Nature, Body and Woman: An Indian perspective on value dualisms

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Introduction
Historically, in cultures that value hierarchies prevailed, it was assumed that the closeness of women to their bodies deprived them of intellectual capacity to acquire and to engage with rational knowledge and thereby many women were excluded or discouraged from intellectual spheres of activity. The role of value dualisms and value hierarchies such as ‘mind over body,’ ‘reason over emotion’, ‘culture over nature’ in differential access to privileges has been highlighted from a western perspective.¹ Two such prominent analyses are the “logic of domination” proposed by Karen Warren in 1996 and the process of dualistic construction of hierarchies as proposed by Val Plumwood (1996).² Warren (2009) describes the absence of women’s writing in history of Philosophy:

The exclusion from the canonical history of western philosophy has functioned as an expression and perpetuation of these false gender–based dualisms about women’s natural inferiority (p.19).

Spelman (1982, p.52) also suggests that as a direct result of the mind-body distinction in the western tradition, the association of women with the body and bodily functions has resulted in certain ideas and attitudes to women on the part of many philosophers who in their casual remarks and writings in non-philosophical contexts, have often expressed the prevalent social and patriarchal views of their period. She uses the term ‘Somatophobia’ to describe the disregard and denouncement of the body in western philosophical traditions. Her concern is that such images and arguments associated with such a disregard are common to women, slaves, labourers, children and animals. This lumping together of all groups associated with the body results in interchangeable images: “The members of these groups lack for all purposes, mind or proper reason; even humans among them are not considered fully human” (p.52). The very same images and arguments used to denigrate the body and women are used in many relationships of domination and oppression. These discourses of domination follow a conceptual logic that is fundamentally created to establish this dominance. Warren (1996) refers to this as “an oppressive conceptual framework that explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of domination and subordination” (p. xii). Warren insists that a simple value dualism without the support of the logic of domination can be constructed as a mere
description of similarities and differences. The way in which these have been used to justify subordination is important for concerns of ecofeminism (pp. x–xv).

Plumwood (1996) suggests that in cases of such dichotomy, the superior side realizes itself through separation from and domination of the lower side:

Dualistically constructed dichotomy typically polarizes difference and minimizes shared characteristics, construes difference along lines of superiority/inferiority, and views the inferior side as a means to the higher ends of the superior side (instrumental thesis) (p.168).

In the arguments of Spelman, Warren and Plumwood, this differentiation, subordination, and domination is based on the ideas of body–mind and its link to the concepts of woman–man, nature–culture, and reason–emotion. Given that the logic of domination of certain values is dependent on conceptual categories such as ‘mind’ and ‘body’ and also ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’, as well as the gender categories of ‘man and ‘woman’ it is pertinent to ask if these dualisms are conceptualized in the same ways across all cultures.

**Some questions, textual traditions, conceptual sources, and women**

Any discussions on concepts within Indian traditions must firstly attempt to engage with the multiplicity of sources, and secondly, must deal with the interpretive analysis of these sources that occur across diverse genres. For instance, philosophical traditions of India derive from various forms of primary texts like the orally transmitted Vedas (including the *upanishads*), commentaries and philosophical doctrines, and supporting texts of various schools. Besides these, a large corpus of literature that captures the everyday conceptualisations of people and situated knowledges is also available in folklore, epic narratives and anthropological studies. Analytically, when studied together, these forms of texts may not submit themselves to a rigorous analysis but in a coherent framework, not acknowledging these as sources of knowledge would create incomplete perspectives of the traditions of thought. In fact it would give eminence to only a certain kind of literature produced by a dominant, literate section of society.

A task of understanding gender within these texts is doubly complicated and challenging particularly because of what Tyagi (2008, p.47) refers to as the ‘double bias’. Firstly, most of traditional texts that one has access to are male centric and also produced by the dominant caste. The second is that narration of history often confines its domain to the realm of the public, where the women and their roles are largely absent.‡ Along the same lines Kinsley (2002) points out the paucity of women’s views in the production of religious
texts too: “Women’s studies also made embarrassingly apparent the great extent to which almost every culture (literate and non-literate) is (or was) patriarchal, exist, androcentric, and often misogynist. The problem is particularly acute in the study of texts” (p.5). He claims that due to the absence of women’s views in these texts, one cannot claim factual understanding of women’s roles and status in these historical periods. However, it is possible to conceptually analyze some texts, narratives and historical records, and interpret them as being embedded in historical, social, and cultural contexts. In such cases even distortions and absences lead to possibilities of understanding the intention behind the composition of such texts (Tyagi 2004, p.5).

