



From Womb to Web: Jagat Janani, Shakti, and Feminist Meaning in Digital India

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ABSTRACT

“By you is this universe borne; by you is this world created.”

India has long been a civilizational space marked by cultural plurality and philosophical depth. From the Vedic period onward women have occupied a central position within the Indic imagination where they have been revered as ‘Shakti’, ‘Paramba’, ‘Jagat Janani’ and ‘Bhavani’. ‘Shakti’ within the Indian knowledge system is understood not merely as symbolic femininity but as primordial cosmic energy that sustains creation and order. Classical thinkers such as ‘Adi Sankaracharya’ emphasized the nurturing and suffering-alleviating dimension of the mother thereby locating motherhood as an ethical and ontological principle rather than a biological role alone.

This study examines how the Indic conception of ‘Jagat Janani’ and ‘Shakti’ is reimagined in contemporary digital spaces and what this transformation signifies for feminist meaning in India. Motherhood is approached as a socially constructed role shaped by cultural expectations, communicative practices and evolving technologies.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative mixed-methods approach combining a digital questionnaire through Google Forms, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and digital discourse analysis. This was complemented by visual and textual analysis of online interactions including social media reels, YouTube content, hashtags and digital trends to examine how motherhood and Shakti are represented, circulated and contested in digital culture.

The study is hypothesised as, “while digital platforms appear to revive the imagery of ‘Jagat Janani’, they frequently detach ‘Shakti’ from her philosophical depth thereby reshaping motherhood into a mediated symbol whose feminist potential is simultaneously activated and constrained.”

The research is theoretically grounded in Indic ontological conceptions of ‘Shakti’ and ‘Jagat Janani’ and will engage critically with postcolonial feminist theory, cultural sociology and digital mediation theory. By treating Indic concepts as living knowledge rather than static symbols the study aims to contribute to Indian Knowledge Systems by demonstrating how feminine power and maternal authority are continuously re-signified through women’s voices within contemporary digital India.

1. INTRODUCTION

ayā visrjyate viśvam jagad etac carācaram saiśā prasannā varadā nṛnām bhavati muktaye

(Devī Māhātmyam 1.56)

“She creates all this universe, moving and unmoving, and it is She Who graciously bestows liberation on humanity.”

This verse from the Devī Māhātmyam articulates a foundational insight of Indic thought: the feminine is not simply symbolic but constitutive of reality itself. The Goddess is imagined as the creative, sustaining, and emancipatory principle through which existence comes into being. Rather than functioning as a secondary or representational figure, the feminine is positioned as the very ground of cosmic order and transformation.

Within the Indian civilizational imagination, womanhood has long been conceptualised through metaphysical categories such as Śakti, Parambā, Jagat Jananī, and Bhavānī. These terms do not merely describe social roles; they embed femininity within cosmology, ethics, and meaning-making practices. Motherhood, in this framework, is not restricted to biological reproduction but emerges as a form of power, authority, and care that shapes both worldly and transcendental life.

Sociological scholarship likewise understands motherhood as a culturally mediated practice rather than a purely natural function. Arendell (2000) locates motherhood within broader constructions of femininity and gender, while Baber and Allen (1995) argue that maternal practices participate in the reproduction of social and ideological structures. Thus, motherhood operates simultaneously at personal, cultural, and political levels.

In Indic epistemologies, Śakti signifies the primordial energy through which the universe is animated and sustained. Unlike many symbolic treatments of femininity in Western philosophical traditions, Śakti functions ontologically as power itself—the capacity to generate, preserve, and transform existence. Philosophical traditions, including Advaita Vedānta as articulated by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, foreground the compassionate and liberating dimensions of the maternal principle, presenting the mother not only as nurturer but as a source of ethical and metaphysical agency. The figure of Jagat Jananī therefore embodies a synthesis of care, authority, and transformative potential, shaping historical imaginaries of femininity within South Asian cultural life.

