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Girls' Education in the Indian Knowledge System: A Historical and Philosophical Overview

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ABSTRACT

Girl education in India has deep roots in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), particularly during the Vedic and early classical periods. Contrary to colonial narratives that portray ancient Indian society as regressive, early texts such as the Rigveda, Upanishads, and Smritis reveal that women actively participated in scholarly and philosophical life. Eminent female figures like Gargi and Maitreyi engaged in intellectual debates and authored spiritual hymns, while educational initiation rituals (upanayana) were available to girls in learned families. Institutions such as forest universities and temple schools provided access to holistic education, including philosophy, arts and sciences.

However, from around 300 BCE, patriarchal norms encoded in legal texts like Manu Smriti led to a gradual decline in women's educational rights. Foreign invasions and colonial policies further disrupted inclusive learning systems. Despite this, epigraphic evidence from early medieval India shows women's continued engagement in religious and administrative roles, implying sustained literacy.

This paper traces the historical trajectory of girl education in India, examining its philosophical foundations, decline and revival. It calls for a re-engagement with India's indigenous educational values to inform modern, gender-equitable learning practices.

Introduction

In Indian philosophy, Śikṣā (education) is more than knowledge-transfer; it is a path to ātma-vidyā (self-realisation) and social harmony. Within this holistic vision the girl child held a sacred place. Texts across the Rigveda, Upaniṣads, Smritis and epics portray women not only as recipients of instruction but as teachers, philosophers and composers of sacred verse. Far from exclusion, they were integral to early India's intellectual and spiritual life.

The Rigveda preserves hymns by women seers such as Lopāmudrā, Ghoṣā, and Viśvavārā (Yasin & Hina, 2023, p. 719). A mantra attributed to Lopāmudrā captures the collaborative spirit of Vedic learning:

**“saṃgacchadhvaṃ saṃvadadhvaṃ saṃ vo manāṃsi jānatām |
devā bhāgaṃ yathā pūrve saṃjānānā upāsate ||”** (Rigveda 10.191.2)

“Let us come together, speak together, let our minds be of one accord. Just as the gods of old sat in harmony, let us commune in unity.”

Formal initiation through upanayana was accorded to girls in scholarly households (Altekar, 1938, p. 11). Educated women were recognised as Brahmvādinīs (lifelong learners) or Sadyovādhūs (students until marriage) (Altekar, 1938, pp. 14–16). The esteem granted female learning echoes in another Rigvedic blessing for a bride:

**“pr̥cchāmi tvā śaṃsasi me bravīṣi mātā yathā bhavati sā no astu |
śivaṃ gr̥he dyumnaṃ no dadhātu prajāvatīm rāyaspoṣāṃ kṛṇotu ||”** (Rigveda 10.85.26)

“May your mother be blessed through you; may the home be peaceful and prosperous, and may you beget wise and flourishing children.”

Here the daughter is envisioned as prajāvatī—a font of wisdom and wellbeing.

Classical narratives reinforce this paradigm. Gārgī Vācakanvī publicly debates Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, while Maitreyi chooses knowledge over wealth (Singh, 2022, p. 74). Epigraphs likewise record women as teachers, donors, and temple patrons (Verma, 2019, pp. 23–26), affirming their educational agency in civic and religious spheres.

Although later Dharmasastric compilations such as Manu Smṛti curtailed women's formal study (Raman, 2020, pp. 92–94), the foundational ethos of the Indian Knowledge System

had already enshrined female education as indispensable to personal liberation and collective flourishing. As Ray concludes, ancient India regarded women as “equal participants in every serious conversation about truth” (Ray, 2024, p. 1). Re-embracing that legacy remains vital for a genuinely inclusive educational future.

Girl Education in the Vedic and Early Classical Periods

The Vedic era (c. 1500–500 BCE) is often regarded as a golden age for women’s education within the Indian Knowledge System. Women were classified as Brahnavadinīs, who pursued lifelong Vedic study or Sadyovādhūs, who studied until marriage (Ray, 2024, p. 1; Altekar, 1938, pp. 14–16). These categories highlight an inclusive approach to education for girls, especially in learned households.

Texts such as the Rīgveda and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad mention several illustrious female scholars—Gargi Vachaknavi, who debated metaphysical questions with Yājñavalkya; Maitreyi, who chose spiritual knowledge over wealth; and Lopāmudrā and Apālā, who composed hymns (Sharma, 2023, pp. 19–20; Singh, 2022, p. 74).

The performance of upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) for girls in Vedic families indicates formal induction into education (Altekar, 1938, p. 11). Girls learned through oral traditions, emphasizing memorization and recitation—central features of early Indian pedagogy, to which women had access in scholarly families (Scharfe, 2002, p. 194, as cited in Yasin & Hina, 2023, p. 720).

Thus, the Vedic period reflects a time when women's education was respected and systemically supported within religious and philosophical life. This ethos is beautifully expressed in the mantra “**Sā Vidyā Yā Vimuktaye**”, meaning “*That is knowledge which liberates*” (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12). It highlights that true education is a means of spiritual and intellectual freedom. Complementing this is the profound mantra from the Isha Upanishad:

**“Om pūrṇamadaḥ pūrṇamidaṃ pūrṇāt pūrṇamudacyate |
pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇamevāvaśiṣyate ||”** (Isha Upanishad 1)

which conveys the infinite and whole nature of knowledge, symbolizing that learning is a complete and ever-renewing process accessible to all, including women.

