

INDIA'S SHAKTI CULTURE AND THE FEMINIST TRADITION

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Abstract. Feminism as a political discourse emerged in eighteenth-century Europe and the USA. It aimed to enhance women's status and power, and paved the way for women's movements. Since then, feminism has been playing significant role in liberating women from gender inequality and patriarchal oppression. Modern feminism in India aroused through the aisle of British colonialism and Indian nationalism. However, Shakti tradition in Indian antiquity exemplifies a remarkable feminist discourse.

The paper argues that India's Shakti tradition provides an alternative source of feminist discourse that is the embodiment of feminine power, energy, freedom, and opportunities. The paper intends to develop a distinctive feminist epistemology that is associated with difference-based feminism particularly referring to Indian antiquity. It tries to engage feminists with the Hindu tradition for pondering over the context and situation of Indian women issues. It will be basically helpful for going beyond the Eurocentric feminist debate and ideological position. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data and exploratory in nature.

Keywords: Shakti, Feminism, Navaratri, Bhauma, Viraja.

1. Introduction: Women Questions and the Feminist Discourse

Feminism as a political discourse emerged in eighteenth century Europe and the USA. It emerged as a movement and body of ideas that aimed to enhance women's status and power. Feminism originated outside academia as the ideology of a critical and disruptive social movement. It was later broadly contextualised and theorised by Utilitarian and Marxist thinkers. Since then, it has been playing instrumental role in liberating women

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from gender inequality and patriarchal oppression. That is how western world is considered as the cradle of feminism in modern politics. Three feminist epistemological positions are predominant from 1960 in political science-liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism. "Liberal feminism tended to emphasise over individual rationality, the public-private distinction and the reformability of institutions. Marxist feminism recognised that the 'sex-gender system' requires logic to analyse the interrelationship of this system with class. Radical feminism uncompromisingly identified the sex war as the most basic political struggle. It highlighted the 'private' sphere as the terrain where women's oppression was founded" (Randall, 1995: 115).

In India, modern feminism aroused through the aisle of British colonialism and Indian nationalism (Chaudhuri, 2012: 20; John, 2011: 171-78). Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries India "produced a 'new woman' with interests that went beyond the household" (Forbes, 1996: 64). Few Indian feminists are not comfortable with the term feminism because of "its over-close association with the western women's movement" and its inadequacy in the study of women issues in non-European world (Kishwar, 1990: 3). Some of them have no objection with the western origin of the term, but they are very apprehensive about "what it stands for" (Bhasin and Khan, 1994: 4). However, the concept of Devi in Shakti tradition is not only the masculine form of the deity on the earth but also a supreme being and revered individual entity. It is rightly said that "Maa Durga thus becomes a wonderful dichotomy that the society approves and ascribes to-she fiercely protects us from evil but she also looks after her family with love and care. Maa Durga successfully becomes a metaphor for modern women" (Bhattacharya, 2019). Indian feminist discourse faces some fundamental problems particularly relating to epistemological and methodological issues such as, i) ancient Indian women society has not been studied as an academic subject in India since the colonial period, ii) there are paucity of trained scholars on ancient women studies and especially feminism, iii) most of the feminist scholars avoid religion in the study of the women's issues, iv) heavily rely on textual approach to study ancient women society while ignoring other sources, context and situation, v) traditional Indian family, which is hierarchical in structure, has not been properly contextualised and studied. In traditional family, relationship among family members was based on dharma (moral duty). "One's place within the family hierarchy has to do with age, gender, and seniority. Both younger male and female members are expected to show deference to older members" (Sugirtharajah, 2002: 100).

2. Feminist Critique of the Shakti Worship

Several Indian feminists raise the question on goddess symbolism. For them, Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Gauri, Sheetla and Santoshi are the “eschewed goddess symbolism who have been used as an active tool of patriarchal oppression. Hindu goddess, though present, is inferior to male god or is created by one of them or several of them collectively to fight their wars and thus denied any independent agency” (Priyamvada, 2018). Amelia Quint said that “feminists have fought for the right to flourish outside the home, yet feminist spirituality in many ways returns them to that sphere” (Quint, 2016). However, it is also said that “the Goddess might well be a projection of male fantasy of womanhood, but women, as throughout history, could use the tools of subversion and reversal to find what they wish for in the symbol” (Priyamvada, 2018). Feminist critics also said on Kanya Puja that “the little pre-pubertal girls who are worshipped on the eighth and/or ninth day of Navaratri are often abused and discriminated against and shunned for being born as girls for the rest of the days and are supposed to be ‘impure’ to be worshipped once they start having periods” (ibid). How far they are rational in their argument against Navaratri and the significance of Hindu goddess? In fact, contradictions are there in our cultural practice which elevates women immensely in some point of time and degrades them negligibly in other ways. The transition of Indian women from Devi to Dasi is certainly a very complex subject matter for feminist discourse. That is how the major challenge for Indian feminists is to engage with ancient Indian culture to merge the gap between modern woman’s thoughts and the traditional gender prejudices. It will help in shaping India’s original feminist debate and ideology.