The emergence of feminist scholarship in the study of religion has further unsettled inherited interpretations of sacred traditions. Feminist approaches interrogate patriarchal assumptions embedded in texts, practices, and institutions, while also seeking possibilities for re-reading religious knowledge in ways that foreground

women's agency and experience. Rather than abandoning tradition, such scholarship reworks it through gender-sensitive and emancipatory lenses.

At the same time, motherhood cannot be treated as a uniform or instinctive role. Parenthood is shaped by social structure, demographic location, and interpersonal dynamics. Erdoğan (2008) emphasises that parenting is less a fixed behavioural pattern and more an emotionally embedded form of social interaction. Expectations attached to motherhood and fatherhood differ across families and cultural contexts, producing multiple lived versions of care, authority, and responsibility. Individuals negotiate these roles through everyday interaction rather than inheriting them unchanged.

Against this theoretical background, the present study seeks to examine how the idea of Jagat Jananī and Śakti is rearticulated within contemporary digital spaces. As religious symbolism enters platforms governed by visibility, aesthetics, and algorithmic circulation, motherhood and feminine power undergo significant transformations. This research therefore explores how digital mediation reshapes the philosophical depth, feminist potential, and cultural meaning of the Goddess as both symbol and lived imagination.

2. HYPOTHESIS

The study is hypothesised as, “while digital platforms appear to revive the imagery of ‘Jagat Janani’, they frequently detach ‘Shakti’ from her philosophical depth thereby reshaping motherhood into a mediated symbol whose feminist potential is simultaneously activated and constrained.”

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative mixed-methods approach combining a digital questionnaire through Google Forms, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and digital discourse analysis. This was complemented by visual and textual analysis of online interactions including social media reels, YouTube content, hashtags and digital trends to examine how motherhood and Shakti are represented, circulated and contested in digital culture.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding Śakti and Jagat Jananī spans sacred texts, philosophical traditions and contemporary academic scholarship. These bodies of work do not just describe the feminine as a social category, but conceptualise it as a cosmological, ethical and cultural principle. From early Vedic hymns to Purāṇic narratives and modern feminist interpretations, the idea of the divine mother has been continuously reworked to address questions of power, agency and social order. A review of this literature allows for an



understanding of how feminine authority has been imagined, interpreted and contested across time, and how these interpretations inform contemporary engagements with motherhood and gender in India.

4.1 Devī Sūkta (Ṛg Veda 10.125): Voice as Feminine Authority

One of the earliest and most significant articulations of feminine power appears in the Devī Sūkta (Ṛg Veda 10.125), also known as the Vāk Sūkta. Unlike later mythological representations, this hymn presents the feminine as Vāk, speech itself who speaks in the first person and declares her cosmic agency. The seer of the hymn, Vāk Ambhṛṇī (Vāgāmbhṛṇī), is also its deity, signalling a complete identification between the knower and the known. This self-reflexive structure is philosophically important, as it situates feminine power not as something observed but as something that speaks, commands and constitutes reality.

Throughout the hymn, the देवी does not describe herself through dependence on male deities instead, she positions herself as the force that sustains them. When she proclaims,

ॐ अहं रु भिर्वसुभिश्चराम्यहमादित्यैरुत विश्वदेवैः । अहं मित्रावरुणोभा विभिर्मिहमिन्द्राग्नी अहमेश्विनोभा ॥ १ ॥

(Devī Sūkta (Ṛg Veda 10.125))

“I move along with Rudras, the Vasus, the Adityas, also with the Vishvadevas. I hold both Mitra and Varuna, both Indra and Agni, and both the Asvin brothers.”

Here, she frames herself as the enabling presence behind divine action rather than a subordinate figure. The hymn repeatedly asserts that perception, breath, nourishment and understanding operate through her alone. In this sense, Vāk is not merely speech as communication, but speech as consciousness and life-force. Feminine power here is epistemic; it structures how beings know, exist and participate in the cosmos.

The hymn also establishes authority through sovereignty. When Vāk declares,

अहं रुद्रेभिर्वसुभिश्चरामि अहमादित्यैरुत विश्वदेवैः ।

अहं मित्रावरुणोभा बिभर्मि अहमिन्द्राग्नी अहमेश्विनोभा ॥

(Devī Sūkta (Ṛg Veda 10.125))

“I am the Queen, the gatherer of vasus (treasures), knower of Brahman, the first (chief) of the object of yagna (worship). The gods have dispersed me in many places, having many abodes, causing me to pervade (or overpower) many.”