Even a casual survey of Indian philosophical texts and authors indicates the absence of women philosophers as active agents of knowledge production in India, (even among the so called privileged castes) though there are a few exceptions. In India, these traditional texts, recognise the contribution of women to a certain extent and yet negate women’s positions in society by subverting their role in participation in public spheres of knowledge production (Tyagi 2004, p.47). In Indian literature narratives and early philosophical texts we find that there are descriptions of a few women scholars who participated in philosophical deliberation such as Gargi and Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Given this background the issues of gender and rational knowledge, this essay seeks to address three main questions — firstly, were women in India historically deprived of participation in rational knowledge because they were considered to be intellectually incapable as was the case in the western traditions? Secondly, what kind of conceptual dualisms may form a basis for participation or exclusion of women in the sphere of rational knowledge in India, particularly philosophy? Finally, what can be conceptual framework of domination in Indian traditions that arises from such dualisms?

One finds that the conceptualisation of dualities is probably not so clear in some of these traditions. For instance, nature–culture and body–mind dualism is ambiguous, even if one can prove that it is not fully absent (Barnhart 1997, p.422). Even the idea of human beings seen as separate from nature is very rare. Nature in Indian thought is inclusive of the human being. Broadly speaking the human beings are seen as contiguous components of a hierarchical order of beings, each related to each other through a network of functional and natural relationships based on their location in this order. The order is maintained by a universal natural law sometimes called Ṛta (pronounced rita). This view explains the diversity of beings and their relationships to each other (Baindur 2010, pp.87–92). Another perspective of nature sees the created world as being substantively unified being constituted
by the same inner being or in some schools a common substratum (Duetch 1989). This philosophical vision sees the inner being or consciousness as one in all human beings and the entire created universe.

The various schools of philosophy in India differ in their understanding of this created universe but most of them subscribe to alternative conceptualisations of nature, body, and mind. Value dualisms and value hierarchies in Indian traditions can be explained differently from the western traditions, if we could demonstrate that the concept of the mind and body are so placed in relationship such that the usual mind–body dualism does not follow. As there are many schools of philosophical Indian thought, I have summarized the ideas of the body and mind from a few representative schools whose views are also seen influencing non-philosophical spheres of discussion such as texts defining social mores and as well as epic literature.

**The mind and many minds**

The most common term used for ‘mind’ in Indian thought is *manas*. The human being encounters the world various faculties of sensing and action (*indriya*), in combination with the mental faculties and the objects of experience in the phenomenal world. The cognition of the non-sensible objects is a proof for the existence of the mind:

> Remembrance, inference, verbal cognition, doubt, intuition, dream, imagination, as also the perception of Pleasure and the Rest, —all these are indicative of the existence of the mind.\(^9\)

Some philosophers of the *Nyaya* School refer to the mind as the eleventh sense (Sinha, 1958/2008, p.14). For *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* (hence forth refered to as *NV*) philosophers, the existence of the mind is inferred from the observation that perception through the sense organs is sometimes absent and sometimes present.\(^10\) It is the mind (*manas*) is what controls the sense organs and helps them to perceive or recognise their objects. Since the mind has to aid all the different senses quickly and in succession, the mind is inferred to be atomic (in size).\(^11\) The mind (*manas*) in *NV* interpretation is atomic, non-physical, or non-gross and exists in conjunction with the self. The mind here is seen as a primary substance, called *dravya*, being endowed with qualities and action (Sinha 1958/2008, p.20).

The *manas* (hence forth referred to as mind in the text) is the inner 'sense' or instrument that helps the self to perceive internal objects or mental objects such as cognition, pleasure, pain, desire and aversion. Mind is defined thus in the *Dasapadarthi* text: “Mind is that non inherent cause for the production of cognition, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, effort, merit, demerit
The mind, which is unconscious (jada) is not an active knower; it is distinct from the conscious self—which is the conscious knower—and it mediates between the external sense faculty and self by being in 'contact' with both the self and the senses. In this interpretation, the mind is only different from other senses in its intangibility and inability to produce physical effects (Sinha, 1952/2006, p.417). The NV view of the mind also necessitates the inference of a single mind that has to be necessarily in conjunction with every sense organ to produce a perception. Simultaneous perceptions are not possible. Being atomic, the mind can be associated with any of the sensory faculties but one at a time as there cannot be simultaneous sensations (Sinha, 1952/2006, p.417).

The mind for the NV philosophy is 'subtle matter'. 'Subtle matter' is a category that NV philosophers chose to satisfy two conditions of their conception of mind’s functions. This is to emphasise that the mind is material in the sense of it being real and existent and at the same time to suggest that it made up of a special substance that can allow it to have close contact with the self.

