



Revisiting Feminism: An IKS Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21237330>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted on: 26-05-2026

Published on: 10-07-2026

Keywords:

Feminism, Gender

Differences, Shakti,

Dualism

ABSTRACT

विद्याः समस्तयस्ति देवि भेदयाः

स्त्विः समस्तयाः सकलय जगत्सु।

त्विः कयय पूरितमम्बयैतत्

कय ते स्तुवताः स्तव्यपिय पौक्ताः॥

(All Forms of Knowledge Are Your Aspects, O Devī, as are All Women in the World. By You Alone, The Mother, Is This world filled. What praise can be sung to You Who Are Beyond Praise?)

Shakti, a divine consciousness, is the powerful embodiment of divine feminine energy and a true manifestation of purity and power, abiding all the universal force of creation and change. The paper here exploring this theme of Shakti can be understood in two parts. The first half begins with the description of what feminism looks like from a Eurocentric lens and how it has influenced us. Then the further discussion offers an insight into the hideous reality of Indian society, this includes the atrocities perpetuated by both men and women. Ground reality of a society that ritually worships feminine power (Shakti) simultaneously violates her autonomy. It also inculcates the challenges faced by many because of some bigotry ideas of feminism which have contributed to the deterioration of the erstwhile society. The purpose is to highlight the fact that Indian culture has given immense spiritualistic and ritualistic power to the divine feminine, but the translation of it in the people is next to none. Thus, asking a question that- Is Goddess just a figure of worship? In the second half of the paper, we will explore different aspects of feminism with the help of true but lost ideals of it. The understanding of Maa Shakti's Swaroopa's will give us a clarity about the meaning that she carries within herself. The discussion about marriage as an institution of balance, breaks away the prevailing myths and taboos about power and womanhood. By the end, we discover an original and fresh perspective of feminism, which this time is shaped by the Indian icons.



THE WORD – "FEMINISM"

The word feminism means multiple things in different connotations. It has been taken from a French word *féministe*, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Hence the term feminism in English is rooted in the mobilization for women's suffrage in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines feminism as an effort to identify and dismantle the norms and institutions that marginalize individuals on the basis of gender.

A CONTRAST

The western idea of feminism is concerned with justice, equality and societal structures which is somewhat similar to its Indian counterpart but it isn't entirely the same thing. The intersectionality of India's feminist thinking includes colour, race, caste, and many more complexities. The situation gets complex when a woman who is a disabled as well as a dalit in India, she will face a different set of prejudices and problems than a higher class Indian woman would. The societal context of India changes the whole idea. Rationality is in understanding that both the ideas work within their respective cultural framework and context.

A major difference is that while Western feminism directly contradicts religion and traditions, Indian feminism re-exams them to support its argument. History is a supplementary tool for Indian feminist historians while it is a villain for the west. Religion in India is a double-edged sword for women, on one hand it celebrates being a woman but on the other its contemporary implementation has oppressed them. The idea of shakti, the divine

femininity is used to support the contemporary realities of women. The soul of shakti and Indian scriptures is in its interpretations and con <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21237330text>. Concepts like intersectionality, introduced through Western feminist discourse, acquire distinct meanings in India due to caste, religion, and regional variations.

EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM IN WEST

The evolution of Western feminism is often described in “waves,” each expanding the scope of gender discourse. While the first wave focused largely on legal rights such as suffrage and property ownership, the second wave broadened the discussion significantly. It moved beyond formal equality to address issues embedded in everyday life—sexuality, reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and the politics of the body. The slogan “the personal is political” emerged during this period, emphasizing that experiences within the home and intimate relationships were not private matters but reflections of larger power structures.

The third wave further complicated feminist discourse by questioning the idea of a universal female experience. It placed strong emphasis on diversity, inclusivity, and intersectionality, acknowledging that race, class, sexuality, and culture shape how women experience oppression. Feminism, therefore, was no longer seen as a single unified movement but as a plural and evolving conversation.

