

Epistemic Re-centering: Toward an Indic Framework of Feminism

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Abstract

This paper proposes a paradigm shift in the discourse on Indian women's rights, moving away from the "outsider-in" perspective of Orientalist sociology toward a rigorous Indic Epistemological framework. It argues that current feminist narratives in India are frequently dominated by Western liberal models that, while providing essential legal protections, often create an "epistemic disconnect" by failing to resonate with the relational and ontological realities of the Indian psyche. By transitioning the Indian woman from a passive "object" of Western rescue to an active Epistemic Subject, the study asserts that true liberation is found not through the abandonment of heritage, but through a deeper immersion into its core philosophical truths. The proposed framework is structured around three foundational pillars of Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT): Shakti (power as immanent energy), Deha (the body as a sacred microcosm), and Dharma (relational autonomy within a communal web). By navigating the "Shakti-Subjugation Paradox"—the tension between metaphysical exaltation and historical social restrictions—the paper utilizes the non-dualist (Advaita) assertion of the genderless Atman to dismantle patriarchal hierarchies from within. This approach redefines autonomy as a "Sovereign Agency" that avoids both the subordination of traditionalism and the alienation of neoliberal individualism. Furthermore, the paper introduces the Ardhanarishvara Model as a blueprint for gender non-duality and proposes Darshana (reciprocal sacred seeing) as an indigenous counter to the "Male Gaze." By linking feminist struggle with

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ecological restoration (Prakriti-Purusha dialectic) and cosmic order (Rta), the research concludes that a decolonial Indian feminism offers a holistic path to Mukti (liberation). Ultimately, this framework calls for “rebuilding the house” of gender discourse, establishing a feminism that is culturally grounded, ontologically profound, and radically transformative.

Keywords: Indic Epistemology, Shakti, Deha, Dharma, Ardhanarishvara, Relational Autonomy, Decolonial Feminism, Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT)

Introduction: Epistemic Voidness

The paper argues for a fundamental shift in how we understand women’s rights in India, asserting that the current discourse is dominated by a “top-down” Western liberal framework that often results in an epistemic disconnect. While these Western models have provided essential legal tools, they frequently fail to resonate with the ontological and cultural realities of the Indian psyche, which views identity as relational rather than purely individualistic (Mohanty, 2003). By moving away from a narrative that treats the Indian woman as an “object” of Western rescue (Spivak, 1988), the text calls for an Epistemic Re-centering that establishes her as a subject within her own heritage. This shift involves exploring Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT)—ranging from Vedic philosophy to Tantric praxis—to find a sophisticated, albeit complex, understanding of the self that is already embedded in the culture.

This “Epistemic Re-centering” framework marks a sophisticated shift in academic thought, moving away from the “outsider-in” perspective of Orientalist feminism and toward a rigorous Indic Epistemological foundation. Instead, of viewing the Indian woman as a passive victim of tradition who needs “saving” by Western standards, this approach establishes her as a primary source of knowledge and agency. It argues that her empowerment doesn’t require abandoning her roots; rather, true liberation is found by engaging more deeply with the fundamental truths of her own culture. “Epistemic Re-centering” draws specifically from the *Shakta* (Goddess-centric) and *Advaita* (non-dualist) traditions to argue that the *Atman* (soul) is inherently *Nirguna*—without qualities such as gender—and thus naturally free. This scholarly shift is supported by a call for “Epistemic Liberation,” which advocates for a curriculum integrating the dialogues of ancient female scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi, effectively challenging the colonial narrative that Indian intellectualism has always been an exclusively male domain.