The above discussion has focused on a particular tradition of philosophical thought, and we find variants of the same conceptualisation across other schools of Indian philosophy. The schools of Vedanta, such as that of non-dualism (Advaita) distinguish among ego, intellect, memory, and mind as different modes of this internal apparatus. The Sanskrit term for the mind ‘manas’ as the perceiver of internal stimulus is the mode of function where it is of the nature of doubt. The reasoning faculty that functions as a determining entity is called the ‘buddhi’. The faculty of memory or remembrance is called citta and the ego that individuates the self is called ahamkāra (Deutsch and Dalvi, 2004, pp. 246–247). Within these views, we find that the intellect (buddhi) by virtue of its discriminatory ability is given pre-eminence over the doubting mind (manas).

Among other predominant traditions of thought, the different Buddhist schools have a very rich theory of the mind along similar lines. The major difference of opinion of these schools with other traditions such as the NV or Advaita is that there is no permanent, persisting self (Stcherbatsky 1998, p.26). The terms related to the concept of the mind within various sub-traditions of Buddhist thought are diverse, each view capturing a particular aspect of mental function, perception or cognition. The most commonly used terms for the mind are vijñāna (consciousness), citta (mental event) and manas (the sensing mind). All of these three refer to the same subjective pure consciousness entity operating at instances of consciousness that are the objective entity. The mind is seen as a receptive entity devoid of content. The content part of the mind consists of particular sensations such as definite sensation, feelings, ideas, volitions and other particularised mental phenomena (Stcherbatsky 1998, p.15).
At the level of personality, primary idea of the mind in Buddhist tradition is that the mind does not exist as an independent entity separate from the body. The psychophysical personality of the Buddhists (that is not a permanent self) is a ‘minded body' or an ‘embodied-mind’. Kalupahana (1922/2005) refers to this as nāma-rūpa (hence forth ‘name-forms’) and explains that the mind entity nāma, (lit. name) and the body entity rūpa (lit. Form) within which it is located are not separately referred to by Buddha. A dislocated mind or a form without the mind is not possible (p.15). Besides name-forms almost always occur as a complex and are not clearly divisible unto two aspects. Each of them the mind aspect and body aspect influence each other.

The understanding of the mind from these perspectives may have many implications for the intellectual history of eastern thought as well as the foundations of epistemology. The concept of the mind in Indian traditions seems to lack a clear hierarchical value dualism from the body.

The body and bodies

The conception of body in Indian thought is connected to the notion of ‘experiencing’ the world. For most philosophical schools, the body is the seat of the indriyas, the capacity for sensing, the senses of knowing and the senses of action. The body is variously referred to as tanū, deha, or śarīra. The primary quality of the body is that it non-eternal as compared to the soul that is seen as eternal.

In Indian traditions of Philosophy such as Sankhya, Sankhya-yoga, or Advaita, the body is understood as a three-fold complex or many bodies. The multilayered interpretation of an individual is based on the notion, that the consciousness is embodied in different sheaths or kośa-s. Each sheath defines one functional layer of the individual and therefore represents the complex intra-relational nature of the human being. The food sheath as the nourishing function corresponds to the corporeal body and the vital air sheath is regarded as the sum of all physiological processes. The mind sheath and the intellectual sheath are the layers concerned with psychological processes, mental cognitions, and thinking. The final sheath that is constituted by the self is the source of joy, which is called the bliss sheath. A clear conceptual idea of mind–body duality is difficult to sustain within such a complex interdependent framework of interpretation of body and mind. Yet within this framework one can see a hierarchical layering emerging due to the differences in the temporality of the bodies, especially within the orthodox Vedic schools of philosophy. In Sankhya–yoga and Vedanta Schools of thought the sheaths are included under the larger categories of bodies (śarīra). The first body that is required to create an individual is the causal body (kārana śarīra), and
the intangible differentiated soul is subtle body (the *sukśma śarīra*). These two bodies are collectively called as the *linga śarīra*. This śarīra is so called ‘*linga*’ (lit. ‘mark’) because it is created at the time of cosmic creation and is dissolved at the time of cosmic dissolutions. The self being eternal has no creation or destruction or individuation as such. The third, the tangible body, is the ‘gross body’ (*sthūla śarīra*) that is made up of the physical elements (*pañcha bhūtas*) of the universe. *Sankhya* lists five elements: earth, water, air, fire and space (*ākāsa*) that are subtle (*mahābhūtas*), that undergo a process of quintiplication.\(^{15}\)

The Vedanta schools also follow the *Sankhya* metaphysics. Since the body exhibits the special qualities of each of these elements odour, form, touch, heat and sound respectively, it is inferred that the body must be made constituted by these elements fundamentally. The *NV* School however regards earth atoms as primary constituents of the body and the other elements are auxiliary constituents or parts. The *Nyaya* School does not believe that a ‘self’ transmigrates but posits that when a person dies, the person does not become ‘disembodied- soul’ as the Vedantins would have it, but the person acquires a body made of air atoms (Sinha 1952/2006, p.673).

