual resources, and opportunities for knowledge production.

Intersectionality and Epistemic Agency

Crenshaw's (2018) concept of "intersectionality" provides a useful framework for understanding that an exclusive focus on the word "women" risks treating them as a homogeneous epistemic group, potentially privileging the experiences of socially and institutionally advantaged women over marginalized women (Chakravarti & Krishnaraj, 2018).

A woman's epistemic position is shaped not only by gender but also by caste, class, region, language, religious affiliation, Occupation, and access to educational and institutional resources. Intersectionality and gender mutually reinforce each other (Chakravarti, 1993). This scholarship suggests that recovering women's knowledge within IKS should not only examine whether women were permitted to participate in knowledge production but also investigate which women had access to particular forms of learning, authority, institutions, and modes of transmission (Paik, 2021). An intersectional approach, therefore, asks an additional question: how caste and gender together shaped the production, validation, transmission, and recognition of knowledge (Guru, 2019).

Combining Western feminist epistemology with Indian feminist, Dalit feminist, and historiographical scholarship ensures that Western feminist epistemology is not transferred to the Indian Knowledge tradition. Instead, Western feminist epistemological concepts serve as analytical resources to reclaim women's voices in IKS.

Indian Epistemological Traditions

Epistemologically, IKS is a holistic, pluralistic body of collective expertise that recognizes multiple sources of valid knowledge (known as pramāṇas), with different schools of thought accepting different epistemic criteria (Sandha et al., 2025). This paper does not equate Indian epistemic traditions with modern feminist epistemology. Instead, it engages with both traditions on questions of epistemic authority and validation.

Women in Indian Intellectual Traditions

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Gārgī and Maitreyī are two prominent female scholars. Maitreyī, the wife of sage Yājñavalkya, is famous for her philosophical dialogue with her husband, documented in verses 2.4.1–14 , about choosing spiritual wisdom over materialistic pleasures such as wealth and worldly riches (Majumdar, 2026; Ranganathan, 2023). This conversation indicates a certain degree of women's agency in philosophical inquiry and dialogue.

Gārgī, on the other hand, provides evidence that at least some women participated in philosophical debates. The third chapter, verse 3.6.1 of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes how Gārgī Vācaknavī, a learned female scholar, contested the great sage Yājñavalkya in the court of King Janaka (Swami Krishnananda, 1983). Gārgī pushed Yājñavalkya to answer her cosmological questions. The sage was irritated by Gārgī's line of questioning and warned her not to ask too many questions (Olivelle, 1998). Afterward, Gārgī limited herself to two profoundly deep philosophical questions documented in verses 3.8.3 and 3.8.5 (Müller, 1884).

Macdonell and Keith (1912) systematically documented the names of female scholars who composed hymns for the Rigveda or other parts of the Vedas. Prominent Vedic hymn composers found in the *Rigveda* include Ghosha, Lopamudra, Vak Ambhrini, Sarparajni, Shraddha Kamayani, to name a few (Altekar, 1938; Upadhyay, 1941).

These examples show that women were not wholly absent from the production and articulation of formal knowledge in early Indian traditions. They also demonstrate that women's epistemic participation took different forms (Haldar, 2025).

However, they do not, by themselves, establish that female authorship or participation received the same degree of institutional validation or recognition as men's (Haldar, 2024). Moreover, a small number of prominent women cannot be taken as evidence of women's general educational or intellectual status across ancient India (Kumar, 2025).

These examples therefore provide an important historical basis for examining women's epistemic agency. They also show why a feminist re-reading must examine the social and epistemic processes through which women's knowledge was validated, transmitted, preserved, and incorporated (or excluded) from authoritative accounts of IKS.

Women Intellectuals in the Buddhist Era

The Buddhist period witnessed the resurfacing of female scholarship. The *Therīgāthā*, a collection of 73 poems attributed to early Buddhist nuns, provides an important corpus of women's literary and religious expression (Rhys Davids & Norman, 1989). The composers came from varied societal strata—32 were unmarried and 18 married. Of the unmarried women, three—Subha, Anopama, and Sumedha—were from affluent families (Weingast, 2020).

In these poems, Buddhist nuns, or *bhikkhunis*, described their struggles and accomplishments in the journey toward arahantship. Spoken with brutal honesty and beauty, they often portrayed heart-wrenching human stories of extraordinary women. These poems established women's participation in knowledge production and supported equality between men and women on the path of spiritual attainment (Norman, 1971).