3. Reinterpreting Feminist Political Tradition

Feminist discourse has two different versions: women issues in Indian antiquity and women’s questions in ancient western society. India’s Shakti tradition provided equal power, status and position to women that was outlined in the form of “aadi shakti” and “matru shakti” in Vedic period. On the other hand, women existence and their voices were silenced and suppressed in Greek antiquity while vilifying their physical strength and mental capacity. Ancient Greek society and its philosophers had very derogatory attitude towards women. A gender biased trend was set up by Socratic and Aristotelian traditions, and followed by Rousseau, Hegel and even by a moral thinker like Kant. In Greek antiquity, “Women’s voices in ancient times were largely ignored or silenced in literature, historical narratives, philosophical discourse, and political life. Since pursuits in the philosophical realm were predominantly viewed as the domain of elite men; women, slaves, and other

minorities are often left out of the narrative. This makes it extremely difficult to find reliable sources on women in ancient times, what their lives were like, and how they carried themselves. Much of what we know about women in these times come from male sources . . .” (Collette, 2018). Despite the male philosophers intellectual suppression of women, few female philosophers survived marginally in Greek antiquity such as Diotima, Arete, and Aspasia (Wider, 1986 and Waithe, 1987) and mostly male philosophers were the only source to know about them. Most of the Greek philosophers ignored or dismissed the position and status of women. They questioned women’s intellectual capacities, physical strength, denied them education, and refused to grant citizenship. They have justified women’s subordination to male based on natural and biological differences and they have reinforced the need of male guidance and domination. Socrates said, “. . . but in all of them women is inferior to man” (Plato’s Republic) and “women were incapable of providing men with intellectual companionship” (Plato’s Symposium). Plato believed that “women had no souls” (Guha, 2015). In the similar vein, Xenophon states, “Men can better endure physically adverse conditions. Women are much more fearful, and hence more protective of possessions, while men are more courageous” (Oost, 1977). Aristotle asserted that “women were naturally inferior to men, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority; the child has it but it is incomplete. The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled” (Aristotle’s Politics). In History of Animals IX, Aristotle “attributes compassion and emotionality to women, along with a lack of critical ability, and believes women are impressionable, easily deceived, and feeble of mind” (Barnes, 1984).

Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792) is considered as classic literature on feminism. She passionately advocated in favour of social equality and educational rights of women. It started a feminist debate and inspired pioneers of women’s rights activists like Elizabeth Cady and Margaret Fuller in the USA. By the mid-nineteenth century, women’s movement emerged as a central political campaign in western world. Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” (1963) was another addition to feminist debate and movement. She made a strong critique on women oppression in domesticity which was justified with cultural myth. However, the western feminist debate raises two basic issues: “women are disadvantaged because of their sex; and that this disadvantage can and should be overthrown.”

In India, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (7th - 6th BC) recommends a certain ritual for a householder for ensuring birth of a scholarly daughter (Altekar, 1938: 3). In fact, the Vedic literature exemplifies that women were privileged with freedom, education, and

opportunities. In ancient Indian Ashrams, girls and young women could learn along with their male counterparts. Importance of women in India's Shakti tradition influenced several verses of the Rig Veda (1st BC) that treats women equally in terms of power, status, and position. Rig Veda states, "the mind of woman... her intelligence carries weight" (verse xvi, hymn xxxiii). The Devi Suktam contains the essence of Goddess Durga and states, "I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship. Thus, gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and abide in. Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them, each man who sees, breathes, hears the word outspoken" (RV, 125/10). Moreover twenty female seers authored several Suktams (hymns) of the Rig Veda. They were Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sikata Nivavari, and Ghosha (Altekar, 1938: 10). Maitreyi, Prathiteyi and Gargi's scholarships are well recognised in Brahmajayna (chanting Vedas daily). "Women students were divided into two classes: Brahmanavadinis (lifelong students of theology and philosophy) and Sadyodvahas (prosecute their studies till the age of 15-16) (Altekar, 1938: 10). In fact, Dr. Ambedkar admitted that women in Vedic India were "highly respected and cannot be disputed" (Dr. Ambedkar, Vol. 3). Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi were three prime ideals of Indian womanhood that "Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India" (Kishwar, 1985).

