

WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF SUSTAINABILITY: INSIGHTS FROM THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM FOR A VIKSHIT BHARAT

* **Dr. Priya. Aher**

* *Head of School, Ashoka Universal School, Sinnar, Nasik*

Abstract:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), emerging from Vedic philosophy, Dharmic ethics, and indigenous cultural practices, offers a deeply integrated understanding of sustainability grounded in harmony between human life and nature. Within this civilizational framework, women have historically functioned as custodians of ecological wisdom, social resilience, and ethical living. This paper explores the role of women in sustainable development through the philosophical construct of Prakriti, representing nature as a dynamic feminine creative force balanced by Purusha, the principle of consciousness. Such an understanding reflects an ancient ecological worldview that aligns closely with contemporary sustainability discourse.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach combining education, psychology, and cultural studies, the research examines how traditional ecological knowledge transmitted through women's practices—agriculture, food systems, water conservation, seed preservation, caregiving, and community leadership—provides actionable pathways toward sustainable nation building. The study further analyses psychological dimensions of environmental consciousness shaped through intergenerational learning and culturally embedded identities.

The paper argues that the realization of Viksit Bharat requires moving beyond purely Western developmental models and reclaiming indigenous wisdom systems where women act as knowledge keepers, educators, and sustainability leaders. Drawing upon qualitative analysis of Indian philosophical traditions and grassroots examples of women-led ecological practices, the study demonstrates that empowering women through education grounded in Indian Knowledge Systems generates a multiplier effect enhancing community resilience, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable livelihoods. The paper concludes by proposing educational and policy interventions that integrate women's traditional knowledge into contemporary sustainability frameworks.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge Systems, Women and Sustainability, Prakriti, Viksit Bharat, Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Psychology, Ecofeminism, Intergenerational Learning, Dharmic Ecology, Community Resilience.*

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial Use Provided the Original Author and Source Are Credited.

Introduction:

The twenty-first century has brought unprecedented environmental challenges alongside rapid technological advancement. Climate change, ecological degradation, and social inequities reveal limitations of development models driven primarily by industrial growth and consumerism. Increasingly, scholars and policymakers recognize the need to revisit indigenous knowledge traditions that emphasize balance rather than exploitation.

India possesses one of the world's richest civilizational knowledge traditions, where sustainability is not a newly introduced concept but a way of life embedded within philosophical thought, cultural practices, and community structures. Indian Knowledge Systems conceptualize existence through interconnectedness governed by *Dharma*, responsibility, and respect for nature.

Within this worldview, women have played a foundational role in sustaining ecological and social balance. Their contributions extend beyond domestic responsibilities to include environmental stewardship, ethical education, health traditions, and cultural preservation.

Yet, mainstream sustainability discourse often underrepresents these contributions.

This paper seeks to reframe sustainability by examining women's roles through Indian Knowledge Systems and by situating them at the centre of sustainable nation building aligned with the vision of *Viksit Bharat*.

Philosophical Foundations: Prakriti, Purusha, and Dharmic Ecology

Indian philosophy recognizes reality as a dynamic interaction between *Prakriti* (nature) and *Purusha* (consciousness). *Prakriti*, symbolically associated with the feminine principle, represents creativity, nourishment, transformation, and regeneration—qualities essential for sustaining life systems.

This philosophical orientation establishes ecological ethics grounded in reverence rather than ownership. Nature is understood as sacred, encouraging restraint and responsibility toward environmental resources.

Ancient intellectual traditions also acknowledged women's participation in philosophical inquiry. Scholars such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi engaged in metaphysical debates recorded in the Upanishads, illustrating that knowledge production historically included women's voices.

Dharmic ecology promotes harmony between individual actions and collective well-being. Practices such as seasonal living, sustainable agriculture, and ritual respect for natural elements reinforced ecological consciousness across generations.

Gender Perspectives in Education and Sustainability:

The contemporary educational vision of India, reflected in the National Council of Educational Research and Training developed National Curriculum Framework 2023, echoes foundational principles of the Indian Knowledge System by emphasizing holistic development, experiential learning, environmental consciousness, and ethical citizenship. The framework recognizes education as a means of nurturing responsible individuals capable of contributing to sustainable and inclusive national development.

