



From Suppression to Shakti: Reinterpreting Feminine Agency through Indian Philosophical Thought and Lived Experience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines feminine agency through a critical reinterpretation of Shakti in Indian philosophical thought and women's lived experiences. Although Shakti represents feminine creative and dynamic power, its symbolic recognition has not always resulted in women's social freedom, autonomy, or equality. The article investigates the contradiction between the worship of the divine feminine and the patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, desires, choices, and voices. It explores how ideals such as *Pativrata Dharma*, social expectations, and emotional suppression can restrict women's ability to recognise and express their agency. Rather than treating suppression as a necessary source of empowerment, the article argues that oppressive circumstances often constrain existing capacities, while reflection, education, critical awareness, and opportunities for action can support their development and expression. Drawing on feminist theories of agency, lived experience, and collective action, the study reinterprets Shakti as a philosophical framework for understanding women's capacity for self-recognition, meaningful choice, resistance, and social participation. It further examines how individual awareness can develop into collective power through shared experiences and challenges to structural inequalities. The article concludes that moving from suppression to

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Shakti requires shifting from the symbolic celebration of feminine power towards its practical expression in women's autonomy, dignity, and agency.

1. SHAKTI, PATRIARCHY, AND THE SUPPRESSION OF FEMININE AGENCY IN INDIAN THOUGHT

1.1. Introduction: The Problem of Feminine Agency

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the famous statement "Frailty, thy name is woman!" reflects Hamlet's disappointment over his mother Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius, the brother of her deceased husband. However, her decision raises an important question: should a woman's actions be understood as weakness, or should they be examined in relation to the circumstances and power relations that shape her life? This question extends beyond literature to the experiences of women in patriarchal societies, where social expectations and traditional norms often restrict their freedom, autonomy, and opportunities. Such restrictions may limit the expression of female agency without necessarily eliminating it. Through lived experiences and self-reflection, women may begin to question imposed roles, recognize their own capacities, and seek greater autonomy. In this context, the Indian philosophical concept of Shakti, commonly associated with feminine divine power and creative energy, offers a framework for rethinking women's capacity for action and transformation.

This article explores Shakti as a philosophical resource for understanding feminine agency under conditions of suppression, bringing Indian philosophical thought into dialogue with lived experience. It argues that suppression does not automatically lead to liberation, but women's experiences may create possibilities for self-awareness, resistance, and the exercise of agency. Thus, the movement from suppression to Shakti represents not simply a transition from powerlessness to empowerment, but a process of recognizing and exercising feminine agency within restrictive social conditions.

1.2. Shakti as Creative Power in Indian Philosophical Traditions

"Shakti is the breath of the cosmos, the pulse of creation, and the silent power behind all transformation". The concept of Shakti provides an important starting point for understanding creative power in Indian philosophy. Shakti is traditionally understood not simply as a goddess but as the dynamic power through which creation, preservation, and transformation become possible. In his discussion of Shakti, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati explains that the concept brings together experiential observations



about creation and philosophical reflections on the power underlying existence. This understanding invites us to look beyond the idea of power as domination or control. Creative power can also be understood as the capacity to bring something into existence, initiate change, and shape the world.

In Indian thought, Shakti is understood as the creative power that brings things into existence. The idea of *visarga* helps us understand this power as the ability to create, express, and bring about change. Shakti is not only associated with the creation of the universe but can also be understood through the activities of the body, emotions, and mind. This idea is relevant to female agency because women, too, have the capacity to think, make decisions, and shape their own lives. However, their ability to act is often influenced by family expectations, social traditions, and cultural beliefs. Understanding Shakti as creative power therefore encourages us to look beyond the restrictions women face and recognize their ability to question existing norms, make their own choices, and bring change to their lives. The important question is how women can exercise this power when the same social structures that shape their lives also limit their freedom.

The symbols associated with Shakti can be interpreted as expressions of women's creative power and agency. Fire represents transformation and action, encouraging women to challenge social obstacles and act according to their considered wishes. The serpent symbolises the awakening of abilities and possibilities suppressed by rigid social norms, while the lotus represents the capacity to flourish even under unfavourable circumstances. Red signifies vitality, desire, reproductive power, and women's ability to make decisions about their lives. Similarly, weapons represent critical awareness and resistance, enabling women to question inherited beliefs and challenge unjust practices. The Śrī Yantra symbolises unity and interdependence, suggesting that women's agency is shaped not only by individual choices but also by their relationships and social environment.