She assumes political, economic and spiritual leadership simultaneously. This triple authority is significant because it collapses the later divisions between private motherhood, public power and sacred legitimacy. The feminine in the Devī Sūkta is both nurturing and commanding, both pervading and directing. Rather than locating motherhood in domesticity, the text states it cosmologically the feminine becomes the ground through which heaven and earth are held together.

Another crucial dimension of the Devī Sūkta is agency. Vāk states that she chooses whom to empower, whom to make a sage, and whom to elevate in knowledge. This reverses conventional hierarchies where women receive authority; instead, authority flows from the feminine. The maternal principle thus becomes productive rather than passive. She is not merely symbolic care but an active creator of social and spiritual subjects.

4.2 Devī Māhātmya: Jagat Jananī as Ontological and Ethical Power

While the Devī Sūkta articulates feminine authority through the medium of voice, the Devī Māhātmya (also known as the Durgā Saptashatī) elaborates this authority through narrative, allegory and cosmology. Composed within the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the text does not merely glorify the Goddess but constructs her as the ontological ground of the universe and the ethical force that sustains, protects and dissolves it. The Goddess is not external to creation, she is its condition of possibility. This conception is crucial for understanding Jagat Jananī not as metaphorical motherhood, but as cosmic agency.

Several verses emphasise this foundational role. When the text declares,

Tvayaitad dhāryate viśvam tvayaitat srjyate jagat Tvayaitat pālyate Devi Tvam atsy ante ca sarvadā

(Devī Māhātmyam 1.75)

“By You is this universe supported, of You is this world born, by You is it protected, O Devī, and You always Consume it at the end.”

The Goddess is positioned as the cyclical principle of creation, preservation and dissolution. Motherhood here exceeds nurture and enters the domain of sovereignty. The maternal is not confined to care but becomes structural power the capacity to hold together cosmic order while also transforming it. This formulation complicates modern assumptions that associate motherhood with passivity or emotional labour alone. The text

also foregrounds the ethical function of the Divine Mother. She is repeatedly invoked as the remover of suffering, the protector of both the moving and unmoving, and the one who shelters those who take refuge in her.

At the same time, the Devī Māhātmya resists reducing the Goddess to gentle benevolence. Through allegorical battles against arrogance, delusion and misuse of power, the text depicts the Devi as a force that confronts excess, pride and moral distortion. When the Goddess is warned against arrogance derived from borrowed strength, the narrative subtly affirms that authentic power is internal and ethical, not performative. This distinction becomes especially relevant in digital spaces where empowerment is often displayed rather than philosophically grounded.

Thus, the Devī Māhātmya provides a critical anchor for analysing how ancient imaginaries of feminine power encounter contemporary structures of visibility and communication. It allows the study to question whether digital representations of motherhood retain the ethical and ontological weight of Śakti or translate it into consumable symbolism.

4.3 Postcolonial and Digital Feminist Perspectives

Contemporary scholarship locates motherhood within cultural and communicative systems rather than biology alone. **Gül (2019)** shows how digital platforms circulate normative maternal models that appear empowering while subtly regulating behaviour through aesthetics and affective labour. **Raj (2023)** further demonstrates that digital visibility enables women's participation in India but simultaneously reproduces ideological expectations around respectability and authority. Together, these studies suggest that digital spaces activate feminine agency while also disciplining it, a tension central to understanding how Jagat Jananī is transformed into a mediated symbol rather than sustained as philosophical power. **Mohanty's (2003)** postcolonial feminist framework cautions against universal models of empowerment detached from cultural context, insisting that feminist meaning must emerge from lived, historical conditions. **Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019)** extend this insight to digital environments, showing how online activism creates resistance but is shaped by platform logics of performance and visibility. These perspectives help situate Śakti not as abstract empowerment but as a culturally embedded agency that becomes reconfigured when translated into digital spectacle and circulation. **Indira (2025)** reframes spirituality as a site of women's authority rather than retreat, arguing that religious traditions offer conceptual resources for ethical autonomy. **Tiwari (2021)** similarly conceptualises woman as supreme consciousness rather than social role, aligning with the metaphysical framing of Śakti in classical texts. These works allow motherhood to be understood as cognitive and ethical power. However, when such depth is mediated digitally, it risks being reduced to imagery rather than lived consciousness reinforcing the need for critical analysis.

