From Shakti to Representation: Reinterpreting Indian Knowledge Systems in the Context of Women's Political Empowerment

3

Vanshika

Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has historically conceptualized women through powerful metaphors such as Shakti, symbolizing strength, wisdom, and cosmic energy. Yet, the political representation of women in India has remained structurally limited. This paper reinterprets traditional Indian philosophical and socio-cultural frameworks to examine the tension between symbolic reverence and material exclusion. By situating women's political empowerment within the broader context of social structure, patriarchy, and democratic modernity, the study critically analyzes whether cultural narratives have facilitated or constrained women's access to political power. Drawing upon classical texts, socio-political developments, feminist political theory, and contemporary representation trends, the paper argues that while the discourse of Shakti offers normative legitimacy for women's leadership, institutional and structural barriers continue to mediate political participation. The study calls for a transformative reinterpretation of Indian Knowledge Systems that bridges symbolic empowerment with substantive democratic representation.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge System, Shakti, Women's Political Empowerment, Patriarchy, Representation, Political Modernity, Social Structure*

Vanshika
Research Scholar, Bareilly College, Bareilly U.P.
Email: vanshikapanghal15@gmail.com
Publisher: Anu Books, DOI: https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB356-A26. Ch.3
Book Name : Indian Knowledge System and Social Sciences
Plagiarism Report: 03%

Introduction:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a civilizational framework that integrates philosophy, ethics, governance, social organization, and spiritual inquiry developed over millennia in the Indian subcontinent. Unlike modern disciplinary divisions, IKS presents a holistic worldview in which metaphysics, morality, and social order are interconnected. Foundational texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Dharmashastras, and later philosophical traditions articulate concepts of cosmic order (*rita*), duty (*dharma*), and knowledge (*vidya*) as guiding principles for both individual conduct and collective life. Knowledge within this framework is not merely descriptive but normative—it shapes ethical relations and social responsibilities.

Within this intellectual tradition, the feminine principle occupies a position of profound symbolic importance. The concept of *Shakti*, meaning power or dynamic energy, represents the creative and sustaining force of the universe. In Shakta philosophy, Shakti is not subordinate but foundational; without Shakti, even Shiva is described as inert. The image of Ardhanarishvara—depicting the divine as half male and half female—symbolizes ontological complementarity and unity between masculine and feminine principles. Vedic and Upanishadic literature also records the participation of women such as Gargi and Maitreyi in philosophical debates, indicating recognition of female intellectual agency (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Across devotional traditions, goddesses such as Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi embody strength, knowledge, and prosperity, reinforcing the cultural sanctification of the feminine.

Despite this symbolic exaltation, a persistent paradox characterizes the socio-political status of women in India. While the feminine is revered within religious and philosophical discourse, women's participation in formal political institutions has historically remained limited. In post-independence India, women's representation in Parliament remained below 15% for decades (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This gap between symbolic reverence and institutional representation raises a critical question: How can a civilization that

worships feminine power sustain structural barriers to women's political authority?

The answer lies not in theological contradiction but in social mediation. Indian society historically evolved through layered hierarchies of caste, kinship, and lineage. Patriarchal norms structured property rights, inheritance, and public authority in ways that privileged male control. As Chakravarti (1993) argues in her discussion of Brahmanical patriarchy, gender relations were institutionalized to preserve caste hierarchy and lineage continuity. Thus, while women were symbolically venerated, their socio-political agency was often confined within domestic or ritual domains.

It is therefore essential to distinguish between metaphysical empowerment and institutional empowerment. The discourse of Shakti confers moral prestige and symbolic legitimacy, yet political representation depends upon access to education, economic resources, party networks, and electoral structures. Symbolic capital does not automatically translate into material power. The paradox of Indian democracy lies in the coexistence of cultural reverence and structural exclusion.

The trajectory of women's political participation reflects gradual institutional correction. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), mandating one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies, significantly expanded grassroots representation. Empirical research indicates that such quotas not only increased descriptive representation but also influenced governance priorities (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). More recently, the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023—popularly known as the Women's Reservation Act—provides for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Although implementation remains contingent upon delimitation processes, the legislation marks a historic acknowledgment of structural gender imbalance in political institutions.