Taken together, these symbols offer a philosophical framework for understanding agency as the capacity to act, make decisions, and transform one's circumstances. The crescent moon, associated with change and renewal, suggests that women's agency may develop differently according to their social position and life circumstances. As discussions of Shakti and goddess imagery demonstrate, feminine power can inspire women's empowerment, although its social meaning remains shaped by cultural expectations and gender norms. Therefore, Shakti should not be understood as evidence that women are already free from social restrictions. Rather, it provides a way to understand how women can recognize their potential, negotiate limitations, resist unjust expectations, and exercise meaningful agency within the circumstances of their lives.



1.3. The Divine Feminine and the Social Position of Women

Arthur Basham, a well-known historian of India wrote:

“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 (2500, B.C. [B.C.E.]) and the male-dominated society of the Aryans. The Mother Goddess of the Indus Valley people never really gave place to a dominant male. The Earth Mother continues to be worshipped in India as the power that nurtures the seed and brings it to fruition. This basic reverence of an agricultural people affirms that man is really dependent on woman for she gives life, food and strength. Mother Goddesses were worshipped at all times in India, but between the days of the Harappa Culture (2500-1500 B.C. [B.C.E.]) and the Gupta period (ca. 300-500) 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”

In the writings of David R. Kinsley, it is seen that the shakti was considered as the creative. He wrote:

“Sakti [shakti] means “power”; in Hindu philosophy and theology sakti is understood to be the active dimension of the godhead, the divine power that underlies the godhead’s ability to create the world and to display itself. 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.”

In some Hindu traditions, women are seen as embodiments of *Shakti*, the divine power. Hindu goddesses represent different forms of this power. Some goddesses represent creation, nourishment, prosperity, and the protection of life. Others represent destruction, death, illness, and the removal of harmful forces. These forms show that feminine power can have different expressions. However, society often expects women to show only certain qualities. Women are expected to care for their families, raise children, forgive others, and show love and kindness. These qualities are valued, but they can become restrictions when women are forced to follow them. A woman who sacrifices her own needs for her family or society may be praised as a good woman. But a woman who makes her own decisions or puts her needs first may be called selfish,



cruel, or anti-social. In this way, society accepts a woman's power when it benefits others but may reject it when she uses it for herself.

This creates a problem for female agency. Women may find it difficult to make their own choices because they fear social criticism. They may feel forced to follow the roles society has created for them. As a result, they can become trapped within social structures that limit their freedom. In a patriarchal society, men have traditionally occupied a superior position, while women have been treated as secondary members of society. Men have often controlled family decisions, financial resources, and positions of power. Women, on the other hand, have had limited opportunities to make decisions about their own lives. Differences in physical strength and the ability to perform certain forms of heavy labour have sometimes been used to justify male dominance. However, physical strength does not determine a person's intellectual ability, social value, or right to make decisions. Cultural and religious traditions have also influenced the position of women. In many societies, these traditions have placed restrictions on women's freedom, education, and independent thinking. Women have often been expected to depend on their husbands, care for their children, and manage household responsibilities. Their contribution to the family has been essential, but it has not always received equal social recognition. As a result, women's identities and abilities have often been defined by their roles within the family rather than by their individual choices and aspirations. Greater access to education, women gradually entered professions and fields that had traditionally been dominated by men. However, their participation did not automatically lead to equality. Women continued to face discrimination in employment, leadership, and career advancement. In many workplaces, men have held more senior positions, while women have had fewer opportunities to reach positions of authority. This inequality shows that the problem is not simply a lack of ability among women, but also the social structures and attitudes that limit their opportunities. The preference for male children and the practice of female foeticide provide further examples of the unequal value assigned to men and women. When the birth of a boy is welcomed while the birth of a girl is considered a burden, women's social worth is questioned even before they enter the world. Such practices reveal how deeply gender inequality can be rooted in social attitudes and family expectations.

