

Women's Resistance and the Reclamation of Indigenous Knowledge in India

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gendered dimensions of indigenous knowledge in India, focusing on epistemic justice, resistance and reclamation. It argues that while women have historically been key custodians of ecological and cultural knowledge, colonialism, modernization and patriarchal structures have systematically undermined their roles and recognition. The article traces the evolution of gendered IK systems from pre-colonial times through contemporary spaces of revival and resistance. Drawing on postcolonial ecofeminist frameworks, it highlights how indigenous women's resistance movements against extractivist development exemplify sustainable, place-based ways of knowing that challenge both global capitalism and local patriarchy. The research emphasizes that supporting indigenous epistemic frameworks is integral to the decolonial project and essential for advancing knowledge justice. By reclaiming their roles as knowledge producers, marginalized women are driving transformative change and creating pathways toward more just, inclusive and ecologically grounded futures. The article concludes by advocating for the active incorporation of women's IK into development, education and governance paradigms to build epistemic democracy, ecological resilience and gender justice.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge; Epistemic Justice; Gender; Decolonization; Patriarchy

Introduction

The intersection of gender and indigenous knowledge (IK) in India forms a crucial dimension of both historical inquiry and contemporary development discourse. Indigenous knowledge, embedded within socio-cultural practices and transmitted through generations, has traditionally been shaped by gender-specific roles and responsibilities. Women have served as the principal custodians of this knowledge in domains such as agriculture, health, ecology and artisanal craft. Despite their centrality, women's contributions have remained largely invisible in formalized knowledge systems and policy discourses. Historically, Indian women have functioned as knowledge producers and cultural transmitters, safeguarding community-specific traditions, practices and environmental wisdom. Their role has not only preserved local epistemologies but also contributed to resilience in times of ecological and socio-economic stress. However, the gendered structure of society often leads to the undervaluation of women's knowledge, especially in the wake of colonial interventions, modernization and state-centric development models. As India navigates the dual challenges of ecological sustainability and social equity, it becomes imperative to revisit and revalorize the gendered dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems through a critical historical lens.

This article seeks to interrogate the historical evolution of gendered knowledge systems in India, examining how colonial disruption, post-independence state policies and contemporary globalization have shaped the production, transmission and legitimacy of women's indigenous knowledge. It further explores the role of women as environmental stewards and epistemic agents in contemporary times, underscoring the significance of recognizing such knowledge for sustainable and inclusive development.

Gender and Indigenous Knowledge in India

The gendered structure of indigenous knowledge in India is manifest in women's deep-rooted association with environmental and cultural domains. Traditionally excluded from formal institutions, women developed parallel systems of expertise through lived experiences, often within the private and community spaces. These knowledge systems are embedded in daily practices such as agriculture, seed storage, herbal medicine and water conservation which have direct implications for community survival and ecological balance (Senanayake, 2006; Mukhopadhyay & Roy, 2015).

In tribal and rural regions, women's knowledge is often contextual, adaptive and ecological. Adivasi women in Maharashtra, for instance, maintain seed banks of local crop varieties and practice agroecological techniques that contribute to food sovereignty (Adivasi Women's Kitchen Gardening, 2022). Their ecological intelligence, passed through matrilineal oral traditions, sustains biodiversity and ensures the continuation of farming practices suited to climatic variability. Moreover, women's role in traditional healing systems reflects their dual position as caregivers and community health mediators. Drawing on ethnobotanical knowledge, women use medicinal plants to treat ailments, combining therapeutic, spiritual and environmental awareness (Gallegos et al., 2024). Yet this body of knowledge remains under-documented, marginalized and often dismissed as anecdotal in modern biomedical systems. Women's conservation practices particularly in forest-dependent communities highlight their capacity for ecosystem stewardship. Saini et al. (2019) emphasize that women are frequently the first to notice environmental changes due to their direct interaction with natural resources. Through initiatives in water management and community forestry, they offer alternative models of sustainability grounded in care ethics and collective responsibility (Menon, 2005).

