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ROLE OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Knowledge Systems (TKS) of India are made up of Jnana, Vignan, and Jeevan Darshan, which have evolved from observation, experimentation, and analysis. Thus, TKS is a vast body of knowledge that includes scientific, artistic, and literary works, as well as medical practices, agricultural techniques, and more. TKS is passed down orally through generations and is adapted to the local culture and environment.

In ancient India, women were integral to the transmission, preservation, and evolution of knowledge across various disciplines, from philosophy and literature to medicine and spirituality. Women have been the traditional incubators and transmitters of knowledge relating to seed preservation and storage, food processing, indigenous health practices, etc. Such forms of knowledge are often contextual, rooted in experience and experiments but are non-codified. In many cultures in a family, women have been custodians of traditional knowledge and instrumental in developing and sustaining the techniques and designs for textiles, clothing, and other valuable forms of traditional cultural expression. Women act as local teachers, passing on traditional knowledge and technologies, such as the proverbial "grandmother's cures", which may hold the key to many curative plant - uses, and acting as traditional birth attendants in many rural societies, where there is no access to "modern" medical facilities. In addition, the variety of home remedies applied in rural homes is also very extensive in terms of useful knowledge on food and nutrition. They possess a very detailed awareness of the species and ecosystems that surround them. They play a key role in the sphere of biological diversity as managers of the kitchen garden and keepers of local knowledge of food crops and medicinal plants. Therefore, it is essential that any knowledge sharing mechanism recognises the value of knowledge possessed by women and provides space for value-addition and the amalgamation of women's knowledge in the global knowledge pool. The focus of this research paper is to examine the role of women in the creation and expansion of non-codified traditional

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knowledge and the transmission of various traditional knowledge that women possess, from generation to generation will be discussed. It may contribute to address the challenges of and around our own biosphere, our body, our environment, etc.

Keywords: Indian traditional knowledge, ecosystems, grandmother's cures, practical experience of rural societies, Cultural traditional knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional knowledge (TK) is knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity. It is typically rooted with the customs, beliefs, and experiences of indigenous and local communities, interactions with nature, society and environment. The traditional knowledge is important for adapting to climate change and understanding livelihoods, security, and well-being. It is passed orally from adults to children. Some examples of traditional knowledge sharing systems include; gurukuls, step wells, shishya Kala institutions and many more. The categories of traditional knowledge are vast such as agricultural knowledge, medicinal knowledge, biodiversity related knowledge, and expressions of dance, folklore and etc.

Traditional Knowledge System (TKS) is the know-how of the people, gathered through day-to-day walk of life, to overcome the hurdles and tap the potentialities from their immediate neighbourhood. TKS represents information, knowledge, skill and technology along with standard management practices which are defined through cultural systems. In this contemporary world when the human civilization faces climate change, natural disaster, loss of biodiversity, destabilized ecological services, food and nutritional inequality, sanitation and health problems and many others, TKS need to be emphasized more in search for alternative solutions or ways to face challenges and to design a sustainable way of lifestyle .

Many examples of TKS-based practices can be found in the country in natural resource management, agricultural practices, medicine and health, housing and allied design and construction that have the potential to act as leverage for sustainable development. The different agro-climatic zones of India represents diversity in environmental and cultural practices, thus sowing different traditional knowledge-based practices to adjust the way of life of the people to the respective environmental set-up. All such practices have some long-

established history, development and practically proven observation, which actually don't need only record, but validation and adaptability in present context in meeting the requirement for sustainable development.

TKs are a major repository of knowledge and practices which have evolved over centuries with lived experiences and nature interactions. Extremely deep in cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs, TKS represents domains that include agriculture, medicine, natural resource management, arts, and architecture. With its diversity, this legacy in India has thus evolved with local environments into sustainable living. For example, ecological adaptability can be revealed from mixed cropping, crop rotation and water management practices such as step wells and tank irrigation systems. Similarly, the traditional medicine systems followed in the Indian subcontinent, Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani, have always taken the advantage of rich biodiversity to provide holistic health solutions. Women play a key role in the preservation and transmission of such knowledge while, at the same time, serving as custodians for ethnomedicinal practices and biodiversity conservation. Expertise in areas such as seed selection, soil management, and the use of local flora underscores their contributions to sustainability.