**Subtle and gross bodies**

We have seen how textual references from philosophical schools such as *Sankhya, NV* and others do not state that the mind is the seat of reason and the body, the seat of senses. The multiple bodies or states of embodiment place the body on a continuous scale with the mind, intellect and the as internal causal body, all of them enlivened and deriving being from the innermost self, called ‘*ātman*’ (in *Vedanta, NV*) or *puruṣa* (in *Sankhya*). This scale is based on a classification of bodies from the subtle to the subtler. Halliburton (2002) points out (in a different context, but it captures the description of the individual self as well) there is “a phenomenology of multiple modes of experience that range from the material to intangible and rarefied...” (Halliburton 2002, p.1130). From the above discussions of the idea of the body one begins to see a sort of dualism emerging between the corporeal manifested body and the inner causal body within an individual, especially within the Indian philosophies that subscribed to scriptural authority of the *Veda* for validation.\(^ {16}\) In these philosophies, one might say that the idea of *subtle* versus *gross* plays an important role in classifying one body layer as being more eternal and persisting than the body below it in this scale.

Some texts go at great lengths to point out the substantive oneness of all beings in philosophies such as *Vedanta* Schools or *Sankhya*. Not only are human beings endowed with the same inner body but also, all beings have the same kind of inner body. This belief is prevalent not only within philosophical texts but also in popular narratives. A story about the
life of the philosopher Shankara narrates how he was made to realize this truth of substantive oneness of all beings by a person of so-called ‘untouchable’ caste, a (chandala).\textsuperscript{17} Shankara, the proponent of non-dualism falls prey to the dualism of caste hierarchies and he asks the chandala beggar to move out of his way fearing ritual pollution. The beggar retorts back, asking, “Who should move out of the way? Are you referring to the inner self or the outer body?” His question reminds Shankara of the inner self-being present everywhere cannot move and the philosophical point of Advaita that outer body is never identified as the real person, being only a garment for the self (Pande 1994, p. 87).

Even so, in these traditions, the presence of the self within all bodies does not directly translate into an equitable social status for all gross bodies. How are we to understand this everyday social reality interpreted from a framework of privileging some bodies over others, particularly in case of gender? And following from that how does engendering of bodies exclude women from participating in the production of rational knowledge?

**Creation of the distinction between bodies**

From the multiple body perspectives earlier mentioned, it is clear that both mind and intellect are not gendered. That excludes gender roles from determining intellectual capacity and participation. The inner body, sukšma šarīra that includes the mind and intelligence is equal in both men and women. For instance, we have a verse that encourages a woman as a wife to be a “wise minister” to her husband in matters of his work.\textsuperscript{18} There is evidence of women scholars in many traditions including the Vedic that do not have anything derogatory to say regarding the reasoning power of women. There is a famous debate described in the Mahabharata between Sulabha, an ascetic woman, and a king where the king insists she cannot be ascetic with a body of a woman. She constructs a logical argument to prove that the soul has no gender and even as a ‘woman-body’ she has the right to pursue her goals of knowledge (Vanita 2003, pp.85-86).

If the association of women with the emotion and men with reason is not really clear in these traditions, to what narratives can we then trace the origins of suppression of women? What kind of duality translates into spaces of exclusion from rational knowledge? I posit here that the medium for exclusion may be not by reason but by body. The dualism that may have created logic of domination is perhaps the nature of woman’s body, in relation to certain other bodies like that of men of the upper castes. It is an example of body-body dualism.

The link between the metaphysical conceptualisation of the bodies and the value hierarchies between individual bodies is possible by ascribing a causal relationship between
moral values and the type of body one has in the current lifetime. The important philosophical and religious beliefs that underlie such a worldview are the transmigration or rebirth the causality of Karma, as well as the hierarchical order of society given by traditional authority. According to the Nyāya philosophy too, the different kinds of bodies are born according to the merits and demerits of different souls, so they are the instrumental cause of gaining a gross body (Sinha, 1952/2006, p. 673). The outer gross body is built and situated socially in the phenomenal world from ‘residue’ that is a sort of a record that is maintained in the inner subtle body. Rather than understand Karma as a case of moral determinism, it is possible to understand it as a religious presupposition that is imposed on rational systems of thought. For Instance, the system Ayurveda doesn’t disregard the importance of techniques of healing, yet it also uses karma to explain incurable or untreatable diseases.