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states that King Janaka organised a philosophical debate in his court in Videha to celebrate a ritual. Gargi asked, "Yajnavalkya, tell me-since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth?" "Gargi was the only philosopher to question Yajnavalkya twice, and, after her second question, she effectively told the men to shut up. What a remarkable episode this was. Remarkable in the first place because a woman was permitted to enter the conclave of male philosophers. Even more remarkable that she assumed a leadership role in such an assembly and had the audacity to tell the men to shut up" (Olivelle, 2024). Gargi defeated Yajnyavalkya and became one of the Navaratnam (nine gems) in Janaka's court. The Manusmriti (2nd-3rd BC) has been criticised for denigrating women and for its over gender bias text. Indian feminists say that Manusmriti categorises all women as "Shudras" and it is "extraordinarily regressive" that contributes to "perpetuation of sexism" (Smitha TK, 2022). No doubt, Manu dehumanised women not only by categorising them into "good women" and "good wife" (Olivelle, 2006: 165-168) but also by "confining women in the private sphere under the constant protection and guidance of father or brother initially and later by husband or son" (Olivelle, 2006: ch.9 [3, 11]). In opposition to its vilifying text and intent, Dr. Ambedkar not only criticised Manusmriti but also burned it. In one side Manu heavily downgraded the social status of Indian women, on the other hand he

provided a peculiar position to women in family too. He bestowed women with responsibility of managing material and financial affairs in the house. However, it was Kautilya (4th BC) who significantly reversed Manu's Code of Law. He empowered women with several rights, made women free from domestic confinement and made equal partners of man. In Arthashastra, Kautilya endorsed post puberty marriage, Stridhan (bride price) and monogamy. He made a special mention that man can marry more than one wife only under certain conditions. Widow remarriage was prevailed in society (Dr. Ambedkar, Vol. 3, p. 433). Women could claim divorce on the ground of mutual enmity and hatred and has a right to claim maintenance for an unlimited period. Kautilya provides economic freedom to married women and made special provisions relating to wife's endowment and maintenance. In fact, a wife could bring an action in a court of law against her husband for assault and defamation which was banned by Manu earlier (ibid: 436).

Bhavabhuti's Uttaramacharita, eight century Sanskrit play, provides a narrative for ancient India's women freedom and assertion. During a trip, two young girls, Atreyi and Vasanti, met accidentally and talked to each other. Atreyi expressed her displeasure before Vasanti and said that her teacher Adikabi Valmiki had brief time to teach her as he was preoccupied and engaged in writing the Ramayana. Atreyi was dissatisfied with Valmiki and decided to "travel to south India in search of better education, although she was student of an extremely famous university in the north" (Guha, 2015). She walked to south India to learn from another great teacher Maharshi Agastya.

Sarala Das's Odia Mahabharata (15th AD) is an important source of Indian feminist discourse. Sarala's women's depiction is much stronger than Veda Vyasa's original text. Sarala's women were assertive, independent, and argumentative. The text has a unique way of gender narrative particularly with two different female characters. Born in a mortal world, Ganga was an obedient daughter of King Himavat and Queen Menavati. She was pined for Lord Shiva, but became eventually the wife of King Shantanu who was not her husband by choice. Ganga became "a wild and tempestuous woman, and finds inventive ways of hurting and humiliating Shantanu. Ganga keeps him starved by cooking tasteless food once in three days, beats him violently at will, tears off his clothes, and destroys his scriptures. Further, she denies him physical pleasure when he seeks it, and forces him to make love on auspicious days when it is forbidden. Later, she kills seven of their children; the eighth one, Bhishma, is saved by the father, and thus Ganga is freed from her marriage" (Routray, 2019). The second story is about Parvati. "Once, early in the morning, Shiva left Kailash astride the bull Nandi and along with his followers. He was supposed to return for lunch. Parvati cooked a large, varied spread for everyone and waited and waited. When it became really late, she sat down to eat, defying the taboo among