TKS is of immense contemporary relevance for the global challenges of climate change, natural disasters, and biodiversity loss. Water-conserving crops to advanced water-saving techniques are some of the adaptive strategies imbibed in TKS. Even traditional ways of building a house, such as climate-responsive architecture in the Nalukettu house of Kerala or the Jali work of Rajasthan, provide much stress on sustainability and resource effectiveness. All these can be advanced with a combination of TKS and modern science and technology towards attaining food security, clean energy, and ecological conservation.

Yet, the potential of TKS goes untapped to its utmost due to issues such as poor documentation, lack of validation, and the possibility of misuse by commercial firms. Initiatives like India's Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) attempt to protect such traditional knowledge from misuse while facilitating an overall increase in its usage. This can be achieved by inculcating TKS into curricula and policies at national levels to enlighten and implement it in the day-to-day problem-solving processes. Reviving and valuing TKS will help India in some of the most critical environmental and socio-economic problems it faces while protecting its rich cultural heritage for generations to come as it opens the way for a more sustainable and

inclusive global society.

Thus India, a historical and cultural civilization in the making, has always had a sterling regard for knowledge whether it is in spirituality, science, literature, or the arts. Knowledge has been an integral part of Indian life. It is also one of the significant roles of women, roles of women often overlooked that they have played in shaping and preserving traditional Indian knowledge across centuries and more.

Women have deep knowledge of plants, medicines, and their environment. Traditionally, they have been using a variety of indigenous plants and animals and have a direct stake in their preservation. Women's knowledge is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community for their particular identity. Studies have shown that women have a more significant interest in utilizing ethnomedicine, conserving and preserving the local forest plants and other natural resources for perpetual use. Beyond this, women are traditional custodians of genetic and species diversity in biodiversity.

From the Vedic sages and female philosophers who contributed to ancient spiritual texts, to the mathematicians, scientists, and healers whose knowledge in fields like Ayurveda and astronomy enriched society, women have been crucial in the development of Indian knowledge systems. Nevertheless, their contributions have not received the recognition and acknowledgement, they deserve. This leads to underlining the rich intellectual legacy of women in India and their roles in several fields such as philosophy, medicine, education, literature, arts, and more.

They have explored the history, studied different cultural practices, and acted not only as custodians of knowledge but also as pioneers of wisdom in themselves. Their comprehensive knowledge can assist a more inclusive and realistic representation of India's intellectual history with the adoptive use of such knowledge systems.

RELATIONSHIP OF WOMEN WITH TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Traditionally, women have played a key role in maintaining, sharing, and developing TKS as custodians of cultural and environmental wisdom. They have been and are engaged in various sectors, ranging from agriculture and healthcare to biodiversity conservation and the arts.

CUSTODIANS OF AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD KNOWLEDGE

For historical purposes, they have filled out several roles in agricultural fields since these roles were considered crucial as seeds, soils, and water management usually implied much-needed sustainable agriculture skills often well-surpassed by the conventional agriculture skill. Skills in selection of seed material, diversification of crops, and fertility of soils in management are significant contributions that lead to the sustainability of agricultural endeavours. Women are not only involved in various ways of protecting crops through traditional food storage and pest control techniques but it reflects their deep knowledge of ecological balance also. This is the reason why traditional knowledge is a good basis of biodiversity preservation and adapting farming practices to the ever-changing climate.

TRADITIONALLY MEDICAL AND HEALING PRACTITIONERS

In health care settings, they played the midwife role, herbalists, and caregivers, accumulating and passing down ethnomedicinal knowledge from generation to generation. Their close association with local flora and fauna enables them to conserve biodiversity and maintain the genetic diversity of crops and livestock, which is important for food security and ecological balance. Beyond the practical applications, women have significantly contributed to intellectual and cultural traditions.