Beyond intellectual history, this paper introduces three innovative theoretical intersections. First, it proposes *Darshana* (reciprocal sacred seeing) as a powerful indigenous counter-framework to the Western “Male Gaze.” In this media theory, “seeing” is transformed from a voyeuristic, objectifying act into a mutual, sacred encounter. Second, it utilizes the *Prakriti-Purusha* Dialectic to link feminist struggles with ecological restoration; here, the restoration of gender balance is seen as inseparable from the restoration of *Rta* (Cosmic Order). Finally, it redefines agency through the concept of *Sahaja* (spontaneous flow), where liberation (*Mukti*) is conceptualized not merely as a legal or political status, but as the lived ability to exist in alignment with one’s true, natural self.

The three pillars of IKT: Shakti, Deha, Dharma

This re-centering is structured around three foundational pillars: *Shakti* (power), *Deha* (the corporeal self), and *Dharma* (the communal order). These concepts allow for a nuanced

exploration of femininity that transcends modern secular definitions. However, the dialogue between IKT and feminism remains fraught with tension; while these traditions are sometimes dismissed as the origin of patriarchal caste hierarchies and gender restrictions (Chakravarti, 1993), they simultaneously contain radical philosophies capable of deconstructing the gender binary itself. By navigating these tensions, the discourse seeks to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary rights, ultimately empowering the Indian woman to navigate her social and spiritual identity through the lens of her own tradition rather than an external one.

Shakti

The discourse on the ontology of power within Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) presents a sharp contrast to Western political thought, which typically conceptualizes power as *Potestas*, or the authority and control of one entity over another. In the IKT framework, power is understood as *Shakti*—the primordial, immanent energy that constitutes the very fabric of reality and animates the universe (Woodroffe, 1918). Unlike the often masculinized and transcendent deities found in Abrahamic traditions, *Shakti* represents a kinetic, non-dual power where there is no ontological separation between the Creator and the Power of Creation. This perspective is exemplified in the *Sakta* traditions and texts like the *Devi Mahatmya*, which portray the Goddess not as a domestic consort or auxiliary to a male figure, but as an independent warrior who derives her authority from her own essence, or *Sva-shakti* (Coburn, 1991). Consequently, feminism within an IKT framework shifts the objective from a Western pursuit of “equal rights” or parity to a process of “ontological realization,” where the goal is to reclaim an innate, constitutive power that is already present.

However, this theological exaltation of the feminine leads to the “*Shakti*-Subjugation Paradox,” which highlights the significant historical gap between the metaphysical worship of the Goddess and the social reality of gender and caste hierarchies. Critics, particularly from Dalit feminist perspectives, point out that traditional power structures have often been Brahminical as well as patriarchal, using localized codes like *Stri-Dharma* to confine women to domestic roles. To resolve this, a feminist re-reading of IKT seeks to prioritize *Sanatana* (eternal) values—such as the genderless nature of the *Atman* (soul)—over restrictive social codes, effectively using the ontology of *Shakti* to dismantle the sociology of patriarchy. This approach also redefines autonomy not as the Western ideal of total independence, but as “relational autonomy” or interdependence. In this view, power is not a zero-sum game of gain and loss, but a means of maintaining a social fabric where a woman’s agency is recognized as central to the health and harmony of the entire community. The radical potential of Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) lies in the philosophical assertion that the *Atman*, or the true self, is fundamentally genderless and beyond the physical markers of caste or social identity. If the animating force of the universe is *Shakti* and the core of the individual is the *Atman*, then the social subordination of women is not just a human rights violation, but an ontological error—a failure to recognize the divine reality in the human form. By reclaiming this spiritual agency, Indian feminism shifts from seeking external permission for equality to asserting an inherent, internal sovereignty. This transition from “power over” (*Potestas*) to “power within” (*Shakti*) allows for a form of resistance that is deeply rooted in the soil of Indian thought, making it both a radical and an authentic reclamation of the feminine self.