The passage of the Women's Reservation Act makes it imperative to revisit Indian Knowledge Systems through a critical lens. If civilizational thought symbolically legitimizes feminine power, democratic institutions must reflect that legitimacy substantively. At the same time, invoking Shakti cannot substitute for structural reform.

A nuanced reinterpretation is required—one that neither romanticizes tradition nor dismisses it as inherently oppressive.

This paper argues that the tension between Shakti and representation is not evidence of civilizational inconsistency but of historical mediation through patriarchal social structures. Indian Knowledge Systems contain normative resources that can support gender-inclusive governance, yet these must be consciously reinterpreted within democratic frameworks. True empowerment requires translating symbolic reverence into institutional authority. When Shakti moves from metaphor to mandate, democratic representation can more fully reflect the ideals embedded within India's intellectual heritage.

Conceptualizing Shakti in Indian Knowledge Systems:

The concept of *Shakti* occupies a central place in Indian philosophical and theological traditions. In Vedic and post-Vedic literature, women were not merely passive subjects but intellectual participants. Texts such as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* reference women scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi engaging in philosophical debates on metaphysics and the nature of reality (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Gargi's interrogation of Yajnavalkya on the essence of existence demonstrates not only female intellectual presence but also recognition of women's participation in epistemic discourse. These accounts indicate that intellectual agency for women was neither unimaginable nor absent in early traditions.

The *Devi Mahatmya* and other Shakta traditions position the goddess as supreme cosmic power, capable of sustaining and destroying the universe. The iconography of Durga, Kali, and Saraswati collectively symbolizes strength, knowledge, and creativity. Durga embodies martial power and righteous resistance; Saraswati represents learning and intellectual refinement; Lakshmi signifies prosperity and order. The philosophical idea of Ardhanarishvara—depicting Shiva and Shakti as inseparable halves—further reinforces metaphysical complementarity between masculine and feminine principles, suggesting that creation and governance of the cosmos require balance rather than hierarchy.

Importantly, Shakti in these traditions is not a peripheral attribute but the animating force without which divine action is

impossible. In many Shakta schools of thought, the goddess is ultimate reality itself, reversing conventional patriarchal assumptions about divinity. This metaphysical centrality endowed the feminine principle with immense symbolic authority within ritual and devotional life.

However, it is essential to distinguish between metaphysical agency and socio-political agency. While women were symbolically associated with divine power, the institutional structures of governance in ancient and medieval India were predominantly patriarchal (Chakravarti, 1993). Political authority, property ownership, and lineage continuity were largely organized through male-dominated kinship systems. The theological elevation of the feminine did not necessarily correspond to equal access to material resources, administrative power, or public decision-making roles.

Thus, Shakti functioned primarily as a spiritual and cosmological concept rather than a political doctrine. The symbolic capital of the feminine divine did not automatically produce egalitarian social relations. Instead, reverence coexisted with regulation, and sanctification coexisted with control. This distinction becomes crucial in understanding the persistence of gendered exclusions within political institutions and sets the foundation for examining how symbolic empowerment may be reinterpreted to inform contemporary democratic representation.

Social Structure, Patriarchy and Political Exclusion:

Indian society historically developed through complex hierarchies of caste, kinship, and lineage, which structured access to resources, authority, and social mobility. These hierarchies were not merely economic or ritual but deeply gendered. Patriarchy was embedded within both familial and broader social institutions, shaping norms of inheritance, marriage, and social conduct. As Chakravarti (1993) argues, Brahmanical patriarchy institutionalized control over women's sexuality, mobility, and reproductive capacity in order to preserve caste purity and ensure lineage continuity. Women's roles were central to maintaining social order, yet this centrality translated into regulation rather than autonomy.

The public-private divide further reinforced gender exclusion. Governance, warfare, and administration were constructed as

masculine domains associated with rationality, authority, and public visibility, while domesticity, caregiving, and ritual observance were feminized and confined to the private sphere. Even when women exercised informal influence within royal courts or local communities, formal political authority remained largely inaccessible. Authority was inherited and transmitted through male lineage, limiting women's independent claims to power.