Years of informal knowledge systems have been time tested by women to cure diseases and maintain the human health. They are aware of the types of local plants, their properties, and usage in various diseases and disorders. These indigenous practices are congruent to their socio-economic and cultural conditions. Wide adaptability, nature of practices, local availability and no cost nature are the major factors responsible for the continuance of indigenous practices in human health. Women not only know the local medicines for treating diseases but are also wise enough to use the ethnobotanical resources for making nutritious and medicinal foods.

TRANSMITTERS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

From the Vedic sages and philosophers to the healers and artists who developed Indian knowledge systems, the intellectual legacy of women is rich and neglected. Their roles as carriers of oral traditions, folklore, and crafts further underscore their significance in the sustenance of cultural identities. Women are typically the main custodians of oral traditions, including tales, songs, and rituals that are important in maintaining a community's cultural

heritage. Through storytelling, women pass on myths and history and moral lessons that carry wisdom around the natural world, social relationships, and the cultural values. In many societies, they play a central role performing rituals and ceremonies associated with important events in life, such as births, weddings, and deaths. These rituals often possess deep cultural and spiritual knowledge enabling the maintenance of social order and community cohesion.

Women are integral to the Traditional Knowledge Systems. Through the roles played as caregivers, educators, and leaders in community, women shape and sustain practices. Such engagement with agriculture, health care, natural resource management, and cultural heritage forms a link with the environment, community, and culture in which the women exist. Women have been central figures in the preservation, transmission, and application of traditional knowledge systems across cultures. These are their roles as custodians of agriculture, healthcare, environmental management, and cultural practices critical to the survival and sustainability of communities. However, there is growing need to ensure that women's contributions are recognized, valued, and supported. Empowering women to maintain and expand their role in traditional knowledge systems is not only important for cultural preservation but also for achieving sustainable development and resilience in the face of modern challenges like climate change.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

LACK OF ACCESS TO FORMAL EDUCATION

Women contribute a lot to the traditional knowledge systems, though they often suffer from recognition, acknowledgement and empowerment issues. The role of women in the process of knowledge transmission and preservation is often overlooked or underrated, especially in patriarchal societies where men are seen as the primary knowledge bearers. In some regions, formal education, resources, and training are scarce for women. This lack of access may impede their efficiency in conserving and enriching their traditional knowledge, especially in the globalization and modern development process.

LACK OF FORMAL TRAINING TO PASS ON KNOWLEDGE

As societies modernize, much of the traditional knowledge passed through generations is likely to be lost, especially in rural areas. Women, especially the old generation, are the principal

custodians of this kind of knowledge, but there is usually a challenge experienced in their ability to hand it down to the upcoming generations due to migration, urbanization, and Westernization. To-date, women are still considered as very vital parts of Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS). However, they are increasingly hindered by several barriers, which prevent them from engaging fully and being appreciated completely. The main challenge lies with erosion through globalization, industrialization, and the influence of modern agricultural and medical systems. These factors have driven TKS to the backstage, especially in the psyche of the young who tag it as outdated.

LACK OF ACCESS TO DECISION-MAKING PLATFORM

Additionally, patriarchal structures and social biases have made women's roles in TKS historically subservient, not allowing them access to any decision-making platform that may enhance their contribution. Women also face challenges maintaining their knowledge systems because they are not allowed to gain control over land and resources, especially in agriculture and ecological management, since their roles have traditionally been centred on it. Environmental degradation, through climate change and biodiversity loss, further disrupts these ecosystems on which many of the traditional practices depend with a disproportionate impact on women who rely on them.

COMMERCIALIZING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Globalisation urbanisation and industrialisation poses another challenge to degrade in commercializing traditional knowledge, where women's efforts in the medical field, crafts, and others are not paid or valued.