5. FINDINGS

The findings of this study emerge from various interconnected sources: responses collected through a Google Form survey, face-to-face interviews, observation of digital representations of the Goddess across social media platforms, and interpretive engagement with classical textual traditions such as the Devī Māhātmya and the Devī Sūkta. Together, these layers reveal how the idea of Jagat Janani and Śhakti is being reshaped within contemporary digital culture.

5.1 Perceptions of Śhakti and Jagat Janani

The survey shows people mostly see Śhakti as feminine strength and inner power, rather than a force for social or political change. Only a few linked it directly to social or political agency. Jagat Janani brings to mind the cosmic mother, Durga, unconditional care, and women's empowerment – protection and nurturance come to mind, not confrontation. It's like motherhood is central to how people imagine feminine power.

This resonates with the Devī Sūkta, where the Goddess declares her all-pervading authority:

अहमेव स्वयमृदं वदामि जुष्टं देवेभिरुत मानुषेभिः ।

यं कामये तं तंमुग्रं कृणोमि तं ब्रह्माणं तमृषिं तं सुमेधाम् ॥ ५॥

(Devī Sūkta (R̥g Veda 10.125))

“I speak this myself, which is liked by both gods and men alike, whomever I wish, I make him powerful, well versed in knowledge, a sage and a wise one.”

Textually, the Goddess is sovereign and world-forming, yet digitally, respondents perceive her more through affective and inspirational frames than through radical authority.

5.2 Aestheticisation and Platform Logic

People said online goddess imagery is "moderately aesthetic". Looking at Instagram and YouTube, goddess visuals are often stylised with digital art, slow-motion transitions, glowing effects, and cinematic filters. It's more about visual impact and emotional punch than ritual depth.

These reels go viral mostly in the evening and late-night hours (7 PM–12 AM) when engagement is high. Posts with instrumental bhajans, remixed shlokas, or trending motivational audio spread faster than plain devotional recordings. The Goddess isn't encountered in silence – it's through rhythm, remix, and repetition. Devotion gets mixed with entertainment logic.

5.3 Comments Section as Digital Devotion

The comment sections of such posts function as micro-spaces of public religiosity. Common patterns include:

1. “Jai Maa 🙏” chains
2. Heart and fire emojis
3. Short affirmations like “Shakti is power”, “Women rise”
4. Users tagging mothers, sisters, friends
5. Collective chanting through text

These interactions convert sacred symbolism into shareable sentiment. The emotional authority of the Goddess is present, but often fragmented into slogans rather than reflective engagement.

This shift contrasts with the Devī Māhātmya, where devotees invoke protection and refuge:

Devi prapannārthihare prasīda prasīda mātār jagato 'khillasya prasīda viśveśvari pāhi viśvam tvam īśvarī Devi carācarasya

(Devī Māhātmyam 11.3)

'O Devī, Who remove the sufferings of those who take refuge in you, be gracious. Be Gracious, Mother of the entire world. Be Gracious, Ruler of All. Protect the universe, O Devī, Who are the Ruler of the Moving and The Unmoving.

5.4 Motherhood as Marketable Image

A key finding is that motherhood online appears as a marketable aesthetic rather than philosophical grounding. Respondents felt that digital motherhood has “least emotional authority.” While the Goddess is visually glorified, her depth as Jagat Janani becomes consumable imagery.

- Creators frame Durga and Kali alongside:
- Women entrepreneurs
- Motivational speakers
- Startup culture
- Dance reels with symbolic gestures

These videos are often shared more with friends and family through WhatsApp and Instagram DMs, especially during festivals or trending moments, indicating a circulation of empowerment as spectacle rather than sustained discourse.