ONGOING SCENARIO – UPROOTING VALUES

Comparative studies suggest that Indian feminism, though influenced by Western feminist philosophy, diverges significantly in its methods and priorities due to unique socio-political and cultural contexts. Indian feminism encompasses a wide array of viewpoints including postcolonial feminism which scrutinizes Western feminist ideologies for their Eurocentrism and failure to properly acknowledge the realities faced by women in the Global South (Prakanshi, IJFMR 2024)

Globalisation has changed the world. We are no longer restricted to our own bubble of opinions. Along with people, goods and food, opinions and values also move across borders. Western feminism has often been criticized for being eurocentric and not doing enough for women outside the immediate circle. The criticism has been played upon the argument that women are the gatekeepers of patriarchy.

GENDER GAP IN THE CURRENT GENERATION, WHY DO GEN Z MEN NOT WANT TO BE CALLED A FEMINIST?

What would an inclusive city look like? It’s “where a wide group of women loiter and spend time in public spaces—a marker that the public spaces are safe, accessible, responsive, and women have the time for self-

care,” says Sonal Shah, founder, The Urban Catalysts. In fact, an earlier 2023 UNFPA brief found 83% of married women in India bore the responsibility of contraception, among these 67% had opted for sterilization.

This is the reality of feminism in India today, why men and women are treated so disproportionately. It is a biological fact that men and women are different but rather than embracing it a sort of alienation is happening. According to a study conducted in Kings College, London, Gen Z men and women are the most divided amongst all other generations. Men today do not want to be associated with feminism or work for the betterment of the other gender. Why is that? A part of the reason is the rise of “sigma influencers” some of the prominent names include Andrew Tate, Walter Weekes and many more. The manosphere in the social media space isn't new but the following and accolades they have been getting is rising. Some Indian counterparts of these people are Mahesh Hegde and many other “red pill” youtubers who are regularly seen not only critiquing feminism as an academic philosophy but rather outright insulting women as a gender group. This content is consumed not only by older audiences but also kids of impressionable ages who see these things and think of it as normal, going so far as to apply them to their real lives.

While there is no harm in improving your life and focusing on the wellbeing of oneself it shall not come at the cost of another person. The gender difference thus, starts from a very young age. This argument will not be considered complete without mentioning that, young girls also consume hyper- feminist content, influencers like Rida Sharma, the rebel kid aka Apoorva Makhija and Liz Wizard to name a few, promote an utopian world of feminism. Genz as a generation lives in social media more than they live in their own minds, this endorsement of hyper- feminism/ masculinity disturbs the balance between gender, it is a major cause of suspicion between genders. The opinion of these public personalities are internalised and amplified by the society, and gender dynamics of families in India.

THE CURRENT IDEA: PSEUDO-FEMINISM

The current idea of feminism is often shaped by movements like #MeToo, #HerChoice, and other digital campaigns, have become part of everyday conversation. For many women, these movements have been deeply empowering. They have created space for women to speak openly about experiences of harassment, abuse, discrimination, and silencing—experiences that were once dismissed or pushed into secrecy. Social media has especially changed how women voice themselves; stories that might have remained unheard now reach millions. In this sense, contemporary feminism has allowed women not only to express themselves, but also to be believed, acknowledged, and included in public discourse.

At the same time, the movement has not been without controversy. Public debates often highlight concerns about the misuse of certain legal protections, such as false accusations or exaggerated claims. While research

consistently shows that false reporting forms only a small percentage of cases, the visibility of such instances has fueled skepticism and resistance toward feminist activism. This has created a complex atmosphere where conversations about gender justice are frequently polarized. Some see feminism as a necessary corrective to centuries of silence; others perceive it as disruptive or excessive. Recent examples, of this would included fake rape and abuse cases, false alimony cases and blue drum cases.

Perhaps the most concerning consequence of this tension is that women with genuine experiences of violence may still hesitate to come forward. Fear of disbelief, social judgment, and lengthy legal battles continues to discourage reporting. As a result, contemporary feminism exists in a space that is both empowering and contested. It has undeniably expanded women's voices, yet it also faces scrutiny and misunderstanding. Recognizing this dual reality is important, especially when examining how modern feminist thought interacts with older cultural ideas of femininity and power.

MARRIAGE – ONCE A SACRED BOND

Marriage has historically been regarded as a foundational social institution across cultures and civilizations. While its forms and rituals vary globally, it has traditionally functioned as a framework for kinship, inheritance, and social stability. In recent decades, however, divorce rates have increased in many parts of the world. Scholars attribute this rise to multiple factors, including changing gender roles, economic independence, shifting expectations of emotional fulfillment, and evolving social norms surrounding individual autonomy.