The NCF reaffirms that learning must be contextual, culturally rooted, and interdisciplinary—principles long embedded within IKS pedagogy. Environmental awareness, respect for biodiversity, local knowledge traditions, and community participation are positioned as integral components of schooling rather than supplementary themes. This approach aligns with traditional Indian educational practices where sustainability was transmitted through lived experiences and social participation.

From a gender perspective, the NCF advocates equitable participation, inclusion, and removal of stereotypes within learning environments. When interpreted through IKS, this vision expands beyond equality of access toward shared ecological responsibility. Sustainability education must therefore move from gender-neutral

participation to gender-transformative engagement, ensuring that both boys and girls actively participate in care practices, environmental leadership, and scientific innovation.

The integration of IKS with NCF enables:

- recognition of women as knowledge holders and sustainability educators,
- inclusion of indigenous ecological practices within formal curricula,
- experiential learning through community engagement and local environmental action,
- development of socio-emotional competencies such as empathy, cooperation, and ethical responsibility.

Educational psychology supports this integration by demonstrating that sustainable behaviour develops when learning connects cultural identity, emotional engagement, and real-life application. When schools align IKS wisdom with NCF pedagogical goals, learners develop ecological consciousness not as imposed instruction but as a value internalized through culture and practice.

Thus, the convergence of IKS and NCF represents a transformative pathway toward **Viksit Bharat**, where education fosters gender equity, environmental stewardship, and sustainable nation-building simultaneously

Empowering Women through Education, Skills, and Leadership:

Within the Indian Knowledge System, empowerment is understood not merely as granting authority but as the awakening of inherent *Shakti*—the inner capacity for knowledge, compassion, and responsible action. Education serves as the primary pathway through which women move from passive beneficiaries of development to active architects of sustainable societies.

Women educators contribute uniquely to learning environments through empathy and emotional intelligence. These qualities foster trust, inclusivity, and psychological safety, enabling deeper student engagement and collaborative learning. Educational psychology highlights that emotionally responsive classrooms enhance motivation, ethical awareness, and social responsibility—foundations essential for sustainability education. When learners experience care, belonging, and meaningful relationships, ecological values become internalized rather than externally imposed.

Women's participation in education also plays a decisive role in addressing persistent gender disparities. As teachers, mentors, counsellors, and leaders, women challenge structural barriers that limit access to education and opportunity. The reformative legacy of **Savitribai Phule** exemplifies how women's education becomes a catalyst for social transformation, equity, and community upliftment. Her pioneering efforts demonstrated that educating women strengthens families, democratizes knowledge, and advances social justice—principles closely aligned with sustainable development.

Beyond classrooms, women contribute significantly to research and innovation by introducing inclusive perspectives often absent in traditionally male-dominated domains. Their engagement promotes interdisciplinary thinking, particularly in sustainability and STEM education, where diverse viewpoints generate socially responsive solutions. Equally important is women's representation in educational leadership and decision-making.

Evidence shows that institutions with gender-balanced leadership foster participatory governance, equitable policy formation, and improved educational outcomes.

Skill development further enhances women's agency in sustainability. Education integrated with life skills, environmental literacy, digital competence, and community leadership enables women to influence sustainable livelihoods, resource management, and grassroots innovation. Such empowerment creates a multiplier effect—impacting families, communities, and future generations.

In the vision of **Viksit Bharat**, empowering women through education, skills, and leadership is not solely a matter of equity but a national developmental necessity. When women's knowledge, empathy, and leadership capacities are recognized and strengthened, education becomes transformative—nurturing resilient communities, inclusive growth, and sustainable nation-building.

Skills for Sustainable Livelihoods:

Women's traditional skills embody sustainability principles long before modern environmental frameworks emerged. Practices such as seed preservation, organic farming, textile crafts, and traditional medicine promote circular economies minimizing waste and ecological damage.

Skill-based empowerment supports local economies while preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Leadership and Community Participation:

Women-led initiatives often prioritize cooperation, long-term planning, and social well-being. Participatory leadership strengthens community resilience during environmental or economic crises. Sustainable governance therefore requires expanding women's representation within educational, social, and policy-making institutions.