upper-caste Hindu women that dictated a wife should eat only after the husband has had his fill. When Parvati hears the sound of Shiva's damru quite late in the day, she is enraged: she throws everything she has cooked into Nandi's trough. Shiva has to go hungry, but the bull has a feast" (Routray, 2019). Furthermore, Balaram Das's "Laxmi Purana" (16th Century) is primarily "a feminist text because it shows a female goddess using her personal power to challenge the way society defines identities and rewards virtue, and the way tradition-even when sanctioned by the Lord himself-understands our ascribed jati-identity and its implications for how we are to be treated" (Mohanty, 2008: 9). In early medieval India, Six Bhauma Queens of Odisha (736 AD to 945 AD) ruled the state for centuries. They were widow queens with the non-Aryan tribal roots from Odisha. It was a royal dynasty that had total sixteen rulers and six of them were female rulers. "This dynasty considered their royal women as heirs to the throne. Among the six women rulers, four of them ruled consecutively in this Kingdom or rather Queendom . . ." (Chakraborty, 2023). Tribhuvan Mahadevi-I is known to be the first queen in 845 AD of the dynasty "to rise on the Bhauma throne after the sudden demise of her son, King Subhakaradeva III. She has been compared to goddess Katyayani wielding inconceivable power and unabashed supremacy over her subjects and nobles. After some decades, another proficient woman ruler Prithivi Mahadevi acceded to the throne of the Bhauma following the death of her husband and brother-in-law. After a brief reign of two other kings, the Bhauma throne was occupied by four female monarchs who ruled in succession. These monarchs were Gauri Mahadevi then her daughter Dandi Mahadevi followed by Vakula Mahadevi and lastly Dharma Mahadevi" (Chakraborty, 2023). It is noteworthy that none of the queens adopted a son to succeed them. These female rulers not only provided leadership to the state but also changed traditional patriarchal structure of the society and male attitude towards women. Another female ruler Maharani Sukadei (1686-1726) of Bankigarh state was Odisha's undefeated warrior queen. Gopinath Gajapati, the King of Khurda state, was attracted to the beauty of Sukadei and wanted to marry her. He attacked Bankigarh and killed her husband King Dhananjay Srichandan. Queen Sukadei fought the war with King Gopinath and defeated him to take revenge of her husband's death. King Gopinath was arrested and some parts of his state were annexed with Bankigarh. Sukadei ruled another six years after the war and died.

4. What is Shakti Tradition?

The Shakti cult is the original and oldest religion of India. It was primarily practised by tribals inhabiting Indian subcontinent before the arrival of farming group. During the period of Indus Vally Civilisation, worship of Devi (feminine) was largely prevailing as a

separate school of thought that gave birth to the Shakti tradition. Devi worship was continued in Vedic age even after the decline of Indus Valley Civilisation (Bhasam, 1967: 313). It is believed that “the theme of shakti perhaps grew out of a conflict and eventual compromise between a powerful matriarchal culture that existed in India before the Aryan migrations and the male-dominated society of the Aryans. The Mother Goddess of the Indus Valley people never really gave place to a dominant male” (ibid). “Mother Goddesses were worshipped at all times in India, but between the days of the Harappa Culture and the Gupta period the cults of goddesses attracted little attention from the learned and influential, and only emerged from obscurity to a position of real importance in the Middle Ages, when feminine divinities, theoretically connected with the gods as their spouses, were once more worshipped by the upper classes . . . by the Gupta Period the wives of the gods, whose existence had always been recognized, but who had been shadowy figures in earlier theology, began to be worshipped in special temples” (Bhasham, 1967: 313). The Rig Veda’s Devisuktam mentions the importance of Shakti cult and it is the only early source to know the Shakti tradition. “Shakti is the embodiment of all power and energy. She is adored by all the gods and goddesses of the Hindu Trinity” (Nanda, 2009: 55). Goddess Aditi has been portrayed as the divine spirit by the Rig Veda. She is considered as the Universe (Rig Veda, 1-819-10). “She is the omnipotent Divine Spirit. She is all light, lustrous, and invincible” (Rig Veda, 1-136-3). Aditi symbolises as the form of “all gods and goddesses” (Katha Upanishad, 2-1-7). Shakti tradition is represented in one of the forms called Durga. Goddess Durga is the cultural representation of women power in the universe. It is an ancient India’s cultural tradition to understand the feminine power and to honour the diversifying feminine potential. It is believed that Shakti is peerless, and there is no substitute to her power and energy in the universe. Shakti worship reminds us that she is the form of formless, and she has many forms. She is the adoring mother Yashoda and she is the fierceness of the indomitable warrior, the feminine strength, and the destroyer Durga. “Within the totality of the godhead, sakti is the complementary pole of the divine tendency toward quiescence and stillness. It is quite common, furthermore, to identify sakti with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy” (Kinsley, 1986: 133).