Engler(2003) summarizes the famous Ayurveda physician Charaka’s views:

… the fetus is said to be a result of two factors: the union of father's semen and mother's blood, and the admixture of the atman (true self or universal mind) with the subtle body (the immaterial body that transmigrates). The latter is the means whereby the individual’s karma affects the fetus (p.435).

These are fruits of actions that are morally acceptable and also morally unacceptable, called merit and demerit (punya and papa). Some bodies are privileged over other bodies because they contain morally different subtle bodies. Karma therefore is invoked as a rationale for the production of a physical body that is obtained within the so-called natural order (pp. 433–434).

It is here that the conceptualisation of nature in Indian thought as mentioned earlier becomes important. The phenomenal world on is already divided into a range of privileged or unprivileged wombs that are envisioned as a field, (kṣetra) for exhaustion of one’s accumulated action fruits (karmaphala) and fulfilment of one’s duty (dharma). The social order of beings is seen as a natural order. In this conception of nature, beings including humans are ordered according to their place in the cosmos (Baindur 2010, 87–90). Philosophically interpreted one may say while the inner self of the person is an individual self with a telos of liberation (Moksha), the gross body is situated within the social with a telos of fulfilling one’ ordained duties (dharma) give by one’s place in the universe. Within this hierarchy, largely illustrated by caste, is also embedded the subservient position of women’s bodies.
In this framework of interpretation, the woman’s body with its natural nature to undergo the pain of birthing is seen as result of some previous lifetime’s moral transgressions. The mythological explanation of the menstruation claims that it is retribution that was given to women to bear. The myth recounts that the sin of Indra’s killing of a three-headed son of Tvashtr (a Brahmin) was distributed among trees, women, and the earth. The stain of the guilt visits upon the women every cycle. Thus, according to this narrative, the woman not only bears her own individual karma but also bears the collective karma of her type, in this case the negative sins of Indra.

In relation to the extraordinary bodies that have access to liberation and higher worlds that are connected with sacred, these woman bodies carrying the effect of bad karma are seen as banal. The physical body is located within social order. The socialization of the gendered body (the physical body) occurs through vesting the gross body with meanings, particularly creating privileged and unprivileged bodies born within privileged and unprivileged social groups. Further, Michaels and Wulf (2011) suggest that notions of purity and impurity take place in this social body. They point to the idea that, “… the body becomes the preferred place for realizing mythological/ ritualistic ideas and concepts “(pp.2–3). They also have suggested that in India, the body is porous, allowing it to become a social body. McGhee (1992, p.76) points out for instance, many traditional renderings of liberation doctrine in later periods according to religious doctrines (dharmaśāstra) often point out that the women cannot attain liberation without being born as a man. She adds that while there was no direct denial of liberation for women, the benefits accruing to a woman often included marital felicity (saubhagya) not liberation (p.77).

Vedic learning and rational knowledge: the link

The idea of adhikāra or eligibility underlines much the study of Vedas or acquisition of knowledge in textual traditions. Adhikāra defines the necessary conditions for knowledge acquisition or the performance of various rituals. The etymology of this word includes the spatial ordering of above and below. ‘Adhi’ stands for ‘above’ or ‘to be in charge of’ or ‘to supervise’. ‘Kāra’ relates to the verb ‘action’. Halbfass (1991) suggests that such adhikāra is associated with dharma in philosophical usages:

Adhikāra has its place in the universe that is hierarchically structured, that is upheld through the performance of rituals and the observance of religious norms and social distinctions, and in which certain hereditary groups have a special mandate for certain types of activities (p.67).
McGee (2002, p.42) analyses the criteria for eligibility of women to study the Vedas was different from the ancient to medieval periods of history. While it is clear that the general competence to participate in rituals includes knowledge of the Vedas (called śruata rituals), it is not very evident that all women were prevented from studying the Veda in earlier periods. It is very clear that the fourth class, the shudra-s, were forbidden to study or sometimes even listen to the Vedas, texts are either ambiguous about women or lump them with the shudra-s as Young (2002) infers that, “… the status of women had become ritually and philosophically with that of śūdras” (p.90). She estimates that least up to the six century BCE, women did learn the Vedas. In later ages with the rigidity of social roles and hierarchies, a ritual where established to indicate entry into the process of learning the Vedas. Knowledge especially the knowledge within Vedic tradition was taught by preceptors after upanayana ritual also popularly known as the sacred thread ceremony. This was not a mere ceremony or initiation but marked the entry into a period of the study of the Vedas, where the ritual initiation was linked to learning the Vedas (p.88).