These conditions raise an important question about women's agency. If women possess the ability to think, choose, create, and act, why have their choices so often been restricted by patriarchal structures? Although women have gradually gained access to education, employment, and legal rights, the struggle for equal recognition continues. Understanding this history is essential for examining how women can move beyond socially imposed roles and exercise their agency according to their own judgement, needs, and aspirations.



1.4. Pativrata Dharma, Patriarchy and the Regulation of Women's Desires

The term *Pativrata* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *pati*, meaning husband, and *vrata*, meaning vow. Pativrata Dharma refers to the traditional ideal of a devoted wife who is expected to remain loyal to her husband and prioritize his needs and those of his family. However, this ideal raises important questions about women's freedom and autonomy when devotion is understood primarily through obedience, sacrifice, and the fulfilment of familial duties.

Under this ideal, women's sexuality, marriage, and reproductive roles were often regulated by social and cultural expectations. Women were expected to sacrifice their personal freedom and desires to maintain family harmony and fulfil their responsibilities towards their husbands and children. They were entrusted with household work, childcare, and the care of other family members, while their own needs, ambitions, and happiness could be neglected. When these responsibilities were imposed unequally, they restricted women's opportunities to participate actively in social, economic, and public life. The traditional representations of female figures such as Sita and Padmini have also contributed to the cultural understanding of the devoted woman. When their stories are interpreted primarily through ideals of sacrifice, loyalty, and chastity, they may reinforce the expectation that women should place family honour and their husbands' needs above their own freedom. Repeated across generations, such interpretations can turn a particular ideal of womanhood into a social expectation that women are pressured to follow.

The problem, therefore, is not necessarily devotion or care within a family, but the expectation that women must demonstrate these qualities even at the cost of their autonomy. When Pativrata Dharma is treated as a compulsory model of womanhood, it may restrict women's ability to make independent decisions and encourage future generations to accept unequal gender roles as natural or morally necessary. Consequently, critically examining this ideal is essential to understanding how patriarchal expectations can limit female agency and women's freedom to determine the course of their own lives.

1.5. Suppression, Silence, and the Formation of Feminine Agency

Suppression occurs when one group uses its power to control, dominate, and restrict the freedom of another group. In a patriarchal society, men often hold greater power and authority over women, limiting their freedom and opportunities to participate actively in social, economic, and political life. This continuous suppression can gradually undermine women's self-confidence and make them doubt their own abilities and decisions. As a result, women may begin to neglect their own needs and desires and become hesitant to act according to their own wishes. They may feel trapped between society's expectations and



their desire for independence, as though they are standing on the sharp edge of a sword, unable to move forward without facing criticism or consequences. In this way, suppression affects not only women's external freedom but also their inner sense of agency and their ability to make independent choices. As a result of patriarchal suppression, women may gradually learn to avoid conflict, hide their true feelings, and remain silent about their needs and desires. This silence is not necessarily a sign of agreement or weakness; rather, it may arise from the fear of criticism, punishment, or rejection. We can understand this situation through the example of a classroom. When students make noise in the absence of a teacher, they may suddenly become silent when the teacher enters the classroom holding a stick. Their silence does not necessarily mean that they have changed their minds or accepted the teacher's authority willingly. Instead, they may remain silent because they fear the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, women in a patriarchal society may suppress their thoughts and feelings because they fear the consequences of challenging established gender roles and male authority. Continuous and repeated suppression can gradually weaken women's ability to express their needs, make independent decisions, and exercise their agency freely. When women become accustomed to silence, they may begin to accept their restricted roles as normal, and these expectations can be passed on to future generations. Daughters who observe their mothers sacrificing their desires and remaining silent may grow up believing that such behaviour is a natural part of womanhood. In this way, silence can contribute to the continuation of patriarchal expectations across generations.

Breaking this silence is therefore an important step towards regaining autonomy and strengthening female agency. Women need spaces in which their feelings, experiences, and opinions are heard, respected, and validated without fear of judgement or punishment. By expressing their needs, questioning unequal expectations, and making independent choices, women can begin to challenge the social conditions that restrict their freedom. However, breaking silence should not be understood as an individual responsibility alone; society must also create conditions in which women can speak and act freely without facing intimidation or violence. Genuine empowerment requires not only encouraging women to find their voices but also transforming the structures that have silenced them.