Post-divorce dynamics often involve complex legal and emotional negotiations, including alimony disputes and custody arrangements, which can have significant psychological and social consequences. Research indicates that children may experience emotional and behavioral challenges during high-conflict separations, although outcomes vary depending on the nature of parental relationships and support systems. Thus, the transformation of marriage in contemporary society reflects broader shifts in values, expectations, and conceptions of partnership.

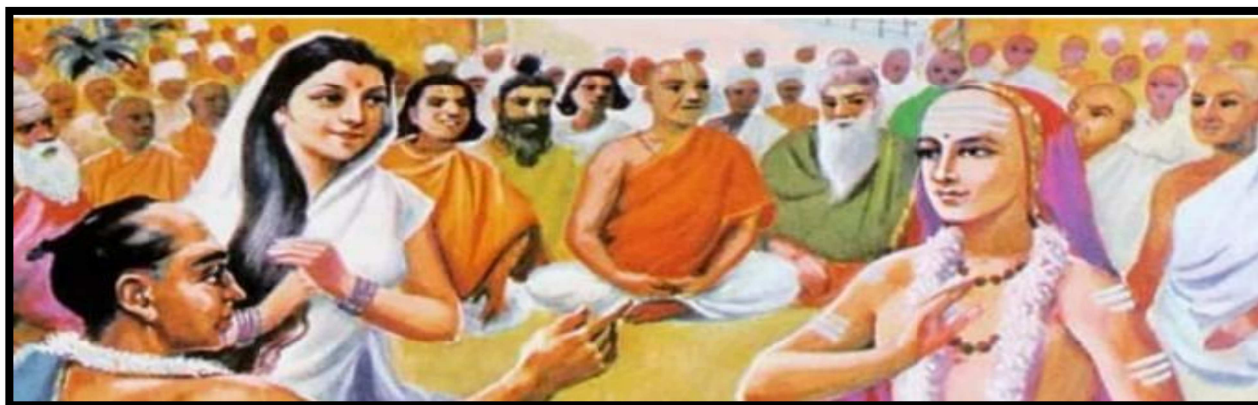
AFFECTED INDIA: CALL FOR RESURGENCE

Modern feminist discourse in India has played a crucial role in exposing systemic inequalities, challenging patriarchal norms, and advocating for legal and social reform. Influenced in part by Western feminist philosophy, contemporary debates often center on bodily autonomy, workplace equality, representation, and the dismantling of oppressive institutions. These frameworks have been instrumental in addressing urgent realities such as gender-based violence, economic disparity, and discriminatory laws. However, while rights-based and structural critiques remain indispensable, they do not entirely capture the cultural complexity of the

Indian social fabric. In a society where mythology, religious symbolism, and ritual practices continue to shape collective consciousness, empowerment cannot be framed solely in legal or political terms.

The paradox of modern India—where the divine feminine is venerated through countless forms of Shakti while women continue to face systemic marginalization—reveals a deeper tension between symbolic reverence and lived experience. Rather than dismissing tradition as inherently regressive, it becomes necessary to interrogate whether indigenous philosophical categories might offer additional resources for feminist thought. The concept of Shakti, understood in classical texts as the dynamic, creative, and transformative force underlying the cosmos, presents a radically different ontology of power—one in which the feminine is not secondary, but foundational.