Despite this androcentric knowledge paradigms and institutional neglect continue to marginalize women's contributions. The erosion of traditional roles due to market forces, land alienation and developmental dislocation has led to the devaluation of their epistemic labour (Opore, 2016). Integrating women's knowledge into development frameworks, therefore, demands both recognition and structural change.

Historical Trajectories of Gendered Knowledge

Pre-Colonial Indigenous Knowledge Traditions

The pre-colonial Indian landscape was marked by diverse and deeply localized knowledge systems, in which women played vital epistemic and practical roles. Contrary to the dominant narrative that relegates women to the periphery of intellectual traditions, historical evidence reveals their central participation in shaping spiritual, ecological and medicinal knowledges. Vedic literature highlights female philosophers like *Gargi Vachaknavi* and *Maitreyi*, who engaged in metaphysical debates within male-dominated Brahmanical circles, asserting their authority in the Upanishadic tradition (Senanayake, 2006). These intellectual roles were not merely symbolic; they underscore a period where women's cognitive agency was acknowledged in elite philosophical discourse.

Outside Brahmanical traditions, tribal and regional societies positioned women as knowledge keepers of agriculture, midwifery and healing practices. Among Adivasi communities, women were integral to sustaining agro-ecological systems through practices such as seed preservation, kitchen gardening and ethnomedicinal usage of plants knowledge that was transmitted intergenerationally through oral and embodied pedagogies (Adivasi Women's Kitchen Gardening in Western India, 2022). In rural contexts, folk healers, often women, served as the primary caregivers and herbalists, drawing from a rich pharmacopeia that blended spiritual rituals with ecological insight. These knowledge systems were inherently gendered, grounded in lived experience and relationality with the land, community and cycles of nature.

Impact of Colonial Epistemology

The imposition of colonial rule in India brought about a systemic epistemic rupture. The British colonial state, in its efforts to rationalize governance, introduced Western epistemological frameworks that prioritized textual, institutional and scientific knowledge while devaluing the oral, experiential and embodied knowledges practiced predominantly by women (Chatterjee, 2013). For instance, the establishment of *scientific forestry* disregarded the nuanced forest management systems developed by tribal women, replacing them with extractive logics that contributed to environmental degradation and displacement. Similarly, colonial biomedicine systematically discredited traditional healing practices particularly those led by women by classifying them as "unscientific," thus delegitimizing entire epistemic traditions (Kumar, 2021).

Western education further entrenched this epistemic hierarchy. Its curriculum, designed to produce compliant colonial subjects, elevated English literacy and scientific rationality while marginalizing vernacular knowledge systems, including those passed through domestic and communal spheres. This gendered exclusion from institutional learning led to a dual loss for women: they were distanced both from the new colonial knowledge order and their traditional roles as community knowledge bearers. The colonial epistemology thus not only displaced indigenous systems but also reinforced patriarchal structures that undermined women's intellectual and cultural authority.

Patriarchal Reform Movements

The 19th century social reform movements in India, while heralded as progressive efforts toward women's upliftment, paradoxically operated within and reinforced patriarchal epistemologies. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned against regressive practices like *Sati* and advocated for women's education and widow remarriage. However, these reforms were often couched in paternalistic narratives that viewed women as civilizational symbols rather than autonomous epistemic agents (Kumar, 2005). The emphasis on educating women was primarily geared toward creating ideal wives and mothers, thus aligning knowledge acquisition with domestic utility rather than emancipatory potential. Moreover, the reform movements participated in the production of a new gendered subjectivity what Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls the "new woman" that was modern yet domesticated, educated yet confined. This domesticated modernity often ignored the knowledge that women already possessed through indigenous practices. As Srivastava (2016) argues, patriarchy during the colonial period intersected with structures of caste, class and colonial modernity to shape a selective narrative of empowerment that continued to marginalize subaltern and tribal women's epistemic contributions. The epistemic shifts brought by colonialism and nationalist reform thus recast indigenous women not as knowledge producers but as subjects to be saved, civilized and educated under a male gaze.