1.6. The Philosophical Problem: Power under Conditions of Suppression

“Power, in political science and sociology, the capacity to influence, lead, dominate, or otherwise have an impact on the life and actions of others in society. The concept of power encompasses, but is not limited to, the notion of authority. Unlike authority, which implies legitimacy, power can be exercised illegitimately.”



Power is present in every society and plays an important role in shaping social, political, and economic relationships. It enables individuals to influence others, exercise authority, and participate in decision-making. However, although power can be useful for maintaining social order and guiding collective action, it can also be misused for personal benefit. When individuals use their power to protect their own interests at the expense of others, it can restrict the freedom, choices, and autonomy of those in subordinate positions. As Tobore Onojighofia Tobore explains, “the corrupting effects of power can influence human behaviour and make it difficult to hold powerful individuals accountable.” The desire to acquire and retain power may also become closely connected with status, recognition, influence, and control over others. Individuals who benefit from these privileges may resist changes that threaten their position and may resort to unfair practices to preserve their authority, even when their actions harm others. This tendency becomes particularly significant in a patriarchal society, where men have historically held greater authority in many social, political, and familial contexts. When this authority is used to control women's decisions, restrict their opportunities, and limit their independence, power becomes a means of suppressing female agency. Consequently, patriarchal dominance may persist not simply because men possess greater power, but also because established social structures and those who benefit from them may resist its redistribution. Understanding the relationship between power, self-interest, and the preservation of authority is therefore essential to examining how patriarchal structures continue to restrict women's freedom and autonomy.

Under these conditions of suppression, women's agency is not necessarily absent; rather, their ability to express, exercise, and develop it is restricted by unequal power relations. Examining power in this context helps us understand how patriarchal structures limit women's autonomy and prevent them from freely shaping their own lives.

2. FROM SUPPRESSION TO SHAKTI: EXPERIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF FEMININE AGENCY

In this section, I will examine the emergence of female agency as a response to suppression. Continuous oppression can create inner conflict, leading women to reflect on their experiences and recognize their own capacities. Through these experiences, women may begin to understand the importance of freedom, autonomy, and living according to their own choices. Their silence does not necessarily indicate acceptance; it may also reflect a period of reflection before they express their resistance through action. As women recognize that their experiences are shared by others, individual struggles can develop into collective resistance. In this way, suppressed experiences can become a starting point for the emergence of



female agency, as women begin to recognize their power and challenge the conditions that restrict their freedom.

2.1. Lived Experience as a Source of Self-Awareness

In moments of solitude, when women find themselves alone with their thoughts, they may begin to question their existence, identity, and purpose in life. They may reflect on their freedom, desires, and the roles that society expects them to fulfil. Every revolution begins with a question, and social change can begin with a change in individual consciousness. Through their lived experiences, women may gradually recognize the restrictions imposed by patriarchal norms and become aware of the gap between society's expectations and their own aspirations. This growing self-awareness may lead them to question unjust traditions, challenge male-dominated structures, and recognize their capacity for independent action. In this way, experiences of suppression can become a starting point for the emergence of female agency, as women begin to understand their potential and seek the freedom to shape their own lives. Education can gradually help women recognize the importance of self-sufficiency, independence, and the power to make their own decisions. However, in a patriarchal society, structural barriers often make it difficult for women to enter the mainstream and exercise their agency freely. Restrictions on personal freedom, unfulfilled desires, suppressed emotions, and the denial of happiness can shape women's experiences and influence their understanding of their own lives. Furthermore, daily news reports of women being brutally raped, killed over dowry demands, sexually harassed, or subjected to mental and emotional pressure can bring greater awareness of the inequalities and injustices women face. Such social realities may lead women to question the conditions that restrict their freedom and reconsider their position within society. Education, personal reflection, and awareness of these injustices may therefore contribute to a movement from suppression towards agency, as women gradually recognize their capacities, assert their choices, and seek greater autonomy. In this sense, the emergence of feminine agency is not simply a response to suffering, but a process through which women may transform their awareness of oppression into a desire for freedom and the ability to shape their own lives.