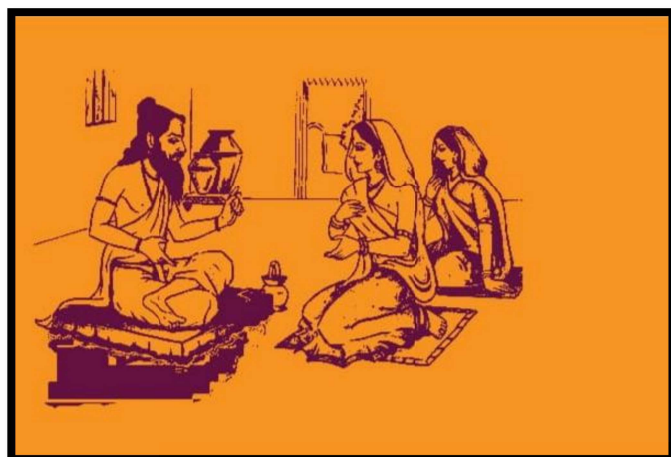
Re-engaging with such traditions does not imply a rejection of modern feminism, nor does it romanticize the past. Instead, it opens a dialogue between contemporary feminist concerns and ancient epistemologies of power. By revisiting the philosophical imagination of Shakti, the discourse shifts from merely resisting oppression to rearticulating femininity itself as a locus of strength, agency, and cosmic authority. In this sense, ancient conceptions of the feminine may serve not as alternatives to modern feminism, but as culturally rooted expansions of it.



POWER OF INTELLIGENCE – THE FEMALE SCHOLARS

In Brihadaranyak Upanishad, we come across an important discussion between Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya which shows the noblest expressions ever made by a woman.

Yajnavalkya had two wives, Maitreyi who was a Brahnavadini (desirous of the knowledge of Brahma) and the other one was Katyayni. Yajnavalkya, once thinking of pursuing the next stage of life said the following-
“O Maitreyi, I am anxious to rise above this stage of life, so, if you agree, I would like to divide between you



and Katyayni (what I have).” Maitreyi, on hearing this said, “Lord if this whole earth with its treasure were mine, then can I attain immortality with them?” Yajnavalvakya replied to this, “No, your life will be happy like that of the rich who are possessed of things of enjoyment, but there is no hope of attaining immortality by riches or by deeds that are done by riches.” On hearing this Maitreyi said: “What should I do with that which cannot raise me above death? Tell me what thou knowest as beyond death.” To this Yajnavalvakya replied: “Maitreyi, thou hast been ever dear to me and so art thou speaking now. Come and sit beside me and I will tell what thou desirest.” Then he goes on with his discourse regarding the way to immortality.



Mahabharata, a smriti which time and again brings to us the countless stories of relevant societal problems and the ultimate solutions towards them, narrates to us the stories of Sulabha, a female ascetic who is seen in a philosophical debate with King Janaka about the true nature of atman (soul), and the other one of Savitri, a woman who with her intelligence saves her husband from Yama, the God of death.

Sulabha and Janaka were discussing the intellectual aspects of Vedas. But Sulabha noticed that Janaka was very disturbed during the conversation. Janaka spoke, “You are probing my mind like a scholar. I find it uncomfortable because you are a woman.” *Sulabha responded, “I am speaking to you as a scholar, not as a woman. You are supposed to pay attention to my words, my thoughts, my ideas and not my body.” She also says, “As per Vedanta, all living beings are genderless souls wrapped in gendered bodies. We simply use this gendered body to understand that genderless soul which is our ultimate reality.”*

Savitri, daughter of King Aswapati, chose to marry Satyavan, an exiled prince living in the forest with his father Dyumatsena who was blind and his mother. Rishi Narada warned Savitri that Satyavan was destined to die exactly one year after their marriage, but Savitri refused to change her choice. When the day arrived, Savitri was in a forest with Satyavan where he slowly died in her lap. Then Yama appears to take Satyavan’s soul and Savitri follows him, refusing to leave her husband. Impressed by her devotion and wisdom, Yama



offers her boons, excluding her husband's life: First, she asks for her father-in-law to regain his eyesight; Second, she requests the restoration of her father-in-law's lost kingdom; Thirdly, she asks for a hundred sons with her husband. Because of this last wish of Savirti, Yama had to ultimately return Satyavan's soul.

These stories above dictate to us an important aspect of feminism that is often overlooked- that is intelligence. These female scholars/ philosophers are the bygone ideals of feminism who show us devotion and humbleness in harmony with intellect and power to reason. These narratives also in a way challenge the notions of submissive nature of women in ancient Indian traditions. Above all this, they are the celebration of power derived from intelligence and show us the feminists whom we should really look upon.

