



# WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ENTERPRISE

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## ABSTRACT

Women entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant driver of inclusive and sustainable development in India. In recent years, renewed attention to Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) has opened new avenues for women to transform traditional knowledge into viable enterprises. Indian Knowledge Systems, encompassing indigenous practices, crafts, healthcare traditions, agriculture, food processing, textiles, and ecological wisdom, have historically been preserved and transmitted by women. This paper explores the intersection of women entrepreneurship and IKS as a pathway for empowerment through enterprise. It examines how women-led enterprises rooted in IKS contribute to economic independence, cultural preservation, social empowerment, and sustainable development. The paper also analyses challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in leveraging IKS and suggests policy interventions and institutional support mechanisms to strengthen this ecosystem. The study highlights that integrating IKS with modern entrepreneurship can empower women while reinforcing India's cultural and knowledge heritage.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, Indian Knowledge Systems, Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Indigenous Knowledge

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a catalyst for economic growth, innovation, and social transformation. In India, women entrepreneurship plays a critical role in addressing gender inequality, employment generation, and inclusive development. Despite progress, women entrepreneurs continue to face structural barriers such as limited access to finance, markets, education, and technology. Against this backdrop, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) present a unique opportunity for women to build enterprises rooted in cultural traditions, local resources, and sustainable practices. Indian Knowledge Systems refer to the vast body of traditional knowledge developed in India over centuries, including practices related to agriculture, medicine (Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani), handicrafts, textiles, food processing, architecture, ecology, and community-based governance. Women have historically been custodians of this knowledge, particularly in household industries, artisanal crafts, traditional healthcare, and food systems. This paper argues that women entrepreneurship based on IKS not only provides economic empowerment but also strengthens cultural identity, promotes sustainability, and supports rural and community-based development. The paper examines the conceptual link between women entrepreneurship and IKS, explores areas of enterprise, discusses challenges, and proposes strategies for empowerment through enterprise.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In her article "Women Empowerment and Self-Help Groups in Rural India," **Sharma, Rekha (2021)** examines how they facilitate rural women's financial independence, collective bargaining, and grassroots political participation

**World Bank Gender Data Portal (2023):** According to World Bank statistics, India has one of the lowest rates of female labor force participation in Asia, falling from 30% in 1990 to roughly 19% in 2022. This trend indicates skill mismatches, care burdens, and structural problems in work environments.

**Singh and Mehta (2022):** Their study, "Digital Inclusion and Women Empowerment in Rural India," shows that women's mobility, income generation, and participation in governance are significantly impacted by smartphone access and digital literacy initiatives.

## 3. OBJECTIVES

- To study the significance of Indian Knowledge Systems in fostering women entrepreneurship in India.
- To analyse the empowerment outcomes of women-led enterprises based on traditional knowledge.
- To propose policy and institutional measures for strengthening IKS-based women entrepreneurship

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT

Women entrepreneurship refers to the process by which women initiate, organize, and manage business enterprises to achieve economic independence and social mobility. Empowerment through entrepreneurship goes beyond income generation and includes:

- Economic empowerment: Control over income, assets, and financial decision-making
- Social empowerment: Enhanced status, self-confidence, and participation in community life
- Cultural empowerment: Recognition of women's knowledge, skills, and heritage
- Psychological empowerment: Increased self-esteem, autonomy, and leadership capacity

Entrepreneurship rooted in IKS aligns closely with this holistic view of empowerment. It allows women to commercialize knowledge that is already embedded in their lived experiences, thereby reducing entry barriers and strengthening ownership over production processes.

## 5. UNDERSTANDING INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS)

Indian Knowledge Systems encompass indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge practices developed through observation, experience, and experimentation. Key characteristics of IKS include:

- Context-specific and community-based
- Sustainable and eco-friendly
- Transmitted orally and through practice
- Integrated with cultural and spiritual values

Women play a central role in the preservation and transmission of IKS, especially in domains such as seed conservation, herbal medicine, traditional food preparation, weaving, embroidery, pottery, and natural resource management. The recent policy emphasis on IKS in education, research, and innovation has created new opportunities to integrate traditional knowledge with modern entrepreneurial models.