Women in the Bhakti movement

The Bhakti movement flourished in India from the seventh to the 17th century CE. Prominent female poets and saints such as Mirabai, Akkamahadevi, Andal, and Lalleshwari challenged traditional patriarchal thought and taught commoners devotion without formal rituals, surpassing caste and language barriers (Sangari, 1990). They composed songs and poems in regional languages to spread knowledge (Ramanujan, 2006). Their devotional practices established women's epistemic agency and created alternative spaces for producing and transmitting spiritual knowledge (Nikam, 2025).

Research Gap

The literature review shows that some women did participate in diverse forms of knowledge production and transmission across historical periods. However, documenting women's presence and participation in these traditions is not equivalent to examining their epistemic agency. These records did not depict the processes that determined whether a woman's contribution was recognized as knowledge and incorporated into the authoritative representation of a knowledge tradition.

Further, the extant literature insufficiently addresses a critical question about IKS revival: Whose knowledge is getting revived, whose voices are getting projected through that revival, and how is women's agency represented within it?

This review therefore identifies the central gap as the limited conceptual integration of women's epistemic agency with the processes through which knowledge is produced, validated, transmitted, and recognized in IKS.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a feminist framework focused on women's epistemic agency rather than representation alone.

It adopts a conceptual research design using an integrative theory-building approach to develop an analytical framework that brings five complementary perspectives of feminist epistemology into critical dialogue with Indian epistemological traditions and Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship. While Western feminist epistemology theories provide analytical concepts, they are not treated as universal categories transferable to Indian knowledge traditions. Indian epistemological traditions, particularly debates involving pramāṇa, offer an evident resource for studying how claims are validated and evaluated. Indian feminist and Dalit feminist scholarship contextualizes the framework within specific relations of gender, caste, education, occupation, and social power that shape access to knowledge and agency in India. Together, they set forth a critical discussion that does not equate classical Indian epistemological categories with modern feminist theories. Accordingly, the four dimensions of epistemic agency—production, validation, transmission, and recognition—are scrutinized through complementary theoretical and

epistemological resources, with Indian feminist and anti-caste perspectives enlightening the analysis across all dimensions. The discussion of Gārgī illustrates an application of the framework rather than serving as an empirical case study.

Locating the Knower

Haraway's (1988) "situated knowledge" theory, as an analytical tool for IKS, directs attention to social location, including Brahminical Patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1993), from which knowledge was generated and transmitted in the Indian context. Thus, situated knowledge provides the first analytical question of this framework:

From what social, historical, embodied, and cultural location was knowledge produced?

This question underlines knowledge as situated practice, rather than an abstract entity.

From Social Location to Epistemic Agency

Standpoint theory treats women's experiences as a potential source of knowledge. In the Indian context, it views their participation in informal knowledge systems as "*Loka*" knowledge, which may be collectively produced and transmitted without individual authorship.

The theory implies that women's epistemic agency need not be limited to producing formally authored texts. It may lie in observing, interpreting, adapting, practicing, teaching, preserving, and transmitting knowledge, even when her contribution is not individually documented in the historical record.

Standpoint theory, therefore, generates the second analytical question:

How does women's social location shape the forms of knowledge they produced, accessed, interpreted, and transmitted?

How Knowledge Becomes Valid?

Applied to IKS, Longino's (1990) theory of "social epistemology" suggests that women's participation in knowledge production does not, by itself, establish that their knowledge was regarded as valid. Longino's work focuses on epistemic communities and their standards of validation. In Indian epistemology, pramāṇa traditions focus on instruments of knowledge validation (Chatterjee, 1939). Therefore, the third analytical question is:

What social processes and pramāṇa traditions considered women's knowledge valid, credible, authoritative, or otherwise legitimate?

This question makes validation central to women's epistemic agency.

When the Knower Is Not Recognized

Fricker's (2007) concept of "epistemic injustice" helps ask why Indian women's knowledge was marginalized. Is it because it lacked epistemic value, or because of the knower's social identity or position? Therefore, the fourth analytical question is:

What mechanisms may have controlled women's credibility, authority, visibility, or recognition as knowers?