Harita, a recorder of the socio-religious codes of conduct differs from the popular text of social codes composed by Manu. He describes this ceremony as normal for women (Young 2002, p.88). Young (2002) also confirms from Yama’s references, (who predates Manu) and Harita’s texts, that the woman was taught Vedas only from a father, brother or an uncle, a stranger was not allowed to teach them. It seems likely that only a few women were able to take on the rigorous routine that was prescribed for the learning of the Vedas. These women were called Brahmadanin-s. They too had to beg alms from their own homes (Mcghee 2002, p.42), another of those rules that were established for reproductive control of women. The stringent rules surrounding the mastery of Vedic texts included practice of ritual purity around the wearing of the sacred thread. For those women who did not have the access to the above initiation called sadyodavadu-s, initiation was performed followed by the marriage (which Manu equates to the thread ceremony). Some women gain the authority to participate in rituals after their marriage through joint partnership with husbands who are ‘eligible’. In this sense the marriage becomes the upanayana. In such cases, the ritual assumed more importance than the idea of eligibility for acquisition of knowledge. Young also suggests that this upanayana might have been perfunctory ritual for upper caste women and might have not been actually of significance in learning the Vedas. McGee (2002) explains the relationship between the Vedas and the ritual of upanayana:
Since *upanayana* is a prerequisite for Vedic learning and the *adhisthāna* to sacrifice, the eclipse of the ceremony for girls leads to an exclusion of females from access to Vedic learning and the performance of šṛuata rituals (p.42).

The rites of the *upanayana* are performed in the house as an individual household rite, as opposed to the larger community rituals. The performance of such ceremonies were not limited only to the elite Brahmans but were also allowed to other castes such as *Kṣatriya* and *Vaisya*. It was the class of *Shudras* and women who did not directly perform the rites during certain periods of history. The *upanayana* is a ritual that marks an entry into the socialization of a person as much as it is an initiation into knowledge. The ritual actually signifies a second birth of the person to purify him from the pollution of the natural birth. This ritual achieved segregation of castes by marking each class’s *upanayana* differently with symbols such as age of the initiate, type of clothes worn etc. It also segregated gender, by including males from the first three castes and excluding women (Tyagi 2008, pp.213–215).

The Vedas were considered sacred and women’s bodies like other bodies such as those of so-called ‘lower castes’ were incapable of supporting the sacred presence of the Vedas. The repeated impurity caused by the occurrence of menstruation prevented women from following these rigid rules. The ritual observances around the fires for the Vedic ceremonies and the rituals of purity were made exceedingly difficult to follow for women by means of temporal rules that did not allow them to observe a short ‘*sūtaka*’ period during their menses. ‘*Sūtaka*’ a word that means polluting or ritually incapable of participating in sacred spaces, actually derives from the root word associated with birthing process or the process of reproduction Linked to the postnatal confinement period. The *sūtaka* is highest for death, then birth, followed by menses period. During the *sūtaka*, chanting of Vedic mantras or learning from Vedas was not allowed (Kashyap 2008, pp.71–72).

Rationality in Indian intellectual traditions such as debate and logic in philosophy ultimately rested on means validating knowledge. Matilal (1998) refers to this tradition of debates:

The art of conducting a philosophical debate was prevalent probably as early as the time of the Buddha and the Mahavira (Jina), but it became more systematic and methodical a few hundred years later (p.2).

The philosophies in India admitted different ways of knowing or validity of knowledge through various means called *pramāna* such as perception, inference and recourse to scriptural (or appropriate) authority. Among most schools of philosophy, perception and inference were universally acknowledged. Only some of the philosophical traditions
admitted the Vedic texts as authority. Buddhists and Jains, of course did not acknowledge Vedic texts as ways of validating knowledge.

Particularly, we can say that the production of rational knowledge within these communities of philosophers who accepted Vedic authority was linked in particular ways to bodies that had the moral right to access sacred Vedic knowledge. Here I posit that perhaps women who were denied access to the Vedas could not participate in rational debates and epistemic activities within these schools or from other schools.21

There is right now no evidence to suggest this might have been the reason for the gender bias in knowledge production. Even if women were from non-Vedic schools, arguments with the theistic schools would not be possible because the process required a thorough understanding of the opponents’ points of view and references used. We know that women did participate in other forms of debates about arts, or duties related to householder life etc.22

According to Tyagi (2008, pp.44–45), Women in this hierarchy are seen as instrumental in procreation and their reproductive role takes precedence in textual references. Rituals further reinforce this division of society that is based on patriarchal and (major caste) varna constructs. The ritual then becomes a means of legitimizing a kind of social practice. As she suggests, its reputation creates a ‘language’ that reflects society (p.9). Later texts like the Manusmriti that lay down social rules for the performance of this ritual recommend that this is not to be performed after a woman has her menstruation. Based on the time period of Manusmriti, the loss of access to the preceptor’s house through the denial of a scared thread ceremony to women could have occurred during 200 BCE. Young (2002) argues that women also had no access to public spaces:

Confining woman to the home bolstered the identity of urban men when it could no longer be based on survival function related to male bodies... One result was that women were denied education, special expertise and mobility (p.88).