## 6. AREAS OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP BASED ON IKS

### 6.1 Handicrafts and Handloom

Traditional crafts such as weaving, embroidery, pottery, bamboo work, and metal crafts are deeply rooted in IKS. Women artisans transform inherited skills into enterprises through self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and micro-enterprises. These ventures preserve cultural heritage while providing livelihoods.

### 6.2 Traditional Healthcare and Wellness

Women entrepreneurs are increasingly engaged in enterprises based on Ayurveda, herbal medicine, yoga, aromatherapy, and natural cosmetics. Knowledge of medicinal plants and home remedies, traditionally passed down through generations of women, is now being formalized into wellness products and services.

### 6.3 indigenous food systems

Traditional food processing techniques such as millet-based products, pickles, papads, fermented foods, and herbal beverages represent a major area of women-led enterprises. These products address contemporary concerns related to nutrition, health, and sustainable food systems.

#### 6.4 sustainable agriculture and allied activities

Women farmers and entrepreneurs apply indigenous agricultural knowledge related to organic farming, seed preservation, natural pest control, and water management. Enterprises based on IKS promote climate-resilient agriculture and biodiversity conservation.

#### 6.5 Natural Dyes, Textiles, And Eco-Friendly Products

Knowledge of natural dyes, traditional textile printing, and eco-friendly materials has enabled women to establish enterprises catering to environmentally conscious markets.

### 7. ROLE OF IKS-BASED ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

#### 7.1 Economic Independence

IKS-based enterprises enable women to generate income using locally available resources and skills. This reduces dependence on external employment and enhances financial autonomy.

#### 7.2 Preservation Of Cultural Heritage

Women entrepreneurs act as cultural custodians by sustaining traditional knowledge and practices. Enterprise becomes a medium for cultural continuity and innovation.

#### 7.3 Social Recognition and Leadership

Entrepreneurial success enhances women's social status and leadership roles within families and communities. Participation in SHGs and cooperatives strengthens collective empowerment.

#### 7.4 Sustainable Development

IKS-based enterprises promote sustainable production, ethical consumption, and ecological balance, aligning with global sustainable development goals.

### 8. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN IKS

Despite their potential, women entrepreneurs leveraging IKS face several challenges:

- Lack of formal recognition and documentation of traditional knowledge
- Limited access to finance and credit
- Inadequate market linkages and branding
- Low technological integration
- Intellectual property concerns and biopiracy
- Balancing domestic responsibilities with enterprise activities

Addressing these challenges is essential to unlock the full potential of IKS-based women entrepreneurship.

### 9. POLICY SUPPORT AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

To strengthen women entrepreneurship in IKS, the following measures are recommended:

- Documentation and validation of traditional knowledge
- Skill development and entrepreneurship training
- Access to microfinance and government schemes
- Market access through digital platforms and exhibitions
- Support for intellectual property rights such as Geographical Indications (GI)
- Integration of IKS in higher education and research

Institutions such as SHGs, NGOs, universities, and government agencies play a crucial role in creating an enabling ecosystem.

### 9. FINDINGS

- Indian Knowledge Systems create inclusive entrepreneurial opportunities for women by leveraging traditional skills and local resources.
- IKS-based entrepreneurship promotes economic independence, cultural preservation, and social empowerment of women.
- Structural, financial, and technological barriers continue to limit the full potential of women entrepreneurs.
- Strong policy support and institutional mechanisms are critical for scaling IKS-based women enterprises

### 8. CONCLUSION

Women entrepreneurs and Indian Knowledge Systems together form a powerful framework for empowerment through enterprise. By transforming traditional knowledge into sustainable businesses, women can achieve economic independence, social recognition, and cultural empowerment. IKS-based entrepreneurship not only

benefits women but also contributes to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and inclusive growth. Strengthening this intersection through policy support, education, and market integration is essential for realizing the full potential of women-led enterprises in India.

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