This question allows the framework to examine why some forms of women's knowledge gained authority while others remained informal, marginal, invisible, or excluded.

Which Women Become Knowers?

Intersectionality distinguishes women's epistemic positions from one another. A woman from a socially privileged caste has greater access to formal learning and textual traditions, support of institutional authority and elite networks, helping her find validation and recognition for knowledge production compared to a Dalit, Adivasi, rural, occupational, or otherwise marginalized woman whose knowledge circulated primarily through oral, embodied, domestic, ecological, or community practices (Meena, 2025).

The fifth analytical question is therefore:

How do intersecting structures shape women's opportunities to produce, validate, transmit, and receive recognition for knowledge?

An Analytical Model

An analytical model integrates the five theoretical perspectives discussed above.

Situatedness: Where is the knower located?

↓

Standpoint: What distinctive epistemic resources may emerge from that location?

↓

Social validation: What pramāṇa traditions and processes are used to evaluate and validate the knowledge?

↓

Epistemic injustice: What forms of structural exclusion may undermine the credibility of the knowledge or knower?

↓

Intersectionality: How are these processes differentiated by caste, class, region, language, Occupation, religion, and other power structures?

↓

Four dimensions of epistemic agency:

Production: How is knowledge generated, interpreted, experienced, or developed?
Validation: How is knowledge evaluated, tested, accepted, challenged, or authorized?
Transmission: How is knowledge taught, practiced, preserved, adapted, and passed between individuals and generations?
Recognition: Under what conditions does a knowledge claim, practice, or knower become acknowledged as legitimate and worthy of preservation, circulation, institutional representation, or inclusion within an authoritative knowledge tradition?

In this context, a clear distinction must be made between validation and recognition. They are related but analytically distinct ideas. Recognition is the social, institutional, or historic acknowledgment of a person, practice, or knowledge as legitimate and authoritative (Deranty, 2022). Validation, by contrast, is an epistemic process through which a knower's claim is evaluated, tested, examined, accepted, or rejected (Hartung, 2007).

A knowledge practice may, therefore, be locally validated without institutional recognition, while a knower may be historically recognized without validation. This characteristic matters for examining women's *Loka* knowledge, where collective custodianship may exist without noted authorship.

FEMINIST FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN'S EPISTEMIC AGENCY IN IKS

The theoretical analysis in the preceding section allows this study to define women's epistemic agency in IKS as follows:

The capacity of women, individually or collectively, to become a knowledge source through the production, interpretation, validation, transmission, preservation, modification, and proclamation of knowledge, and to exercise or negotiate agency over that knowledge within particular social and epistemic contexts.

With this definition in mind, this framework develops a few sets of questions under the five dimensions of epistemic agency that, when applied to IKS, will help reclaim women's voice in IKS.

Knowledge Production

- What counts as knowledge production?
- Can knowledge be individually or collectively produced?
- Does textual authorship have to be present?
- How does Loka knowledge constitute knowledge production?
- How might women's social location shape what they know and produce?

Answering these questions will show that knowledge production ≠ textual authorship.

Knowledge Validation

- Who decides whether knowledge is valid?
- What constitutes evidence?
- By what standards, communities, or authorities was that knowledge considered credible or legitimate?
- Who has authority to validate?
- Were women able to participate in those validation processes?
- Can community validation differ from institutional/canonical validation?

Responses to these questions show that knowledge can be valid within a community without formal institutional recognition.

Knowledge Transmission

At first, we need to examine the following:

1. Guru–shishya traditions

2. Oral transmission
3. Family transmission
4. Community transmission
5. Apprenticeship
6. Textual transmission
7. Performance
8. Embodied practice
9. Intergenerational transmission

Then ask: What role did women play as teachers, custodians, practitioners, interpreters, and transmitters?

A response to this question will shift the focus from "who created the original idea" to "who held the epistemic agency."

Knowledge Recognition

- Who becomes a recognized "knower"?
- What makes knowledge established?
- Why might collectively held women's knowledge remain anonymous?
- Why might oral knowledge be less visible than textual knowledge?
- How does caste, class, religion, language, etc., affect recognition?
- How can knowledge become retrospectively recognized?

This will connect: Epistemic injustice + intersectionality + authority.