5. Diversifying the Concept of Shakti

The theme of Shakti reflects over different forms of the deity, different texts of Puranas and diversified ways of invoking the divine spirit. Indian people honour, worship, and celebrate the tradition of Shakti across the country in different forms and most popular

forms are Durga Puja, Navaratri, Chandi Puja and Kali Puja. The Hindu scriptures state, "Shiva is the manifestation of Shakti and Shakti is the feminine power of Shiva who is the creative force behind the universe." "Shakti is also called the Divine Mother, as everything in the universe has taken birth from its womb. The Divine Mother, which has given birth to the universe, also nurtures and sustains it, and has the power to destroy the same" (Rameshji, 2019). Moreover, "Shakti has many other names as well. She is called Ambika in Yajurveda." "She is depicted as the consort of Rudra" (Taittiriya Aranyaka, 10-18-1). "The name Durga is mentioned in this Aranyaka and, her colour is that of fire, she is extremely bright and worshipped by all" (Nanda, 2009: 55).

Odisha's Shakti cult was dated back to 4th-5th century AD. Archaeologists say that the present idolatry of Goddess Viraja in the temple of Jajpur belongs to the 5th century AD. There are eight main Shakti Peethas or shrines in Odisha where Shakti is worshipped. These eight premier deities are collectively called as "Ashta Chandika" (Nanda, 2009: 56). "These deities are worshipped as Bimala at Puri, Samalai at Sambalpur, Bhagavati at Banapur, Charchika at Banki, Gouri at Bhubaneswar, Ramachandi at Konark, Mangala at Kakatpur and Viraja at Jajpur. Apart from these deities there are many others like Sarala at Jhankada, Chandi at Cuttack, Barunei at Khurda, Taratarini in Ganjam and Taradei at Bhusandapur, and Tarini at Keonjhar" (Nanda, 2009: 56).

In the Adi Parva of Odia Mahabharata, Sarala Das invokes "Goddess Sarala as Durga, Aparna, Parvati, Narayani, Bhavani, Katyayani, Saraswati, Chandi, Bhairavi, Bhagavati, Mangala and Hingula." The chapter elaborately talks about "Shakti Upasana." In the Sabha Parva, Sarala Das writes about the beginning of the Shakti: "Out of the Vacuum (Maha Sunya), there came the wind, from the wind, the power..." Furthermore, Sarala Das's "Chandi Purana" made a list of goddesses who are widely worshipped across Odisha like "Ugratara, Mangala, Chamana, Sarala Chandi, Maheswari, Tripura, Vasuli, Barati, Hingula, Tarini, Ambika, Charchika, Kamala etc" (Das and Lenka, 2009: 97-99). Moreover, Sarala Das also elucidates about the origin of "Chausathi Jogini" (sixty-four yoginis) "from different parts of Goddess Durga. The yogini idols represent female figures standing on an animal, a demon or a human head depicting the victory of Shakti." "The worship of Sapta Matruka (seven mothers) was another form of Sakti tradition during the Bhaumakara period. The seven goddesses are Varahi, Indrani, Vaishnavi, Kaumari, Sivani, Brahmani and Chamunda. The deities are of two or four-armed" (Ghadai, 2004: 20). "It was during the early Bhaumakara rule in Odisha, that the Durga image became eight-armed (Astha bhuja) and during the later Bhaumakara period, this image is found to be ten-armed (Dasabhuja). The popularity of Shakti worship at Jajpur is born out of the fact that the Bhaumakara queen Tribhuban Mahadevi compared herself with Katyayini