Decline During the Medieval Period

The medieval period (c. 8th–18th centuries CE) marked a significant decline in women’s formal access to education, largely due to the combined impact of **foreign invasions**, **patriarchal reinterpretations of law**, and **social restrictions**. The imposition of **pardah**, **child marriage**, and the withdrawal of women from public life curtailed educational opportunities (Saini, 2023, p. 85). Legal codes such as *Manu Smṛiti* and *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti* increasingly emphasized women’s domestic roles and spiritual dependence on male guardians (Raman, 2020, pp. 92–94). This restrictive worldview is reflected in *Manu Smṛiti* 9.3, which declares: “**Na strī svatantryam arhati**” — “*A woman does not deserve independence.*” The full verse elaborates that a woman is to be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in youth, and by her sons in old age, denying her autonomy at every stage of life. Similarly, *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti* 1.85 states:

**“Pitr̥bhir bhartṛbhir putrair nārī rakṣyā yathāvidhi;
na svātantryam striyaḥ kāryam, pramādaḥ strīṣu kartavyaḥ”**

“A woman must be protected by her father, husband, and son according to proper rule; women should never be granted independence, and no carelessness should be shown in dealing with them.”

These verses became foundational to a legal and social framework that confined women to the domestic sphere and marginalized them from educational and public life.

Additionally, inscriptional records from the early medieval period show fewer references to women as donors or educators, reflecting their diminishing visibility in scholarly and administrative roles (Verma, 2019, pp. 45–48). Nevertheless, some forms of **informal learning** persisted through **devotional traditions**. The **Bhakti movement**, which emphasized personal devotion over ritual orthodoxy, created alternative spaces for women to express philosophical thought. Saints like **Meerabai**, **Akkamahadevi**, and **Lal Ded** used poetry and song to convey complex spiritual messages, often bypassing institutional barriers (Ray, 2024, p. 2). Their compositions reflect not only emotional depth but also intellectual engagement, offering a counter-current to the dominant exclusionary trends of their time.

Renaissance and Social Reform Movements

The 19th and early 20th centuries were transformative for girl education in India due to the efforts of visionary reformers and educators. Savitribai Phule, widely regarded as India’s

first female teacher, broke societal barriers by co-founding the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, setting a precedent for women's participation in formal education (Lohia, 2020, p. 1). Alongside her, Fatima Sheikh, recognized as the first Muslim woman educator in India, played a vital role in championing inclusive education, especially for girls from oppressed castes and communities (Lohia, 2020, p. 2).

Prominent reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule relentlessly challenged regressive customs like child marriage, purdah and the denial of education to women. Their advocacy led to the foundation of several schools for girls and the legitimization of women's education as a national priority (Paul & Upadhyay, 2024, p. 36). As Singh (2022) notes, these reform movements were rooted not only in enlightenment ideals but also in an effort to revive India's ancient traditions of inclusive learning (Singh, 2022, pp. 240–242). This period laid the foundation for modern policies and attitudes toward women's empowerment through education.

Women, Indigenous Knowledge and the Future of Girl Education

Recent scholarship underscores that women have long been central to India's indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Their expertise has ranged from oral literature and ecological stewardship to herbal medicine, childbirth practices, and sustainable resource management (Petikam & Vaidya, 2024, pp. 390–391). Rigvedic seers such as Lopāmr̥dā and Apālā composed hymns, while numerous epigraphs record women as temple patrons and land-grant donors, confirming their intellectual and administrative authority (Verma, 2019, pp. 23–26). Other evidence notes women's mastery of Ayurveda, astronomy, and music—disciplines integral to the wider Indian curriculum (Yasin & Hina, 2023, pp. 718–720). Although later patriarchal shifts curtailed formal schooling, these female-led traditions endured informally, illustrating the resilience of women's intellectual roles. Integrating such women-centred IKS into modern curricula is therefore vital for both cultural preservation and sustainable development (Petikam & Vaidya, 2024, p. 391).

Yet girl education in 21st-century India still faces formidable structural and socio-cultural barriers. High dropout rates—especially at the secondary level—stem from early marriage, economic pressure, and poor rural infrastructure (Iqbal, 2024, p. 555). Safety concerns and entrenched gender norms further undermine girls' educational continuity. Government initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyālaya (KGBV) have improved enrolment and retention, particularly among marginalised communities (Iqbal, 2024, p. 556). Nevertheless, stark regional disparities persist, notably in tribal belts, parts of northern India, and historically disadvantaged castes.

Bridging these gaps demands sustained policy innovation, robust community engagement, and the purposeful incorporation of local, often women-led, indigenous knowledge into classroom practice. Such an approach can create culturally relevant pedagogy, strengthen community buy-in, and ensure that education's benefits reach every girl. In doing so, India can honour its ancient conviction—reflected throughout the Vedas, epics, and living traditions—that a society truly prospers only when its daughters learn, lead and transmit wisdom across generations.

Conclusion

From the spiritually inclusive atmosphere of Vedic India to the socio-political activism of today, the journey of girl education in India has been marked by profound shifts—ranging from reverence and participation to marginalization and revival. Women once stood as philosophers, poets, and physicians, only to be later restricted by evolving patriarchal structures and colonial disruptions. Yet, the reform movements of the 19th century reignited a national consciousness that recognized education as a tool for empowerment, equality, and nation-building.

Today, amidst persistent challenges like dropout rates and regional disparities, the vision of NEP 2020 offers an opportunity to reclaim the inclusive spirit of India's indigenous knowledge systems. Integrating historical legacies with contemporary needs can help create a truly gender-equitable education framework. As ancient Indian texts remind us, **“Yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ”**—where women are honoured, divinity flourishes. India's progress and prosperity rest on ensuring that its daughters are educated, empowered and treated as equals in every sphere of life.

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