2.2. From Emotional Suppression to Critical Awareness and Resistance

Emotional suppression involves hiding or restraining emotions rather than expressing them freely. In patriarchal societies, women may suppress anger, sadness, and personal desires to avoid family conflict or meet social expectations. Such behaviour may reflect learned beliefs that women should remain patient, obedient, and silent. Psychological research shows that emotional suppression can affect interpersonal relationships and varies across cultural contexts. However, silence does not necessarily indicate acceptance.



Through reflection on their lived experiences, women may begin to question social expectations and recognize how patriarchal norms restrict their freedom and autonomy. Mahmood's analysis of agency offers a useful framework for understanding how agency exists within unequal social relations, even when it does not take the form of direct resistance.

This critical awareness may create possibilities for resistance, ranging from personal decisions to collective action. Shapland and colleagues' research on women's resistance provides a relevant perspective on subtle resistance and gradual self-empowerment. In this article, I interpret Shakti as a philosophical resource for understanding women's capacity for self-recognition, creative action, and transformation. Drawing on the concept of feminine divine power in Hindu traditions, this interpretation explores how women may challenge restrictive expectations and exercise their agency.

2.3. Shakti Reinterpreted: From Creative Potential to Feminine Agency

Reflection plays an important role in helping women recognize whether they are genuinely free or living according to social expectations. Through reflection on their lived experiences, women may begin to question the restrictions imposed upon them and distinguish their own values and desires from those shaped by society. This process of thinking can contribute to the development of female agency, enabling women to make decisions, act according to their values, and shape their own lives. Furthermore, thinking enables creativity, allowing women to find new ways to respond to restrictive circumstances, manage challenges, and explore possibilities beyond traditional roles. In this sense, agency involves not simply the ability to act but also the capacity to reflect, create, and determine the direction of one's life. From this perspective, Shakti can be interpreted as a creative capacity through which women recognize their potential and transform their awareness into meaningful action.

Creative potential becomes meaningful when women recognize and exercise their capacity to think, make choices, and shape their own lives. Even within restrictive patriarchal structures, women may negotiate social expectations and make decisions according to their values and circumstances. Oppression may limit their freedom, but it does not necessarily eliminate their agency. As Hemmings and Treacher Kabesh suggest, agency should not be understood simply as freedom from constraint; individuals may act within restrictive conditions without necessarily overcoming them. Moreover, agency and resistance are not identical: women may exercise agency through everyday decisions and negotiations, while resistance involves challenging particular forms of power or restriction. From this perspective, Shakti can be interpreted as a creative capacity through which women recognize their potential and translate it into meaningful action, whether through personal choices, negotiation, or resistance.



2.4. From Individual Resistance to Collective Feminine Power

Collective power refers to the ability of individuals to work together to address a common problem or achieve a shared goal. It emerges when people unite their efforts to challenge injustice and bring about social change. In the context of women's agency, collective action becomes an important means of resisting gender discrimination and challenging the social structures that limit women's freedom. Naila Kabeer's understanding of women's empowerment through resources, agency, and achievements provides a useful framework for understanding women as active agents capable of making choices and transforming their circumstances. When women come together to express their concerns and demand equal rights, their individual voices can develop into a collective force capable of influencing society. Judith Butler's discussion of collective assembly further helps explain how people acting together can make political demands and challenge exclusion. Historically, collective action has played an important role in improving women's rights. Women have organised movements to challenge gender inequality, demand political representation, and gain greater control over their reproductive decisions. These struggles demonstrate that women are not merely passive victims of social circumstances but active agents capable of questioning existing norms and transforming their conditions. bell hooks's feminist approach is particularly relevant here because it understands feminism as a struggle against sexist oppression and emphasises the importance of challenging the structures that reproduce inequality. Collective resistance thus shows how individual experiences of oppression can become a shared basis for action and empowerment.