Contemporary Resonances, Resistance and Reclaiming in Postcolonial India

The postcolonial experience in India has not only continued the epistemic marginalization instituted by colonial rule but also generated new spaces of resistance and reclamation. Particularly among women from tribal, Dalit and other marginalized communities, there has been a visible resurgence in reclaiming traditional knowledge systems. These interventions challenge dominant, Eurocentric and patriarchal knowledge paradigms by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies rooted in embodied experience, ecological practice and collective memory.

Revival of Traditional Practices

Women across India are at the forefront of reviving traditional ecological, medicinal and cultural knowledge systems, often transmitted orally through generations. Movements such as *Navdanya*, founded by Vandana Shiva, exemplify how indigenous women's agricultural knowledge particularly concerning seed saving, organic farming and biodiversity is being revalorized in opposition to industrial agriculture. These women, long excluded from agrarian policy frameworks, are reframed as "seed custodians" and agroecological experts whose practices sustain local food security and environmental resilience (Shiva, 2000).

Similarly, the *Kudumbashree* initiative in Kerala represents a state-supported yet community-driven model of gendered knowledge production. Rooted in collective economic empowerment, Kudumbashree's women's groups engage in organic farming, nutrition programs and traditional craftwork that depend heavily on local knowledge systems. Their work not only revives indigenous livelihood practices but also challenges the homogenizing logic of neoliberal development, reasserting the social and epistemic roles of women in sustaining community health and ecology (Devika & Thampi, 2007).

Feminist and Dalit Epistemologies

The epistemic resistance of marginalized women extends beyond grassroots practices into theoretical and activist realms. Feminist and Dalit epistemologies have critically interrogated the exclusions inherent in dominant academic and policy discourses. Dalit feminists, particularly Sharmila Rege, have called for a "Dalit Standpoint Epistemology" that centres the lived experiences of Dalit women as sites of knowledge production. Such frameworks critique both Brahmanical patriarchy and mainstream feminist thought for ignoring caste and experiential knowledge (Rege, 2006).

These epistemologies emphasize the importance of oral histories, testimonio and subaltern narratives that are often excluded from institutional knowledge. By elevating the voices and narratives of women who have faced multiple layers of marginalization, these frameworks contribute to a more plural and inclusive understanding of society. The epistemic contributions of such women are not only critical for academic redressal but are essential for reconstructing collective memory and historical agency.

Policy Gaps and Institutional Invisibility

Despite formal recognition of traditional knowledge in legislation such as the Biological Diversity Act (2002) and the Forest Rights Act (2006), gendered dimensions of indigenous knowledge often remain invisible. Institutional frameworks tend to be technocratic and rarely account for how knowledge is gendered in practice such as the roles women play in seed selection, herbal medicine, or forest resource management (Saini et al., 2019). This erasure undermines both gender equity and ecological sustainability.

Moreover, government schemes and extension services often fail to consult or involve women as primary knowledge holders, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about expertise. This not only limits the effectiveness of developmental interventions but also continues the colonial legacy of epistemic silencing. Bridging this gap requires participatory policymaking and institutional mechanisms that explicitly recognize and integrate women's traditional knowledge.

Knowledge Justice and Decolonization

The struggle to reclaim and validate gendered indigenous knowledge must be located within the broader global movement for epistemic justice. The call for decolonizing knowledge systems articulated by scholars like de Sousa Santos (2014) demands the dismantling of Eurocentric hierarchies and the recognition of *pluriversality*: the coexistence of multiple, equally valid knowledge systems.

In the Indian context, this means enabling tribal, Dalit and marginalized women to define and transmit their knowledge on their own terms. Decolonizing knowledge involves more than inclusion; it requires the reconfiguration of epistemic authority. Community archives, oral history projects and participatory research models must be supported to ensure that non-Western and non-masculine ways of knowing are given institutional space and legitimacy.

In sum, the epistemic resistance and reclamation efforts led by marginalized women in postcolonial India are transformative acts. They disrupt dominant knowledge hierarchies and create pathways toward more just, inclusive and ecologically grounded futures. These movements remind us that the struggle for knowledge justice is inseparable from the broader struggle for social and epistemic emancipation.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2007) concept of *epistemologies of the South* underscores the critical need to validate plural and localized knowledges that have long been silenced by dominant Eurocentric epistemologies. Within the Indian context, this imperative intersects with deeply gendered and caste-based structures of marginalization. The decolonial project, therefore, must attend to the specific forms of epistemic violence that indigenous women face not only through colonial impositions but also through patriarchal and caste-based exclusions within their own communities (Hussein & Hussain, 2019; Dutta, 2019).