The Interrelationship Among the Five Dimensions

The framework does not assume that these dimensions occur in a fixed sequence. Rather, they are analytically distinct but mutually intertwined.

The relationship can therefore be represented conceptually as:

Situatedness → Standpoint → Epistemic agency

↓

Production ↔ Validation ↔ Transmission ↔ Recognition

↑

Epistemic injustice + Intersectionality

The arrows between the four dimensions indicate bidirectional relationships rather than a linear sequence.

For example, recognition can impact subsequent transmission. Once a form of knowledge is recognized as authoritative, it may acquire new institutional procedures of preservation and transmission. Conversely, transmission can influence recognition by determining which knowledge survives to become historically visible. This relational understanding is significant for feminist analysis because women's epistemic agency may be exercised at one point in the knowledge process while constrained at another.

Intersectionality and the Conditions of Epistemic Agency

This section asks: Does the framework apply equally to all women?

The answer is clearly no. The literature review shows that privileged women were exposed to the formal education system, allowed to debate and discuss in both private and public settings, and offered validation, preservation, and recognition. In contrast, most common women or women from lower castes participated in *Loka* knowledge with little or no formal authorship or recognition. Their conditions of authorship, validation, and recognition differed significantly from those with access to formal and scholarly traditions and conventions.

Therefore, Gender × caste × class × Region × Language × Occupation × Religion can influence access to knowledge, authority, transmission, credibility, preservation, and recognition.

An Analytical Synthesis

The framework combines three complementary bodies of scholarship: feminist epistemological theories, Indian epistemological traditions, and Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship. Their contributions are related but not interchangeable. Feminist epistemology provides concepts for examining situated knowledge, standpoint, collective validation, epistemic injustice, and intersectionality. Indian epistemological traditions raise questions regarding means of knowledge validation. Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship positions these questions within caste- and gender-based structures. These resources connect the model's four interconnected dimensions, while intersectionality operates across all of them.

The proposed framework can be made operational through the set of questions in Table 1:

Table 1. ***Analytical Matrix of Women's Epistemic Agency in IKS***

Dimension	Central question	Theoretical and epistemological resources
Situatedness	From what social, historical, embodied, and cultural location does knowledge emerge?	Standpoint theory; Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy; Indian feminist scholarship
Production	What knowledge do women produce, interpret, develop, adapt, or preserve?	Situated knowledge; standpoint theory; Rege's Dalit feminist perspective; Guru's analysis of caste and knowledge
Validation	Who determines whether women's knowledge is credible or legitimate?	Social epistemology; collective criticism; Indian pramāṇa traditions; feminist analysis of credibility and epistemic authority
Transmission	How is women's knowledge taught, preserved, adapted, and transmitted?	IKS transmission traditions; oral and embodied knowledge; gendered access to learning; Indian feminist scholarship
Recognition	Under what conditions are women and their	Epistemic injustice; authority

	knowledge acknowledged as authoritative?	formation; Chakravarti's analysis of caste and gender; Rege, Guru, and Paik on caste, education, and epistemic marginalization
Intersectionality	How do caste, class, region, language, Occupation, religion, and other structures differentiate these processes?	Dalit feminist scholarship; Brahmanical patriarchy; Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship

This matrix turns the framework into an analytical apparatus for examining women's engagement with IKS.

DISCUSSION

This proposed framework shifts the discussion from recovering women in IKS to examining their epistemic agency in a broader context. It argues that historical recovery is not the ultimate destination; it is the inception point for understanding women's relationship with knowledge. The framework generates four conceptual changes.

The first shift is "From Recovery to Epistemic Agency," which asks, "How did women function as knowers?" instead of "Which women were present?"

The second shift is "From Individual Authorship to Multiple Forms of Knowledge Production." Here, the framework identifies individual women's authorship in formal education but finds little insight into women's informal knowledge. Therefore, it stresses assessing the significance of women's *Loka* knowledge, where the knower remains unidentified and outside formal institutions.

The third shift is "From Knowledge Transmission to Knowledge Authority." The framework asks not only how knowledge was transmitted, but who held the authority to validate and define knowledge as legitimate.

The last shift is "From 'Women' to Intersectional Women." The framework incorporates intersectionality to challenge treating "women" as a homogeneous group. It highlights intra-group differences women experience in access to education, knowledge production, validation, and recognition, based on intersecting structures of caste, class, region, language, religion, occupation, education, and institutional access.