FORMS OF SHAKTI – AN UNDERSTANDING

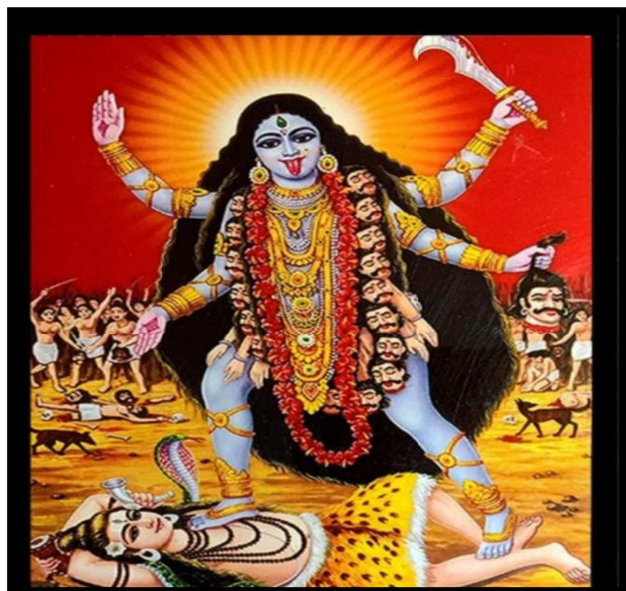
Saraswati means the 'flowing one'. There are different names used to describe her: Sarda (giver of essence), Brahmi (wife of Brahma), Mahavidya (supreme knowledge). She represents power and intelligence from which organised creation proceeds. She is the personification of all knowledge of arts, sciences and skills. The knowledge which removes the darkness of ignorance, hence she dresses up in all pure white. Seated on a lotus, she holds in her four hands, a Vina (lute), Aksamala (rosary) and a Pustaka (book). In a way, she is depicting different ways of Sadhana to understand and connect with the Parmatma (higher being), may it be by reading of scriptures, or chanting the holy name, or by practicing the creative arts. All this in one way or other, requires knowledge. Being the wife of Brahma, She represents power and intelligence, without which creation is impossible. Hans (swan), is associated with her as her Vahana (vehicle). Swan is said to be possessed with power to separate milk from water, shows 'Viveka', that means power of discrimination or differentiation between what is temporary and what is permanent, and hence showing power and impact of wisdom.



Lakshmi, standing beautifully on a lotus and also holding lotuses in two of her hands is seen surrounded by elephants on either side showing grandeur and valour. Her four hands signify her power to grant the four Purusharthas (ends of human life)- Dharma (righteousness), Artha (prosperity), Kama (pleasure), Moksha (liberation). The lotuses in various stages of blooming, represent the world in various stages of evolution. Lakshmi is the wife of Vishnu, and she also takes birth with his spouse, every time he incarnates, like with Vamana- Padma, Parasurama- Dharani, Rama- Sita. She is inseparable from Vishnu, like speech from meaning, or knowledge from intellect.

Lakshmi Purana gives us an interesting story from Jagannath in Puri, Odisha. Balaram, the elder brother of Jagannath, who is the form of Vishnu, once saw Lakshmi entering the house of Chandala, who were considered opposite of Brahmins. Balaram said that Lakshmi had become impure and should not be allowed into the temple. Jagannath agreed to his brother and didn't allow Lakshmi to enter. From that day onwards the two brothers had no access to food. Balaram soon realized his mistake that the notions of purity of impurity didn't make any sense to the body and had to open the door of the temple to let Lakshmi in.

The significance of the story lies in what Mata Lakshmi teaches us here- the idea of equality. She treats everyone equally. She is the ideal of how a society should really be. She is more often viewed as goddess of wealth and prayed for so as most of our other Gods too are prayed to attain something, but we never really understand the meaning behind them, just like Mata Lakshmi symbolizing here the power to indiscriminate.