MODERNISED APPROACH TO PRESERVE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

In the face of these challenges, women are contributing significantly to reviving and renovating TKS. They become active in documenting and recording TKS at community and NGO levels so the future generation can benefit from them. Women have learnt to use traditional agricultural and water management practices to counter the challenges of climate changes by planting drought-resistant crops among other sustainable farming practices. Not to mention, women are spearheading grassroot movements, the Chipko and Navdanya movements focus on environment conservation and seed sovereignty, respectively. In doing so, women integrate

traditional knowledge into modern practices. Women make use of digital platforms for popularising organic farming, ayurveda and allopathy combination among various things. Women also utilize TKS in economic ventures through self-empowerment as they create sustainable livelihoods in textiles, food processing, and such handicrafts have been well protected through policy advocacy and legal protection of their intellectual property rights through efforts like the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL).

This is where a well-rounded education, policy support, and economic empowerment can improve the status of women in TKS. Establishing platforms to listen to the voices of women in the decision-making process, intellectual protection of their contributions, and the sustainability of practices through TKS will preserve such invaluable knowledge and make them relevant in this changing world.

CONCLUSION & RECOMENDATIONS

Integrating women's knowledge into Traditional Knowledge Systems is important for not only historical justice but also a future that balances sustainability and inclusion. Women have been integral in the conception, preservation, and transmission of traditional knowledge across generations. They have contributed to everything from agriculture and healthcare to resource management and cultural preservation in India's intellectual heritage. Recognizing and integrating this vast repository of knowledge can address contemporary challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and healthcare inequities while preserving cultural diversity and promoting gender equality.

Women's roles as custodians of biodiversity, conservationists, and practitioners of sustainable farming are particularly crucial in the context of ecological and agricultural challenges. Knowledge on seed preservation, soil fertility, and pest control is unimaginable in the promotion of sustainable agricultural production and meeting food security. In health care, women preserved rich traditions of herbal medicine, midwifery, and holistic health approaches, creating sustainable and culturally rooted alternatives to the modern biomedical systems. This knowledge, rooted within experience and a deep contact with nature, represents the principles of sustainability and coexistence that seem increasingly vital for today's world.

Female contributions in TKS have too often been silenced and pushed aside in patriarchally defined societies. The historical invisibility of women in intellectual and cultural narratives has

led to their underrepresentation in fields such as medicine, philosophy and science.

To acknowledge, realisation or get benefit of traditionally and culturally rich women's knowledge followings are the recommendations-

DOCUMENTATION AND VALIDATION OF WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL KNOW

Thus there is an urgent need to document and validate women's traditional knowledge, ensuring it is preserved and incorporated into modern educational and policy frameworks. This can be done by widening efforts such as India's Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) specifically to focus on and protect women-led knowledge systems, preventing their exploitation and ensuring their equitable use.

INTEGRATION OF WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE INTO TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Incorporating women's knowledge into TKS also forms the basis of inclusive development. Women's experiences and unique perceptions of the world may provide solutions that balance environmental sustainability with social equity and economic resilience. Such integration allows women to be active stakeholders in their decision-making processes at the local, national, and global levels. Furthermore, integrating women's traditional knowledge into modern science and technology would create innovative ways of solving complex problems through the meshing of ancient wisdom with the current capacity of advanced science and technology.

GOVERNMENT'S INITIATIVES REGARDING POLICIES, TRAINING ETC

The future of TKS is to grow and develop while staying firm in its core principles. This is possible only if the role of women is recognized and their contribution helps to shape the direction of these systems. Policies, educational initiatives, and community-driven programs should be gender-inclusive and involve women in the preservation, application, and innovation of traditional knowledge.

In conclusion, the integration of women's knowledge into Indian knowledge systems is not merely about preserving the past but about building a more equitable and sustainable future. It is by recognizing and harnessing the potential of women's traditional knowledge that India can strengthen its cultural heritage, addresses contemporary challenges and lead the way in creating a world where traditional wisdom and modern innovation coexist harmoniously. This ensures

TKS is always a living system and continues to benefit human society through the ages.

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