This reflects a tension with the textual Goddess who declares universality:

Sarvasvarūpe Sarveśe sarvaśaktisamanvite bhayebhyas trāhi no Devi Durge Devi namo 'stu te

(Devī Māhātmyam 11.3)



“O Devī, Who Exist In The Form Of All, Who Are The Ruler Of All, Possessing All Power, protect us from fears. O Devī Durgā, salutation be to You!”

5.5 Digital Feminist Visibility

Respondents highlighted empowering content such as:

- Draupadi and Kali narrative reels
- Muniba Mazari’s resilience story
- Women confidently speaking online
- Conference talks on Mahābhārata

So, these digital representations of Śhakti and Jagat Jananī become a kind of symbolic feminist visibility, where ancient figures and modern women are brought together to show a continuous thread of resistance. But here's the thing: this visibility is shaped by platform metrics – likes, shares, and what's trending algorithmically. It's like feminist expression online is performative and public, but still bound by the rules of attention economies.

5.6 Textual Readings as Findings

The classical verses themselves become findings when read against digital mediation. In the Devī Sūkta, the Goddess asserts:

मया सोऽन्नंमति यो विपश्यति यः प्राणंति य ईं शृणोत्युक्तम् ।
अमन्तवोमान्त उपक्षियन्ति श्रुतिश्रुत श्रद्धिवं तं वदामि ॥ ४ ॥
(Devī Sūkta (R̥g Veda 10.125))

“He who eats food, he who sees, who breathes, who hears the spoken word does so through me alone. Even the non-perceivers of you dwell near me. Hear me! he who is capable of hearing me! I speak to you the credible.”

Another verse states:

bhūyas ca śatavārṣikyām anāvr̥styām anambhasi munibhiḥ samstutā bhūmau sambhaviṣyāmy
ayonijā

(Devī Māhātmyam 11.46)

“Again, when no rain has fallen for a hundred years and there is no water on earth, Then Praised by sages, I Shall Appear, But Not Born Of A Womb.”

Symbolically, this resonates with digital rebirth: the Goddess repeatedly “appears” online without ritual birth, through reposts, edits, and viral circulation. Thus, scripture and screen intersect, but not without distortion.

5.7 From Sacred Authority to Digital Symbol

In short, the study shows that digital platforms do two things at once: they give women’s voices a bigger stage and keep the symbolic heritage of Jagat Jananī alive, but they also turn Śhakti into something more aesthetic, commercial and emotionally shallow. The Goddess is still there, but now she’s mostly a visual motivator rather than a deep metaphysical force, a shift driven by algorithms, audience attention and how culture consumes it.

RESULTS

The study looked at how people perceive Śakti and Jagat Jananī online, and here's what it found. Digital platforms keep the reverence for these concepts alive, but they reshape their meaning into more aesthetic and symbolic forms.

Most people see Śakti as "feminine strength" or "inner power", rather than a force for social or political change. When it comes to Jagat Jananī, people associate her with the cosmic mother, Goddess Durga, unconditional care, and women's empowerment. These views show a cultural attachment to the Divine Mother, but focus more on emotional and visual aspects than deeper philosophical meaning.

Online, goddess imagery is often made to look visually stunning through filters, cinematic visuals, and devotional remixes. These images spread quickly on platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, with people engaging through short affirmations or praise. This turns maternal power into something consumable.

People also felt that digital platforms raise awareness about feminist issues, but this empowerment is often symbolic and driven by algorithms rather than real engagement. Motherhood online is seen as having limited emotional authority, with people engaging briefly before moving on.

Overall, digital media revives the imagery of Jagat Jananī, but loses touch with the deeper philosophy of Śakti. Platforms activate feminist symbolism, but constrain its potential by reducing it to shareable, emotional representations.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a central tension in the digital re-signification of Śakti and Jagat Jananī. While online platforms provide new visibility to the Divine Mother and narratives of feminine strength, they also transform these ideas into aesthetic, emotional and algorithm-driven forms. Rather than transmitting the ontological depth of Indic philosophy, digital culture tends to privilege immediacy, visibility and affect. As a result, Śakti circulates more as an image of empowerment than as a principle of ethical and social transformation.