In such cases, it seems to be a body- versus body argument that creates a value dualism. We can articulate this logic of dualism thus:

- Sacred Bodies that are ritually marked by a sacred thread are different from Banal Bodies mark of a sacred body
- Banal bodies are incapable of participating in the spaces around Veda-s. Ritually unmarked bodies such as women’s bodies cannot gain in certain kinds of rational knowledge, contained in the Vedas.
Having no access to Vedic knowledge invalidates arguments and rational discourses produced by women. Tyagi (2008) writes “...by specifically denying woman (and śūdras) access to the Vedas and learning, Brahminical constructs ensured that gender and varna hierarchies can be maintained thus favouring one at the cost of another” (p.43).

In conclusion I posit that the hegemony of men over knowledge in Indian thought has been created through narratives of the woman’s body as banal and/or sexually vulnerable. The body of the man, especially the upper caste body was exalted as sacred and special thereby allowing them access to rituals and practices associated with the oral transmission of knowledge such as the chanting of the Vedas.

Most women who were often equated with the lower castes were denied access to these rituals as they were considered incapable of transcending their bodily limitations. References from some texts such as the Manusmrīti show that the Vedas as the sacred locus of all knowledge were not accessible to women because of the narratives about their bodies and not their minds. It was not the ‘mind–body’ dualism but the ‘body–body’ dualism that caused the logic of domination to exclude women from participating in production of rational knowledge.

4 There are a few verses of the Veda ascribed to women seers.
5 For more on participation of women intellectuals in rational debates, see Ruth 2003, p.80.
6 Indian Philosophical traditions are classified broadly into ‘schools’ of thought based on a tradition of teachers, texts, and students. Many of the schools are syncretic having common metaphysics or belief systems such Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika or the Sankhya- yoga, the scholars treating them as a single system. Yet others share common texts interpreted differently such as the Vedanta schools. For more about the schools in Indian philosophy see Dasgupta, (1922/2004).
7 Indriya refers to a capacity for sensing the world. It functions on locations in the physical body called dravendriya (Jainas) or āśraya (Buddhist) or adhīṣṭhāna (Vedanta). A translation of indriya as ‘sense–organ’ is likely to confuse the concept with that of our commonly understood five senses.
8 Sāṁkhya philosophy calls these various faculties as thirteen instruments. See Larson (1979), pp.190-191.
10 The aphorism reads, “The nonappearance of simultaneous cognitions is indicative of the existence of the mind.” The Nyāya Sūtras 1.1.16, p.269.
11 The NV concept of atomic particle called paramānu is conceptualized as a fundamental particle that cannot have parts. There are four kinds of atoms, earth water, fire, and air. See Dasgupta, (1922/2004), p.326.
Some schools of philosophy relied on Vedic texts for validity of their ideas, while others (like Buddhists, Carvaka and Jaina philosophers) did not. Sometimes these are classified as theistic schools and atheistic schools. Other classifications of orthodox, unorthodox etc are also popular. See Dasgupta, (1922/2004) pp. 67–71. Also popular are the designations ‘Hindu’ and ‘non-Hindu’, that are problematic because of the political implications.

In this process each half of each subtle element combines with its other four in equal components (½of itself with 1/8 of other four) to form the gross elements.

Chandala caste was considered to be the ‘lowest’ and its members were often referred to as untouchable, and were most oppressed under the social hierarchy. Even their shadow was supposed to be untouchable.

From the verse on the six qualities of a good wife. ‘Kāryesu maṇtri...’ etc. Quoted from Subhāṣita-ratnabhāndāragāra or ‘gems of Sanskrit poetry’, Acharya, (2011), p. 351.


While Jaina and Buddhist women scholars would explain and hold discourses within their own schools, they would still be unable to debate in public against due to lack of information of the Vedas. The same would be true of all those who were untrained in Vedic traditions.

Again a popular narrative in the life of Shankara recounts his debate with the wife of a scholar Mandana Mishra on householder duties.

References


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Glossary of terms with diacritical marks

(Note: the terms are freely translated as per their usage in the essay by the author. Sanskrit words have been arranged according to English alphabetic order. All terms have standard diacritical marks; the general spelling used has been provided after a slash wherever diacritics have not been used in the main text. Proper names of philosophical schools, people and texts are not included.)