Deha

In contrast to Western feminist struggles with biological determinism and the “mind-body” dualism—which often relegates the female body to a passive state of nature—Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) conceptualize the body as a *Brahmanda*, or a microcosm of the entire universe. Through the lens of *Sukshma Sharira* (the subtle body), IKT offers a path toward gender transcendence by mapping a network of *nadis* and *chakras* that exist beyond mere physical anatomy. In Yogic and Tantric physiology, every human being is seen as possessing both *Ida* (feminine/lunar) and *Pingala* (masculine/solar) energies, with the ultimate spiritual goal being the union of these dualities within the *Sushumna*, or the central channel. This framework renders biological gender a penultimate rather than an ultimate reality, providing an indigenous theological basis for non-binary and transgender identities that have existed in the Indian cultural consciousness for millennia.

Within this tradition, the body is not viewed as a site of sin or a mechanical vessel, but as a *Yantra* or a *Mandir*—a sacred instrument and field (*kshetra*) for the evolution of consciousness. This perspective provides a radical foundation for bodily autonomy, where sovereignty over the physical self is viewed as a spiritual duty and a prerequisite for *Sadhana* (disciplined practice) rather than a mere secular right. In many Tantric frameworks, this elevates female biological processes, such as menstruation and childbirth, from social taboos or physical burdens to sacred cycles of creative power (Menon, 2003). The metaphor of *Kundalini* energy, inherently gendered as feminine and residing at the base of the spine, further emphasizes that the journey toward liberation involves the awakening and movement of this feminine force to dissolve binary ego-identities (Nanda, 1990).

The ultimate semiotic representation of this philosophy is found in the iconography of *Ardhanarishvara*—the deity who is half-man and half-woman. This form serves as a potent symbol for modern gender discourse, suggesting that “Ultimate Reality” is a seamless integration of dualities rather than a rigid binary. By presenting perfection as the union of masculine and feminine essences, *Ardhanarishvara* challenges the “male gaze” and consumerist aesthetics, replacing them with a “body-positive” discourse rooted in sacredness. Ultimately, this IKT model suggests that the body is the primary vehicle for *Moksha* (liberation), shifting the narrative of the female body from a site of political struggle to a divine medium of ontological realization.

Dharma

The exploration of social structure within Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) centers on the complex and often contested concept of *Dharma*, offering a model of Relational Autonomy as an alternative to the “atomic individual” of Western liberalism (Kakar, 1978). While Western feminist discourse typically defines freedom as independence from others and seeks equality through rights-based litigation, the IKT framework views the self as fundamentally embedded in a communal web (*Kutumb*). In this context, the primary objective shifts from mere sameness to *Samatva* (harmony), where freedom is realized not in isolation, but as “freedom with others.” This relational approach acknowledges that a woman’s agency is central to the health of the community, suggesting that power is not a zero-sum game but a collective maintenance of the social and cosmic fabric.

However, the discourse candidly addresses the “weaponization” of *Dharma*, particularly through historical texts like the *Smritis*, which have been used to enforce domesticity and uphold Brahminical patriarchy. To counter this, a feminist recovery of IKT distinguishes between localized social codes and *Svadharmā*—the authentic, innate duty according to one’s own nature (*Svabhava*). By prioritizing *Svadharmā* and *Sanātana* (eternal) values, women can find the internal tools to revolt against oppressive norms, moving toward a “Sovereign Agency” that is neither submissively traditional nor alienatingly neoliberal. Furthermore, concepts like *Apaddharma* (duty in times of distress) provide a traditional basis for radical shifts in social roles when existing structures become oppressive or dysfunctional.

This indigenous framework also extends to Ecofeminism, drawing parallels between the agency of *Prakriti* (Nature) in *Samkhya* philosophy and the status of women. Within this view, the exploitation of the environment and the subjugation of women are seen as the same cosmic imbalance, rooted in a failure to respect the animating force of the universe. By shifting the focus from “rights” to “duty-based negotiation,” IKT-based feminism seeks to build support systems that Western individualism often lacks, utilizing the relational strength of Indian society to empower the individual without severing their connection to the collective.