Colonial intervention in the nineteenth century added another layer of complexity. The codification of personal laws by the British administration crystallized selective interpretations of customary practices into rigid legal frameworks (Sarkar, 2001). While certain social reforms—such as widow remarriage or female education—were introduced, colonial governance also reinforced patriarchal norms by treating community identity as fixed and tradition-bound. As a result, gender hierarchies became intertwined with emerging nationalist and communal identities.

The nationalist movement in the early twentieth century expanded women's participation in public protests, political mobilization, and civil disobedience. However, participation did not automatically yield equal representation. After independence, women gained formal political rights through universal adult franchise, yet representation in legislative bodies remained disproportionately low. This highlights a distinction central to political theory: the difference between symbolic and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967). Symbolic representation refers to figures or images that embody collective ideals, whereas substantive representation involves actual influence over policy decisions and institutional power.

In the Indian context, women were often elevated symbolically as embodiments of the nation—most notably through the figure of "Bharat Mata"—while remaining underrepresented in law-making institutions. Patriarchy, therefore, operated not in opposition to cultural reverence but alongside it. The symbolic exaltation of women did not dismantle structural barriers related to education, property ownership, economic independence, party-level gatekeeping, and access to political networks. Instead, reverence coexisted with exclusion, producing a system in which women were celebrated as ideals yet

constrained as political actors. This structural paradox forms the critical bridge between civilizational discourse and contemporary struggles for democratic inclusion.

Women in Indian Politics: From Margins to Mobilization:

Women's political participation expanded significantly during the freedom struggle, marking one of the earliest large-scale entries of women into organized public life. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit challenged not only colonial authority but also prevailing patriarchal norms that restricted women's mobility and visibility. Participation in civil disobedience movements, protests, and nationalist campaigns created new political subjectivities for women. However, while nationalist discourse invoked women as symbols of sacrifice and moral strength, this mobilization did not automatically translate into proportional representation within post-independence political institutions.

Following independence, universal adult franchise granted women formal political equality. Yet descriptive representation in Parliament and State Assemblies remained modest for decades, often fluctuating within single-digit percentages. Women were present, but rarely in numbers sufficient to influence legislative agendas substantively. Political parties frequently fielded women candidates selectively, often in constituencies considered "safe" or symbolically significant rather than as part of systematic inclusion strategies.

A major structural shift occurred with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which mandated reservation of not less than one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. This reform marked a transformation from rhetorical commitment to institutional design. Empirical studies suggest that reservation at the local level not only increased women's participation but also influenced policy priorities, particularly in areas such as water, education, and health (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). The success of grassroots reservations demonstrated that political inclusion is significantly shaped by institutional mechanisms rather than symbolic acknowledgment alone. Over time, many states expanded reservations to 50%, further normalizing women's leadership in local governance.

At the national level, the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023—popularly referred to as the Women's Reservation Act—represents a historic step toward structural inclusion. By mandating 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, the amendment acknowledges persistent gender imbalance in higher political offices. However, implementation remains contingent upon delimitation processes, and the actual transformative impact will depend on party nomination strategies, internal party democracy, and broader socio-economic access.

Parallel to institutional quotas, dynastic pathways have shaped women's entry into politics. Political families often provide access to networks, financial resources, name recognition, and organizational support. From a sociological perspective, this reflects Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, wherein inherited networks facilitate access to elite institutions. Dynastic entry can lower barriers for individual women, yet it does not necessarily democratize participation across class or caste lines. Instead, it may reproduce elite circulation within limited social strata, reinforcing existing hierarchies.

In contrast, grassroots leaders emerging through reservations challenge this pattern by broadening the social base of representation. Women from marginalized caste and rural backgrounds have entered governance structures, altering the demographic composition of political institutions. Thus, two primary pathways—elite inheritance and institutional quotas—illustrate distinct models of political entry: one mediated through family capital, the other through constitutional design. The interaction between these pathways reveals that sustainable empowerment requires both structural reform and social transformation.