In contemporary society, social media has created new possibilities for the expression of collective feminine power. It enables women to share their experiences, raise awareness of gender-based violence, expose discriminatory practices, and support others who face similar challenges. Zizi Papacharissi's work on affective publics offers a useful perspective on how digital technologies connect people through shared feelings, experiences, and concerns. Experiences that were once confined to the private sphere can now become public concerns, attracting wider attention and encouraging collective responses. Research by Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller also examines how digital feminist activism challenges rape culture, sexism, and sexual violence. Such activism can help women recognise that their personal struggles are often connected to broader social inequalities and encourage them to question the conditions that restrict their agency.

However, collective feminine power does not arise merely from the presence of a group or the availability of digital platforms. It depends on women's ability to recognize shared concerns, express their experiences, and transform awareness into meaningful action. Nancy Fraser's account of social justice and



participatory parity provides a further perspective on the importance of creating conditions in which people can participate as equals. Therefore, the movement from individual resistance to collective feminine power represents a process through which women can challenge established power structures and strengthen their capacity to shape their own lives. Collective action becomes not only a means of resisting oppression but also a way of affirming women as active subjects of social transformation.

2.5. Critical Evaluation: Does Suppression Generate Power or Constrain Its Expression?

The relationship between suppression and feminine agency raises an important philosophical question: does oppression generate power, or does it merely constrain the expression of a power that already exists? Within patriarchal societies, women often experience restrictions on their freedom, desires, decisions, and opportunities. These restrictions may limit their ability to act independently and shape their own lives. However, it would be misleading to assume that suffering automatically produces strength or that oppression is necessary for empowerment. Suppression can weaken self-confidence, restrict opportunities, create emotional distress, and discourage women from expressing their thoughts and desires. Therefore, the relationship between suppression and agency is neither simple nor inevitable.

A useful distinction can be made between the existence of power and the conditions under which power can be exercised. If feminine agency is understood as the capacity to think, make choices, create, and act, patriarchal suppression does not necessarily eliminate this capacity. Rather, it may restrict the conditions required for its expression. Michel Foucault's analysis of power offers a useful theoretical perspective here because power operates through social relations, practices, and institutions rather than merely through direct domination. A woman may possess the ability to make independent decisions but lack the financial resources, social support, education, or freedom necessary to put those decisions into practice. Naila Kabeer's framework of resources, agency, and achievements further clarifies this distinction: the capacity to make choices must be considered alongside the resources and circumstances that enable those choices to produce meaningful outcomes. Thus, the existence of feminine agency does not mean that women are equally free to exercise it.

Nevertheless, suppression may sometimes become a starting point for critical reflection. When women encounter a contradiction between their personal desires and the roles imposed upon them, they may begin to question the assumptions underlying those roles. Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of *patriarchal bargains* is particularly relevant because it examines how women develop strategies within specific systems of male dominance, sometimes negotiating restrictive expectations to secure their interests or improve their circumstances. A woman who has been expected to sacrifice her ambitions for her family, for instance, may



gradually recognise that care and responsibility need not require the complete abandonment of her own aspirations. This recognition may encourage her to reconsider her identity and explore alternative ways of living. However, such reflection should not be understood as an automatic consequence of suffering. Its development depends on individual circumstances, access to education, supportive relationships, and the availability of opportunities to act.

The distinction between power and resistance is particularly important in this context. Women's agency does not always appear as open opposition to patriarchal authority. It may be expressed through everyday negotiations, independent decisions, the protection of personal boundaries, or the gradual redefinition of family and social responsibilities. Saba Mahmood's analysis of agency challenges the assumption that agency must always take the form of resistance to established norms. Her approach encourages a more careful examination of how women exercise agency within the social and cultural conditions in which they live. From this perspective, a woman's decision to negotiate a restrictive expectation may represent an exercise of agency even when it does not produce a direct challenge to the entire patriarchal structure. At the same time, recognising agency within constraints should not lead us to treat every act of accommodation as liberation. The central question is whether women possess meaningful possibilities to reflect, choose, and act within their circumstances.