The word '**Kali**' comes from the word Kala, time. She is the power of time. Time which is all-destroying. The universe is seen as a veil or cloak for divinity, thus destruction of the universe unveils the divinity which is seen as symbolized by the mother. Her complexion is near black showing a void that has swallowed up everything. She represents the state where time, space and causation have disappeared without any trace as it were. Her open hair, for which she is called 'Muktkesi', shows her unhampered freedom. The garland of heads that She wears shows the creation has been withdrawn indicating the state of destruction. Her third eye is the reflection of the state of complete awareness. While her two hands show a bleeding head and a sword, the other two hands are seen in 'Abhaya Mudra' and 'Varada Mudra', granting boons showing that She is also a mother. The most important thing is Shiva, seen trampled under the feet of Kali. Shiva is lying like a 'Sava', corpse. Kali represents his shakti or energy. This can be interpreted as to show that energy cannot exist apart from its source or act independently of it. So, Shakti here not only represents a destructive aspect of God's power. What exists when time is transcended, the eternal night of limitless peace and joy, is also Kali-Maharatri. She is who enforces Shiva into the next cycle of creation. She is the power of God in all His aspects. Both Shiva and Kali are inseparable from each other, they reflect the equal need of both male and female in sustaining or preserving the cosmic order. Kali in all her anger and valour, still needs Shiva, reflecting that one is incomplete without the other.



These different Devis carry such deep meanings and interpretations which are overlooked. We merely bow down before them but never try to understand what they are trying to signify in real life. All the roopas teach us something, the values which we need to learn. The careful study of them reveals to us far greater definitions of self.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE? - THROUGH INDIAN LENS

Marriage is a divine institution which brings together the dual aspect of creation, both male and female, in which no one is subordinate to the other. Marriage coexists within the harmony and contributions of both, thus confirming balance. But this institution of marriage is often challenged in the present society because of the growing expectations. Brihadaranyak Upanishad expresses to us the idea that both husband and wife constitute a unity in society. In ancient India, marriage, birth of children and their upbringing, all were considered as the religious duties of a man. Hence women were considered as a partner (Ardhangini- half body) in all these religious duties of men. Also, any ritualistic practice like Yagya were considered incomplete if performed without a partner. That is why Vivah (marriage), also one of the sixteen ‘Samskaras’ (religious rites), was such an important part of one’s life. All our Gods and Goddesses show us the significance of marriage and especially the Trinity- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, explicitly confirm its relevance as they function only in presence of their female counterparts. But what kind of a partner does one need?

In Devi Mahatmaya, comes the story of two Asuras- Sumba and Nisumba, who, attracted by Devi Ambika’s (Parvati) beauty, asked her to marry either one of them. Devi replies to this:

यो मां जयति संग्रामे यो मे दर्पं व्यपोहति ।
यो मे प्रतिद्वन्द्वी लोके स मे भर्ता भविष्यति॥

“He alone Who conquers Me in battle, Who removes My pride, Who equals My Strength in the world, will become My husband.)”

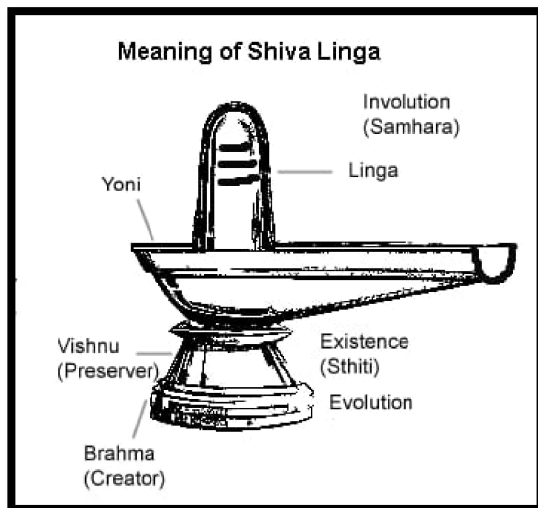
Here, Devi is mainly saying this on the purpose of killing the demons but she is implicitly justifying the fact of healthy marriage which is about union of two equals- equal in the way of respecting each other, equal in the way of understanding each other.

The essence of these words by Devi can also captured in Ramayana, where Mata Sita (incarnation of Lakshmi) found by King Janaka in a furrow, was strong enough to pick up Shiva’s dhanush (bow)- Pinaka, which was almost impossible to even move. So, it was decided that whoever picks up the Pinaka, will be allowed to marry

her. Many tried but no one was able to do so, finally Lord Ram (incarnation of Vishnu) came and picked up the bow and tied its string and broke it into half.

Devi, as a feminine ideal doesn't reject the idea of marriage but stresses upon choosing wisely, not the 'better-half' but the 'other-half' as the sanctity of marriage lies in balance.