Reinterpreting Indian Knowledge Systems for Democratic Modernity:

The tension between *Shakti* and representation does not imply that Indian traditions are inherently anti-egalitarian. Rather, it reveals that traditions have historically been mediated through patriarchal social arrangements that shaped their institutional expression. Civilizational ideas do not operate in isolation; they are interpreted, institutionalized, and sometimes constrained by prevailing power structures. A critical reinterpretation of Indian Knowledge Systems

(IKS) can therefore reclaim emancipatory elements that support gender justice while acknowledging historical distortions.

First, the philosophical principle of complementarity symbolized in *Ardhanarishvara* can be reimagined as normative support for shared governance rather than hierarchical division. The image signifies interdependence and balance between masculine and feminine principles, suggesting that neither is complete in isolation. When translated into democratic theory, this complementarity can justify models of participatory governance, power-sharing, and inclusive leadership. Rather than confining complementarity to metaphysical symbolism, it can be understood as a political ethic advocating balanced representation.

Second, the intellectual presence of women in Vedic discourse challenges narratives that women's leadership is culturally alien or externally imposed. Figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi demonstrate that intellectual authority was not exclusively gendered male in early philosophical traditions. Recovering such histories destabilizes claims that gender equality is merely a modern Western import and instead situates women's leadership within indigenous epistemic traditions.

Third, the ethical concept of *dharma*—understood not merely as duty but as moral order aligned with justice—offers a normative framework for gender-inclusive institutions. If governance is to be guided by *rajadharma* (the duty of rulers), then ensuring equitable representation becomes a matter of ethical obligation rather than political concession. Democratic modernity, therefore, need not reject tradition; it can reinterpret foundational ethical principles to promote equality and accountability.

Feminist scholarship emphasizes that empowerment requires both individual agency and structural transformation (Walby, 1990). Symbolic reverence without redistribution of resources, decision-making authority, and institutional access sustains inequality. Translating Shakti into representation demands reforms beyond constitutional amendments. Educational reforms that normalize women's leadership, political training programs that enhance capacity-building, gender-sensitive budgeting, and internal party democracy are essential mechanisms for embedding equality within institutional

practice. Representation must extend beyond numerical presence to substantive influence over policy agendas.

Furthermore, gender-inclusive governance aligns with global democratic norms while remaining culturally grounded. When reforms are articulated through indigenous philosophical vocabulary rather than solely through external rights-based discourse, they acquire deeper social legitimacy. Situating women's leadership within the moral language of Shakti and dharma bridges tradition and modernity, reducing resistance framed as cultural defense.

Reinterpreting Indian Knowledge Systems is therefore not an act of revisionism but of renewal. It involves transforming symbolic capital into institutional power and re-aligning civilizational ideals with constitutional commitments. In doing so, democratic India can move beyond the paradox of worship without representation and toward a political order where the feminine principle is not only revered but institutionally realized.

Conclusion:

The Indian Knowledge System has long articulated the feminine principle as powerful, creative, and indispensable. Yet this symbolic exaltation has not automatically ensured women's equal participation in political institutions. The gap between Shakti and representation reflects structural patriarchy, socio-economic hierarchies, and institutional gatekeeping rather than inherent civilizational limitations.

Women's political empowerment in India has progressed through constitutional amendments, grassroots reservations, and increasing public discourse. However, sustainable transformation requires bridging symbolic reverence with structural inclusion.

Reinterpreting Indian Knowledge Systems offers an opportunity to align tradition with democratic equality. True empowerment lies not in worshipping the feminine divine, but in institutionalizing women's authority within governance structures. When Shakti becomes not merely a metaphor but a political reality, democratic representation will reflect the civilizational ideals it has long celebrated.

References:

1. Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
2. Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. *Economic and Political Weekly, 28*(14), 579–585.
3. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica, 72*(5), 1409–1443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x
4. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). *Women in national parliaments*. https://www.ipu.org
5. Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation*. University of California Press.
6. Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The principal Upanishads*. Harper & Brothers.
7. Sarkar, T. (2001). *Hindu wife, Hindu nation: Community, religion, and cultural nationalism*. Indiana University Press.
8. Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.