Women as Caregivers and Nation Builders:

Nation building is often discussed in terms of infrastructure and economic growth; however, sustainable societies depend equally upon emotional stability and social cohesion. Women as caregivers—mothers, teachers, counsellors, and health workers—create supportive environments that foster responsible citizenship.

Caregiving contributes to:

- development of emotional intelligence,
- conflict resolution skills,
- resilience during crises,
- ethical decision-making.

Through these roles, women sustain the psychological infrastructure necessary for long-term national development.

Indigenous Practices and Grassroots Sustainability:

Across rural and tribal India, women continue to lead community-based sustainability initiatives. Collective farming, water harvesting systems, forest conservation movements, and biodiversity preservation efforts demonstrate how indigenous knowledge adapts to modern environmental challenges.

These grassroots practices illustrate that sustainability thrives when local communities participate actively rather than relying solely on centralized policy measures. Women integrate ancestral wisdom with contemporary

innovations, offering practical models for sustainable development.

Education and the Vision of Viksit Bharat:

The aspiration of *Viksit Bharat* envisions a nation that is economically strong, socially inclusive, environmentally responsible, and culturally rooted. Education becomes the most powerful vehicle for achieving this transformation.

Educational institutions must move beyond examination-oriented systems toward holistic learning that integrates:

- Indian Knowledge Systems,
- environmental education,
- mental well-being,
- ethical citizenship.

Recognizing women as educators and sustainability practitioners strengthens the connection between knowledge and lived experience.

Methodological Approach:

This research adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach combining:

- analysis of classical Indian philosophical texts and Dharmic ethics,
- examination of sustainability practices embedded in indigenous traditions,
- ethnographic insights from women-led community initiatives,
- interpretative analysis informed by educational psychology.

Such methodology allows contextual understanding of sustainability rooted in culture and lived practice.

Discussion:

The study reveals that sustainability in India has historically evolved through cultural processes sustained largely by women. Modern sustainability frameworks increasingly validate principles long embedded within Indian Knowledge Systems—holism, moderation, interdependence, and ethical responsibility.

Re-centring women within sustainability discourse shifts development narratives from extraction to regeneration. Women's education and leadership generate ripple effects across families, communities, and institutions, enabling inclusive and resilient growth.

The convergence of Indian Knowledge Systems with women-led sustainability practices offers a culturally authentic pathway toward national development.

Implications for Caregivers and Society:

Caregivers represent the foundational agents of sustainable transformation. Teachers, parents, counsellors, and community leaders shape ecological values through everyday interactions.

Practical implications include:

- integrating environmental ethics into parenting and schooling,
- fostering emotional literacy alongside ecological awareness,
- promoting mindful consumption practices,

- encouraging youth participation in community sustainability initiatives.

Sustainable nation building therefore begins within relationships guided by care, responsibility, and shared purpose.

Conclusion:

Indian Knowledge Systems affirm that sustainability is a civilizational ethos deeply intertwined with cultural identity and ethical living. Women have historically preserved ecological balance, cultural continuity, and psychological resilience through everyday practices rooted in Dharmic philosophy.

The realization of *Viksit Bharat* requires recognizing women not merely as participants but as leaders of sustainable transformation. By integrating indigenous wisdom with modern education and policy frameworks, India can develop a model of progress that is humane, inclusive, and environmentally balanced.

A sustainable future emerges when development is guided by the nurturing principles embodied within the feminine ethos—care, harmony, regeneration, and collective responsibility. Reclaiming this wisdom enables India to move toward holistic progress rooted in its own civilizational strengths.

References:

1. Aurobindo, S. (1998). *The foundations of Indian culture*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.
2. Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
3. NCF2023
4. Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The principal Upanishads*. Harper & Brothers. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
5. Shiva, V. (2016). *Who really feeds the world?* North Atlantic Books.
6. UNESCO. (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives*. UNESCO Publishing.
7. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations.
8. Kautilya. *Arthashastra* (translated editions).

Cite This Article: Dr. Aher P. (2026). Women as Custodians of Sustainability: Insights from the Indian Knowledge System for a Vikshit Bharat. In *Educreator Research Journal: Vol. XIII (Issue III)*, pp. 406-411