(Durga or Viraja) at her accession” (Ghadai, 2004: 19-20, OR). “The worship of the artistic earthen deity of Simha Bahini with ten hands (Devi Durga riding on her mount animal Lion) and slaying Asura king Mahisha (buffalo headed asura) started in the 11th century by princely houses of King Choda Ganga Deva of Eastern Ganga dynasty in present-day Puri. But the Sarvajanic Puja (popular worship in pandals) was started during the Bhakti movement by Sri Chaitanya under the patronage of King Pratap Rudra Deva of Gajapati dynasty at Cuttack in the 16th century. Netaji Subhas Bose also organised Durga Puja in Odia Bazaar, Cuttack to inculcate nationalistic spirit among people” (Panda, 2020). Devi worship is carried in Shakti temples of Odisha during the autumn season is called “Sharadiya Utsav” (autumn festival). Since Odisha is the land of Shakti Peethas (shrines) it has its own way of celebrating Durga Puja. “Shodasa Dinatmaka puja is a sixteen-day millennium-old ritual. It starts from Mulashtami which is seven days prior to Mahalaya and it continues till the Durga Ashtami and Vijayadashami. Shodasa Dinatmakapuja is carried out in all Shakti Peethas of Odisha. Shakti Peethas are the manifestation of the Divine Mother in different forms” (Panda, 2020).

Mata Vaishno Devi (Katra, Jammu and Kashmir) is a manifestation of Goddess Shakti who is also popularly known as Mata Rani. “When asuras were roaming the earth, and wreaking havoc upon innocent people and their lives, Shakti appeared to protect the weak and the defenceless. She vanquished the asuras and made them fear her. She created three manifestations-Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi, and Maha Saraswati, each with terrifying and destructive power” (Mata Vaishno Devi, 2023:2). Sharadiya Navaratri is a festival dedicated to Mata Vaishno Devi. Navaratri celebration has three primary features: nine forms of Mata Rani, nine forms represent nine significant colours, and Kanya Puja on the Navami. The nine forms of Mata Rani are “Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmanda, Skandamata, Katyayani, Kalaratri, Mahagauri and Siddhidatri” (ibid). Shailaputri symbolises Mother Nature. Brahmacharini is “associated with renewal of Nature, and energy.” Chandraghanta symbolises zeal and determination to destroy evil. Kushmanda is “credited with creating the world with her divine smile.” Skandamata represents “purity, peace, and meditation.” Katyayani is the most powerful form of the Shakti. She is a great warrior who represents “the anger towards the enemies and fearlessness.” Kalaratri signifies the One who is “the Death of Kaal” and “signifies the destroyer of all demons and has a dark complexion and a fearless posture.” The Mahagauri gives relief from sufferings and fulfils all desires. Siddhidatri gives knowledge and helps in attaining aspirations.

North India has a unique ritual on ninth day of Navaratri called Kanya Puja. “Devotees pay their tribute to Mata Rani by worshipping nine prepubescent girls who represent the

nine incarnations of the goddess. The puja is traditionally performed by washing the feet of the girls, offering them new clothes, stationery items and cosmetics as gifts, and serving them the puja feast (a meal of halwa, chana and puri) before other members of the house consume the same. It is believed that worshipping the little girls would give the devotees manifold returns for the prayers due to the feminine power vested in the girl child, who are the purest in Hindu mythology” (Shankar, 2022). Worshiping a little girl as Devi is a significant Hindu feminist tradition.

6. Conclusion: Developing an Indic Approach to Feminist Discourse

Feminist political scientists urge that feminism has gone through three epistemological phases: rationalist (positivist), anti-rationalist and post-rationalist (interpretive). “Both liberal and early radical feminism were implicitly rationalist but without reflecting over their own epistemological basis. Marxist feminism inherited the more realist notion of historically circumscribed consciousness. Post-structuralist turn has depended on a post-rationalist epistemology which is deeply self-aware, in which indeed in some sense epistemology becomes everything” (Randall, 1995: 119). That is how, there has been a call for more ‘feminist methodology,’ better gauged to reveal and enhance our understanding of the gender dimension of politics (Hawkesworth, 1994; Kenney, 1996). It is suggested that we should not repudiate rationalist or scientific approach for being more logical and reasoning. We should combine different research methods rather relying on just one. Hawkesworth (1994) rightly said that we should ensure that what we adopt are ‘neither gender-biased nor gender-blind’. Krook and Squires (2006) suggest that there is no distinctive feminist methodology but there is distinctive feminist approach to methodology and methods. Western feminist discourse has a methodology which is very much Eurocentric, time and culture specific. In the process of developing an Indic feminist approach we should expose excessive Eurocentric methodology. Feminist discourse should challenge ‘malestream politics’ rather becoming more and rocentric biasness. Feminist ideology should be free from region, religion, ethnic, and culture blindness. Similarly, feminism must refrain from universalistic conception of women and essentialist thinking. Feminists working on women’s questions should be little careful while using the term feminism in ancient Indian society. It is not only the issue of socio-cultural diversity and its intersectional complexity but also the epistemological and methodological issues of understanding the ancient Indian women society. There are certain specific issues, principles, norms, and situations which are very much indispensable in the study of Hindu women society, however, these are irrelevant for the western feminist debate. Western feminist political discourse has failed “to recognize is that what counts as marginal in relation to the West