Applying the Framework: Gārgī's Epistemic Agency

The prescribed framework is applied to the Gārgī-Yājñavalkya exchange mentioned in Section 2 to show how it reveals women's epistemic agency that the presence/participation narrative could not. Table 2 presents the analysis.

Table 2. ***Locating Gārgī's Epistemic Agency***

Dimensions	Questions applied to Gārgī's presence	What does the evidence reveal?
Situatedness	In what social/intellectual setting did she participate?	She appears before a king's court to take part in a public philosophical debate.

Production	What did she actually contribute?	She formulated questions concerning the ground reality rather than merely repeating received knowledge.
Validation	Did the court witnessing the debate validate Gārgī's questioning?	Gārgī's questions were accepted as legitimate. However, the narrative does not establish that a specific pramāṇa was explicitly invoked to validate her agency. Therefore, the text records a dialogical engagement but says nothing about demonstrated epistemic validation.
Transmission	How did her contribution survive?	Her questions and exchange survive through the Upaniṣadic textual tradition.
Recognition	Was she recognized as an authoritative knower?	Gārgī's intellectual prominence is preserved. However, subsequent texts do not identify her as an independent epistemic authority. She remained a participant in someone else's narrative.
Intersectionality	What can be inferred about gender position?	This episode shows female participation, but it is insufficient to generalize about women across ancient India.

Therefore, analysis of Gārgī's episode shows that women scholars in ancient India participated in intellectual activities and received temporary recognition, but their contributions were not institutionally validated as prominently as their male counterparts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY IKS REVIVAL

This study has significant implications for research, education and curriculum development, and documentation. The formulated questions help examine IKS in depth and reclaim women's voices in both formal and informal knowledge settings.

Additionally, this framework can distinguish among evidence of women's participation, evidence of epistemic authority, and subsequent historical recognition. It argues that women's absence from textual records need not be interpreted as evidence of their absence from knowledge production. Similarly, the presence of individual women in textual sources need not be accepted as evidence of their epistemic agency. Moreover, an intersectional approach can help IKS scholarship examine how socio-economic power structures shaped women's opportunities to produce and exercise authority over knowledge (Bagga & Meena, 2025).

In education and IKS curriculum development, this framework can help explore women's community knowledge, vernacular traditions, ecological, health-related, artistic, craft-based, and community-based practices alongside women's knowledge in formal textual traditions. Such representation would also show students that knowledge can be produced and transmitted through multiple epistemic practices, not only through named intellectual authorities or institutions. Similarly, an intersectional approach is equally important because it allows students to appreciate women's differentiated contributions and experiences across caste, community, region, Occupation, and other social contexts.

Documentation and preservation of IKS is another area where this framework has important implications. The proposed framework can help document women's contributions as knowledge custodians and practitioners while preserving information about the social and intersectional contexts in which knowledge is maintained. This is particularly important for *Loka* knowledge, where epistemic authority is not centered on an identifiable author but distributed across generations and communities.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper presents a conceptual framework without supporting primary empirical research or a systematic archival analysis. The proposed framework needs to be empirically tested across specific IKS traditions, historical periods, and social groups to assess its effectiveness.

Based on this study, future research can examine the following:

- Case studies of historical individual women;
- Oral-history research;
- Archival research;
- Ethnographic studies;
- Comparative studies across caste/community;
- Studies of women's knowledge in Ayurveda, agriculture, ecology, crafts, etc.;
- Analysis of IKS curricula under NEP 2020.

CONCLUSION

The revival of IKS offers opportunities to rediscover historically marginalized forms of knowledge. Yet historical women's contributions remain insufficiently recognized because they do not necessarily establish epistemic authority. This paper proposes an integrated feminist epistemological framework grounded in Western feminist epistemology, Indian epistemological tradition, and Indian feminist and anti-caste scholarship to conceptualize women's epistemic agency through production, validation, transmission, and recognition, treating these as interconnected rather than sequential.

This framework can help IKS revival be more inclusive by examining the structures through which knowledge has historically been produced, validated, transmitted, preserved, and recognized. It can support reclaiming women's voices in IKS in a way that is historically more reflexive, epistemically more inclusive, and better equipped to recognize the diverse ways knowledge has been produced and sustained.

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