This tendency aligns with existing scholarship on digital motherhood and feminist representation. Derya (2019) observes that digital media often reproduces motherhood as a cultural ideology shaped by visual norms and market logic, rather than lived relational authority. Similarly, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019) argue that online feminist activism gains momentum through visibility but risks simplification when mediated by platform economies. The present study extends these insights into the Indic context, showing how goddess imagery becomes inspirational yet conceptually compressed within short-form digital content.

The interpretation of Śakti as primarily “inner strength” rather than social or political power reflects a broader depoliticisation of feminine authority in digital spaces. Mohanty’s (2003) critique of Western feminist frameworks reminds us that feminist meaning is historically and culturally situated. In the Indian digital environment, empowerment is often reframed as personal confidence instead of collective transformation. Thus, while platforms amplify women’s voices, they also subtly redirect power into motivational rather than structural registers.

Moreover, the marketisation of motherhood observed in this study resonates with cultural sociology perspectives on mediation. Digital platforms require identities to be visible, shareable, and emotionally engaging. This converts maternal authority into content performance. Classical Indic texts imagine the Goddess as inseparable from existence itself, yet digital culture renders her as an object of circulation. The sacred becomes consumable, and the cosmic becomes symbolic.

At the same time, the digital revival of Jagat Jananī cannot be dismissed as merely superficial. The frequent resurgence of goddess imagery during festivals, feminist debates and crises indicates an ongoing cultural desire to reconnect with feminine power. Women’s participation in creating and sharing such content reflects agency in negotiating tradition within contemporary technologies. Thus, digital media functions as both a site of constraint and possibility.

Overall, the discussion confirms the hypothesis that digital platforms simultaneously activate and limit the feminist potential of Śakti. They offer new spaces for expression and recognition while restructuring meaning through aesthetics, algorithms and market logics. The Divine Mother in digital India emerges not as erased, but as reconfigured - present as inspiration, visible as symbol yet distanced from her philosophical and ontological depth

LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations. The data mainly comes from a Google Form questionnaire and online observations, without in-depth interviews due to time constraints. While the survey gives useful insights, it can't fully capture the complexity of women's experiences with motherhood, spirituality, and digital identity - richer interviews could have added more depth.

The sample size and diversity were limited, so the results might not apply everywhere. People's views on Śakti and Jagat Jananī vary across regions, ages, religions, and digital skills. Future research could benefit from a bigger, more diverse sample.

The online observations are based on interpretation rather than hard data. Trends were inferred from what's visible online, so some aspects of how algorithms work are approximate.

Linking old texts with today's digital culture involves personal interpretation. Scriptures provide a foundation, but translating their meaning for today requires scholarly judgment, which can vary.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a starting point for understanding how Śakti and motherhood are redefined in India's digital world.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how India's ancient ideas of Śakti (divine feminine power) and Jagat Jananī (Mother of the Universe) are being reinterpreted in today's digital world. What does this mean for feminism in India?

By looking at old texts, online trends, and what people have said in surveys, the research shows that digital platforms aren't just copying traditional images of the Divine Mother – they're reshaping them in big ways. The way these images are designed, shared, and moderated online changes their meaning.

The findings suggest that while digital media brings back the imagery of Jagat Jananī, it often loses touch with the deeper philosophy behind Śakti. Online spaces highlight goddess symbols and stories of female strength, but they often reduce power to something emotional, visual, or motivational. Motherhood becomes inspirational, but its real authority gets lost in the process.

At the same time, digital culture lets women engage with tradition, identity, and self-expression in new ways. Through social media, storytelling, and creative performances, women are helping redefine what maternal power means today.

So, in digital India, Śakti isn't preserved or erased – it's constantly being reconfigured. The study adds to our understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems by showing how feminine power now lives at the intersection of ancient scripture, culture, and screens.

Understanding this shift matters for feminism in a digital world, where the Divine Mother remains influential but has changed in form and meaning.

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