has often been central and foundational in the non-West” (Gandhi, 1998: ix). In fact, in Hinduism, “women’s questions are conjoined with men’s. At the conceptual level, Hinduism affirms the spiritual equality and inseparability of male and female. As Shakti, the divine feminine power is already latent in the masculine, and without the activating power of Shakti, the masculine (Shiva) is rendered powerless” (Sugirtharajah, 2002: 102).

Amelia Quint (2016) raised a cogent argument: “is emphasizing motherhood really reclaiming the agency we’ve fought so hard for?”. Truly, it is an important feminist issue that social and political scientists should examine whether feminist spirituality and goddess symbolism are bringing back the patriarchal institutions, creating private-public gap and unbalancing gender-power relationship. As far as India’s Shakti tradition is concerned that was the phase of celebrating Matru Shakti-feminine power, and womanhood. The tradition emerged in pre-Vedic tribal society which was matriarchal in nature. With emergence of patriarchal society in post-Vedic period male gods were spearheaded in public sphere and goddesses were neglected. The Shakti tradition contemplates on the significant contribution of women to the world. It is itself a theory of human race which reminds us that women are the creator and protector of human habitation. It was the Shakti who provided shelter, love, care, and defence. Goddess Durga exemplifies the Shakti tradition. India’s Sankhya philosophy acknowledges the feminine aspect of our life in the concept of Purusha (spirit) and Prakriti (creation). Prakriti represents the feminine aspect of creation that is active, changeable, earthly, and eternal entity. Purusha symbolises the spirit that represents the male aspect of creation. Sankhya philosophy says that “the world is created as a result of the union of Purusha and Prakriti. Prakriti and Purusha are the two main causes and reasons for existence: these are the two fundamental, independent, and eternal principles”. Following the theory of Western feminism, some Indian feminists assert that men are ‘the problem’ and they demand for ‘disengagement with men’. In their language it is called ‘feminist separatism.’ However, it goes against the sentiment of Indian cultural concept of Ardhanarishwara which depicts the full-fledged man and woman: the organic union of Shiva and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti. It was the Shakti who feminised Indian society. Goddess Durga breaks all the patriarchal shackles and barriers to liberate women.

Worshipping the Shakti signifies three basic feminist ideas: there is no tension within the sphere of public-private divide, the personal is merged with political, and there is representation of feminine power. Goddess Durga bridges the gaps and eliminates tensions within the public and private spheres. She is an adorning mother of Kartikeya and Ganesha. She is the Shakti and Vishwarupa Chandi, Mahakali, Mahinshamardini, the great warrior and the feminine power. She is the cultural symbol of gender equality and she is the source of women’s empowerment. Shiva and Shakti are the epitome of shared parenthood and their

children have brought up with love, care, and guidance from the close relationship of both parents. Together, they have celebrated the proud moment of Devi's motherhood. The symbolism of Goddess Durga explains the same joint venture of male-female unification in ancient society. She was created by three powerful gods. And all gods and goddesses donate their weapons to eliminate the demon. She was empowered by every god and goddess and she won the great battle. In our time, male members of each family should imbibe the moral values and cultural lessons from the goddess spiritualism- Shakti, Navaratri, and Kanya Puja in such a way that they can love, care and honour women even in their unconscious conduct. The Shakti tradition gives a message for empowering women, feminizing society, advancing social democracy, balancing power between female-male, and gendering the state. The Shakti tradition has ultimately raised debates within feminism and urge for a distinctive feminist approach to methodology and methods. It affirms that the western feminism has to develop an epistemology and Indian feminism has to devise a methodology for effective feminist discourse in their respective places while universalising the ideology of feminism.

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