This distinction also provides a critical perspective on the interpretation of Shakti. In Indian philosophical and religious traditions, Shakti is associated with divine power, creative energy, and the capacity for transformation. David R. Kinsley's study of Hindu goddesses demonstrates the diversity of goddess traditions and the different forms through which divine feminine power is represented. Interpreting Shakti as a philosophical resource for understanding feminine agency allows us to explore women's capacities for self-recognition, creativity, decision-making, and action. However, the symbolic celebration of feminine power does not necessarily correspond to women's actual social freedom. Uma Chakravarti's feminist analysis of gender and caste offers an important perspective on how social structures regulate women's sexuality, marriage, and conduct. A society may revere powerful goddesses while maintaining expectations that restrict women's autonomy, mobility, and participation in decision-making. The coexistence of divine feminine power and social restrictions therefore raises a significant question: how can the cultural recognition of feminine power be reconciled with the limitations imposed on women in everyday life?

The answer requires distinguishing between Shakti as a philosophical or religious concept and its interpretation as a framework for understanding lived feminine agency. Shakti should not be treated as proof



that every woman is empowered simply because feminine divinity is revered. Nor should women's suffering be interpreted as evidence that their power is waiting to emerge. Instead, Shakti can serve as a critical lens through which to examine the difference between recognising feminine power symbolically and enabling women to exercise agency in practice. This interpretation shifts attention from the mere celebration of feminine strength towards the social, material, and relational conditions that make meaningful action possible.

Furthermore, the movement from individual reflection to collective resistance demonstrates that agency is not exclusively an individual achievement. Women's individual experiences may reveal common forms of discrimination, while collective action can transform these experiences into shared demands for social change. Judith Butler's account of collective assembly provides a useful perspective on how people acting together can make their claims visible and contest conditions of exclusion. Social media may further extend these possibilities by connecting women who experience similar forms of discrimination. Research by Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller examines how digital feminist activism challenges rape culture and sexual violence. Nevertheless, digital visibility does not automatically produce equality. Collective agency requires sustained participation, effective forms of organisation, and opportunities to influence the institutions and practices responsible for maintaining inequality.

The critical conclusion, therefore, is that suppression does not necessarily generate feminine power; it can constrain the expression of existing capacities while sometimes creating circumstances in which those capacities are recognised, developed, and exercised differently. The transformation from suppression to Shakti should consequently be understood not as a natural progression from suffering to empowerment, but as a contingent process involving reflection, choice, resistance, relationships, and social change. This interpretation preserves the significance of women's lived experiences without romanticising oppression or suggesting that suffering is necessary for growth. It also strengthens the central argument of this article: feminine agency is not created exclusively by resistance to patriarchal power, nor is it completely destroyed by suppression. Rather, its expression depends on how women negotiate their circumstances and whether the social conditions surrounding them permit their capacities to become meaningful action.

2.6. Conclusion: Rethinking Shakti through Women's Lived Experience

This article has critically examined feminine agency through the philosophical concept of Shakti, moving from the suppression of women to the possibilities of self-awareness, resistance, and collective action. It argues that although Indian philosophical traditions recognise the feminine as a source of creative and dynamic power, this symbolic recognition has not always translated into women's freedom and equality



in social life. The contradiction between the worship of the divine feminine and the regulation of women's bodies, desires, choices, and voices reveals the need to reinterpret Shakti beyond its religious and symbolic meanings. Women's lived experiences show that agency does not emerge simply because women suffer or remain silent; rather, it develops through reflection, education, critical awareness, the ability to make choices, and opportunities to act within or challenge existing social structures. Suppression may restrict the expression of agency, but women can recognize their own capacities and transform their experiences into meaningful action when the conditions for reflection, support, and participation become available. Furthermore, individual awareness can grow into collective power when women share their experiences, question common injustices, and work together for social change. Therefore, this article reinterprets Shakti not as a power automatically possessed or exercised by every woman, but as a philosophical framework for understanding the capacity to recognise oneself as a subject, make meaningful choices, and participate in shaping one's life and society. Ultimately, the movement from suppression to Shakti is not a celebration of suffering, but a transformation in how feminine power is understood—from a symbolic ideal imposed upon women to a lived capacity through which women claim their voice, autonomy, dignity, and agency.

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¹ Declaration: I hereby declare that the conceptual and philosophical authorship of this paper belongs to me and that the AI assisted tool was used only for the structural refinement of the paper.

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