ICONS OF UNITY – MALE AND FEMALE AS INSEPARABLE



Ardhanarishvara, a combined figure of both Shiva and Parvati in a state of equilibrium. It is the symbol of unity of both feminine and masculine energies. Towards the right is the Shiva and on the left is Parvati-reflecting the association of purusha and prakriti. They personify the non-dualistic aspect of divinity and Upanishadic principle of a single 'tattva' dividing itself into two parts, thus reflecting the need of duality for creation. They both are in harmony with each other representing cosmic balance, as both being inseparable.

Ardhanarishvara is a very strong figure which can also be interpreted as symbolizing that the reality is neither this nor that. A similar meaning is also given by the Linga- depicting both the Shiva and Shakti in the form of 'Linga' and 'Yoni' (male and female genital organs). It symbolises the importance of the union of creative



forces for creation. They, in a way, present that the essence of existence lies in the unification of plurality.

A celebrated figure of utmost love and intangible essence of Bhakti, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is said to be the incarnation of Krishna embodied with the sentiment of Shri Radharani, who is the divine energy (Shakti) within Krishna and symbol of purest form of love (Nishkama Prem) . He is often called as 'Gauranga' because of his golden complexion. He simplified Bhakti by diluting it, and bringing the idea of chanting the holy name as the best way to connect oneself with the divine. Radha and Krishna were separate figures but they re-incarnated as one to show that the divine aspect doesn't lie in 'you' and 'I' but in 'us' and the highest form of devotion is coming out of this dualism.

All these figures are the symbols of the dual nature of creation and a realisation that there is the need of both male and female to sustain this cosmic balance. Both the aspects of life are universal and complementary to each other because:

"He who is Brahman is indeed the Adyashakti. When He is inactive, I call him Brahman, I call him Purusha. When He creates, preserves, dissolves, I call Him Shakti, I call Him Prakriti. He who is Purusha is indeed Prakriti . Together they constitute the anandmaya (all blissful male aspect of God) and anandmayi (all blissful female aspect of God). He who is aware of manhood is also aware of womanhood."

CONCLUSION – FEMINISM REVISED

As we reach the end of this paper, one must have witnessed the evolution of the idea of feminism and a change in perspective. The key idea of feminism which is popularized today, came more or less from the intersection of western philosophy and social media, and has greatly penetrated itself into the very core of Indian society, uprooting its values. The contemporary issues of rape cases, increased divorce rate, growing distinctions between men and women, all contribute to the development of alienation and hatred in between the two. All this is happening due to the misguided effort of proving oneself as better than the other. The worst thing is that the civilization which has everything of itself to look upon has still snagged itself on the wrong idea's, and we don't relate with our own ideals whom we worship. Shakti, the power which forms the Indian idea of feminism is seen in different aspects. The Vedic times saw many female scholars or Rishikas, showing the power of intelligence and knowledge transcending gender. The intensive interpretation of Devi's roopas revealed to us that all our Gods and Goddesses are not mere entities but ideas. Marriage is also seen as a keen characteristic of all our Indian ideals of feminism because marriage as a divine institution is not built to disempower women but is a sacred bond that should yield balance, not conflict. Because both male and female are the dual aspects of the creation, none is complete without the other. We all are the different manifestations of the same energy, thus the Indian idea of feminism talks about equality rather than superiority. As we re-imagine the Shakti, we come across her different forms. She is Kali- who destroys, She is Saraswati- who enlightens, She is Durga- who protects, She is Lakshmi- who provides; She can also be Sati- who sacrifices for her husband, and also Sita- who sacrifices for her own self-respect, She can be Radha- who surrenders. She is the power in all its aspects, not the power that connotes the ability to control and dominate but who re-directs everyone to come out of the duality, She is universal in this sense. As we established in the very beginning that all women are forms of Shakti, so are men who are forms of Brahma. We need to realize the meaning that they carry with them and inculcate the morals that they teach us. "Don't just be believers, be followers."

People, male and female,
blush when a cloth covering
their shame comes loose
When the lord of lives
lives drowned without a face
In the world, how can
you be modest?
When all the world is
the eye of the lord,
onlooking everywhere,
what can you cover conceal?
Akka Mahadevi

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