Adhikāra: rights, as necessary conditions for knowledge acquisition or the performance of various rituals.

Adhiṣṭhāna (in Vedanta): the physical location of the organs of sensing — Indriya. Lit. ‘base’.

Ahamkāra: ego. Lit. ‘ego-maker’.

Ākāsa: Space, one of the five great elements that make up the universe in Indian traditions

Ātman: Self, the innermost, immortal core of one’s being

Āśraya (in Buddhist thought): the physical location of the organs of sensing — Indriya. Lit. ‘support’.

Brahmavadini: Common name given to a (unmarried) woman who was invested with the sacred thread and therefore could learn the Vedas.

Buddhi: the intellect, the rational faculty of the mental apparatus that is decisive.

Chitta: (in Vedanta): Memory faculty of the mental apparatus. (in Buddhist thought): Mental event, cognitive episode

Deha: Physical body

Dharma: duties ordained by one’s place in the order of beings. Includes duties according to caste, gender, occupation, and some common human norms.

Dharmaśāstra: Texts that describe the rules of Dharma, these are religious doctrines that are treated as authoritative in matters related to norms of duties and rituals.

Dravendriya: In Jaina Philosophy the physical location of the organs of sensing — Indriya. Lit. ‘physical organ’.

Dravya: Primary substance.

Indriya: Organ of sensing, includes the five organs of knowledge and five organs of action. Sometimes the mind is called the sixth organ of knowledge or the eleventh organ of sensing.

Jada: Insentient, unconscious.
Kārana śarīra: The causal body, the body that causes the existence of a soul, and lasts from the beginning of creation till the final dissolution. It is a part of the Linga śarīra.

Karmaphala: Fruit of one’s action.

Kośa: Sheath, defines functional layers of the individual as series from gross to the subtle—food, vital air, mind, intellect, and bliss.

Kṣatriya/ Kshatriya: Warrior class, one of the four major varna or class categorisation.

Kṣetra: Field.

Linga śarīra: the subtle body that is created at the time of cosmic creation and is dissolved at the time of cosmic dissolutions, the marked body of an individual soul.

Mahābhūtas: Five great elements. According to Samkhya metaphysics they combine to form gross elements that are material constituents of the world.

Manas: The mind. In Nyaya philosophy, controls the sense organs and helps them to perceive or recognise their objects, and is considered atomic in size. In Vedanta philosophy, the mind is the doubting and desiring faculty that is constantly wavering as different from the intellect—Buddhi.

Mokśa/Moksha: Liberation.

Nāma-rūpa: Name and form. In Buddhist philosophy it refers to the mind–body.

Pañcha bhūtas: Five gross elements that are material constituents of the world.

Pāpa/papa: Demerit. Leads to experience of ‘bad karma’ in the future.

Pramāna: Means of acquiring knowledge or validity. Lit. ‘Proof’.

Puruṣa: Lit. Person. In Sankhya philosophy, it is the spirit—as passive and a spectator—of the prakṛti—the creative force.

Punya: Merit. Leads to experience of ‘good karma’ in the future.

Ṛta: Divine order in the universe. Fixed or settled order of nature.

Śarīra: Body, lit. ‘that which decomposes’.

Sadyodavadu: Collective name given to married women who were invested with the sacred thread and could participate in Vedic ritual with their husbands.

Saubhagya: Marital felicity, marital auspiciousness.

Śūdras/shudras: Labourer Class, the lowest in the hierarchy of the Varna class categorisation.

Sukśma śarīra: Subtle body of an individual consisting of the mental layers and the soul, as opposed to the gross body or sthūla śarīra.
**Sūtaka**: being in a state of defilement or period of ritual defilement, practiced in Hindu brahminical tradition. After death, during menstruation, contact with a defiling substance, food or person, such as an untouchable leads to this period when sacred access to Vedas and other places is prohibited.

**sthūla śarīra**: The gross body, made of the five elements in their material form, as opposed to the subtle body—*Sukšma śarīra*.

**Tanū**: Gross body. Also form or manifestation.

**Upānayana**: Ceremony of investiture with the sacred thread, particularly performed for the upper three classes of *Varna,— Brahmana, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya*—hence called the twice born castes.

**Vaiśya**: Trader class, one of the four major *varna* class categorisation.

**Varna**: Class categorisation of human beings in Hindu society. There are four classes—*Brahmana, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdras*. The fifth class were outcaste and did not belong in the social order of *Varna*. *Varna*, though earlier on might have been function based, is described in most of the later doctrines as birth based.

**Vijñāna**: consciousness, a particular concept of the mental state in Buddhist thought.