Decolonizing indigenous women's knowledge requires a fundamental restructuring of knowledge systems that have historically privileged Western, male-centric frameworks of rationality and modernity. It entails confronting the mechanisms through which indigenous epistemologies especially those shaped by women's lived experiences are rendered invisible or illegitimate within both academic and policy discourses (Finlay et al., 2021). In this regard, the intersectional insights offered by Indian feminist and decolonial scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Gopal Guru and Bina Agarwal are particularly instructive. Chakravarti (2003) interrogates the Brahmanical-patriarchal order that governs Indian historical narratives, while Guru (2002) critiques the caste and gender hierarchies that define the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Agarwal's (1992) work reveals the ecological and economic expertise of rural and tribal women, which remains largely unrecognized within dominant development paradigms.

These scholars collectively emphasize the necessity of centering Dalit, Adivasi and other subaltern women's voices in epistemic reconstruction. Recognizing them not merely as knowledge-bearers but as epistemic agents allows for a reorientation of knowledge production that challenges the structures of exclusion and affirms alternative modes of knowing. This shift involves not only acknowledging their contributions to agriculture, healthcare and resource management but also understanding these practices as critical interventions into global discourses on sustainability and justice (Mukhopadhyay & Roy, 2015).

Indeed, indigenous women's knowledge systems in India embody a relational and regenerative engagement with nature that aligns with postcolonial ecofeminist frameworks. As Jabeen (2018) notes, the material realities of women in postcolonial societies are inextricably tied to their environmental relations and historical experiences of dispossession. The resistance movements led by tribal women against extractivist development in states like Jharkhand, Odisha and the Northeast are not only political acts but epistemological assertions articulating sustainable, place-based ways of knowing that challenge both global capitalism and local patriarchy.

This epistemic agency carries significant implications for global justice. Indigenous women's practices disrupt technocratic and homogenizing solutions to climate change by offering grounded, relational and community-centric alternatives. Their lifeworlds exemplify the potential of pluriversal modernities multiple, coexisting ways of being, knowing and organizing social life that transcend the epistemic confines of Western liberal rationality. These indigenous epistemologies challenge the universalist claims of Eurocentric knowledge systems and instead foreground context-specific, relational and often ecologically embedded forms of understanding. Supporting such epistemic frameworks is therefore not only integral to the decolonial project but also essential to advancing the broader agenda of knowledge justice one that affirms the heterogeneity of human experience and legitimizes alternative ontologies and worldviews. In sum, the epistemic resistance and reclamation efforts led by marginalized women in postcolonial India are transformative acts. They disrupt dominant knowledge hierarchies and create pathways toward more just, inclusive and ecologically grounded futures. These movements remind us that the struggle for knowledge justice is inseparable from the broader struggle for social and epistemic emancipation.

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Conclusion

The gendered dimensions of indigenous knowledge in India reveal a complex interplay of epistemic authority, historical marginalization and contemporary resistance. Women have historically served as key custodians of ecological, medicinal and cultural knowledge, yet colonialism, modernization and patriarchal state structures have systematically eroded their roles and recognition. The persistence of these patterns in postcolonial India underscores the urgent need for epistemic justice through both the reclamation of women's knowledge and the transformation of institutional frameworks that continue to devalue it. This article has traced the evolution of gendered indigenous knowledge systems from pre-colonial times through the colonial rupture and into contemporary spaces of revival and resistance. It has demonstrated how women's epistemologies grounded in lived experience, communal ethics and ecological relationality are essential for reimagining sustainable and inclusive futures. The challenge lies in ensuring that these epistemologies are not only acknowledged but actively incorporated into development, education and governance paradigms. As India grapples with deepening socio-environmental crises, revisiting and revitalizing indigenous knowledge through a gendered lens is not merely an act of cultural preservation it is a transformative strategy for building epistemic democracy, ecological resilience and gender justice.

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