Discussion

The synthesis of *Shakti*, *Deha*, and *Dharma* culminates in a holistic, indigenous feminist theory that shifts the Indian woman from an object of external rescue to an empowered Epistemic Subject. By re-centering the discourse on *Shakti*, power is reclaimed not as a political grant of *Potestas* (authority over others), but as an immanent, non-dual energy that constitutes the very essence of reality. This ontological shift moves the goal of liberation from mere legal parity to a profound realization of innate sovereignty. When this power is applied to the second pillar, *Deha* (the body), it dismantles biological determinism by viewing the physical self as a *Yantra*—a sacred microcosm of the universe. Through concepts like the *Sukshma Sharira* (subtle body) and the iconographic fluidity of *Ardhanarishvara*, the body is liberated from the “male gaze” and reimagined as a divine instrument for consciousness, where gender is a fluid manifestation rather than a rigid binary. Finally this internal empowerment is contextualized within the social pillar of *Dharma*, which replaces the isolated, “atomic individual” of Western liberalism with a model of Relational Autonomy (Donchin, 2001). While acknowledging the historical weaponization of communal codes by Brahminical patriarchy, this framework utilizes *Svadharmā* (authentic individual duty) and the genderless nature of the *Atman* to challenge oppressive hierarchies from within. By aligning the self with *Sanātana* (eternal) values rather than localized social restrictions, Indian feminism finds a middle path that avoids both the subordination of traditionalism and the alienation of neoliberal individualism. Ultimately, this unified theory suggests that true liberation is found in *Samatva* (harmony)—a state where a woman’s agency is not a zero-sum struggle against the collective, but a vital force for the equilibrium of the entire social and cosmic order.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this discourse advocates for a de-colonial Indian feminism that transcends the mere “breaking of glass ceilings” within existing patriarchal or Western structures. Instead, it

calls for a total rebuilding of the “house” of gender discourse by utilizing indigenous categories such as *Shakti* (primordial energy), *Prakriti* (nature), and *Atman* (the un-gendered soul). This movement is not a retreat into romanticized nostalgia or a “golden age” but a radical, critical recovery of the future (Nandy, 1983). By stripping away colonial interpretations and medieval distortions, this framework seeks an “awakening” of latent philosophical truths already present in Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT), shifting the narrative of the Indian woman from a derivative “import” of Western ideals to an active, epistemic subject of her own heritage.

Central to this transition is the shift from a “feminism of lack”—defined by what women are denied under law—to a feminism of essence, defined by the inherent power women already possess. This model finds its “North Star” in the iconography of *Ardhanarishvara*, where the masculine and feminine are viewed not as competing poles or a rigid binary, but as a singular, vertical fusion of consciousness and energy. By decoupling the feminine from Western “otherness” and re-centering it within the expansive ontologies of IKT, this approach offers a map of the body and power that is far more fluid than Enlightenment-era dualisms.

Furthermore, this de-colonial approach is intrinsically ecologically conscious, recognizing that the exploitation of “Mother Earth” and the subjugation of women are symptoms of the same cosmic imbalance. (Shiva, 1988). Ultimately the goal is to forge a uniquely Indian feminist identity that is culturally grounded, ontologically deep, and radically transformative. It asserts that true liberation (*Mukti*) is the spontaneous alignment of the self with its true nature, grounded in the foundational truth that the spirit has no gender and that power is an innate birthright rather than a social concession.

These contributions culminate in the *Ardhanarishvara* Model, which provides an ultimate blueprint for gender non-duality. By presenting the vertical fusion of *Shiva* and *Shakti*, this model moves beyond the “Shakti-Subjugation Paradox”—the historical gap between metaphysical worship and social reality—to offer a vision where inclusivity is woven into the very fabric of divinity. This de-colonial approach suggests that by utilizing indigenous categories, we can construct a feminism that is culturally grounded, ontologically profound, and capable of “rebuilding the house” of social order rather than simply seeking entry into a pre-existing patriarchal structure.

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