The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Devi as a Symbol of Psychological Strength: Exploring Resilience, Self-Efficacy and Women's Empowerment through Indian Philosophy

Dimpal Das

Research Scholar, Auniati University

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24490962

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 25-10-2026

Accepted: 10-11-2026

Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:

Devi, Shakti, Resilience, Self-Efficacy, Women's Empowerment, Indian Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Indian philosophical and religious traditions have long imagined the divine as feminine, with Devi appearing as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Shakti, the creative power underlying the cosmos. This paper examines Devi as a symbol of psychological strength and explores how her narratives and philosophy can be read alongside contemporary constructs of resilience, self-efficacy and women's empowerment. Using a qualitative, conceptual and interpretive design based on secondary sources, it draws on the Devi Mahatmya, Shakta thought, the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras, and places them in dialogue with Bandura's social cognitive theory, resilience research and empowerment theory. The findings suggest that the forms of Devi model distinct yet complementary capacities: protective courage, transformation of fear, resourcefulness and knowledge. However, the symbol's empowering potential is limited by persistent gender inequality, the risk of idealising women's endurance and the lack of empirical research. The paper concludes with recommendations for culturally grounded counselling, education and empowerment programmes, and for future empirical study.

INTRODUCTION

In most of the world's religious traditions the divine is spoken of primarily in masculine terms. India offers a striking exception. From the Vedic hymns to the Puranas and the Tantras, the feminine divine, known as

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

Devi, has been worshipped as mother, warrior, giver of wealth and source of knowledge. Millions of people continue to invoke her during festivals such as Navaratri and Durga Puja, and in daily household worship. Kinsley (1986) observed that the Hindu goddesses are not merely consorts of male gods but are often portrayed as independent, powerful and sometimes fierce beings in their own right.

Religious scholars have studied Devi extensively, but her significance for psychology has received comparatively little systematic attention. This is a notable gap, because symbols, myths and sacred narratives shape how people interpret suffering, imagine their own capacities and decide how to act. For women in particular, the images of power that are culturally available can influence how they see themselves. A symbol of strength drawn from one's own heritage may feel more authentic than concepts imported from other cultures.

This paper therefore asks how Devi can be understood as a symbol of psychological strength. It focuses on three constructs central to modern psychology and to discussions of women's wellbeing: resilience, self-efficacy and empowerment. It does not claim that Indian philosophy anticipated these constructs literally, nor that devotion to a goddess is equivalent to psychological intervention. Instead, it reads classical sources alongside contemporary theory to show where they illuminate one another and where they diverge.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the philosophical foundations of Devi in Indian thought, particularly the concept of Shakti.
2. To examine the major forms of Devi as symbols of psychological strength.
3. To analyse the relationship between Devi symbolism and the constructs of resilience, self-efficacy and women's empowerment.
4. To identify the strengths and limitations of Devi as a psychological and empowering symbol.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is Devi represented in Indian philosophy as a source of strength and agency?
2. How do the forms of Devi correspond to resilience, self-efficacy and empowerment as understood in psychology?
3. What limitations and challenges affect the use of Devi as an empowering symbol for women?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual and interpretive research design. It is based entirely on secondary sources, including translations of primary texts such as the Devi Mahatmya, the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras, scholarly works on Hindu goddesses and Shakta philosophy, and psychological literature on resilience, self-efficacy and empowerment. The material was analysed using thematic and content analysis. Key themes such as Shakti and agency, archetypal forms of Devi, resilience, self-efficacy, empowerment and critical perspectives were identified and interpreted comparatively.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

- The study is conceptual and is limited to secondary sources. It does not report empirical data on how real women experience or interpret Devi.
- It focuses on four major forms of Devi (Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati) and on the Hindu Shakta tradition, rather than on all goddess traditions in India.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- **RESILIENCE-** Resilience is commonly defined as the capacity of a person or system to adapt successfully despite serious threats to functioning or development (Masten, 2001). Masten described it as “ordinary magic,” arising from everyday protective systems such as supportive relationships, a sense of meaning and emotional regulation. Luthar et al. (2000) emphasised that resilience is a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait, and that it requires both exposure to significant adversity and the achievement of positive adaptation.
- **SELF-EFFICACY-** Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their capability to organise and carry out the actions required to produce given outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Efficacy beliefs are strengthened through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and the interpretation of physiological and emotional states. They influence the goals people choose, their persistence and their response to setbacks. Bandura (2001) further described human beings as agents who intentionally influence their own functioning and life circumstances.
- **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT-** Zimmerman (1995) described psychological empowerment as involving a sense of personal control, a critical understanding of one's social environment and participation in efforts to exert control over one's life. Kabeer (1999) defined women's empowerment as the expansion of the ability to make strategic life choices where this ability was previously

denied, comprising resources, agency and achievements. Empowerment therefore requires the capacity to define goals and act on them, which links it closely to self-efficacy.

- **SHAKTI AND DEVI IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY-** The philosophical foundation of Devi lies in Shakti, the dynamic power through which ultimate reality manifests and acts. In Shakta traditions, Shakti is not subordinate to a male principle but is the energy that makes creation, preservation and transformation possible. Pintchman (1994) traced how the notion of a feminine principle at the centre of the cosmos developed across Vedic, epic and Puranic literature, eventually crystallising into the worship of the Great Goddess, Mahadevi. Related ideas appear in Samkhya, where the world arises through Prakriti, the active principle, in relation to Purusha, the witnessing consciousness. For the psychological reading offered here, the central implication is that agency itself is treated as a sacred reality.

- **THE DEVI MAHATMYA-** The most influential scriptural account of Devi is the Devi Mahatmya, a text of the Markandeya Purana (Coburn, 1991). In its best-known narrative, the gods are defeated by the buffalo demon Mahishasura and cannot restore order. Their combined energies emerge as a radiant female form, equipped with their weapons, who defeats the demon. The power that overcomes the crisis belongs to no single male deity. It is generated when scattered forces are gathered into a unified, purposeful agency. In a later episode, Kali emerges from Durga's fury to defeat Raktabija, whose blood spawns endless duplicates of himself. Read symbolically, these episodes depict struggles that are internal as well as external.

KEY FORMS OF DEVI AS PSYCHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES

Devi is not a single image but a family of related forms, each foregrounding a different quality. The following interpretations are symbolic and reflective. They are not claims about how any particular worshipper understands the goddess.

- **DURGA: COURAGE AND PROTECTIVE AGENCY-** Durga, shown riding a lion and carrying weapons in many hands, represents courage, determination and the protective use of power. Her calm expression in the midst of battle can be read as assertiveness without loss of self-control. She fights not out of hatred but to restore balance, suggesting that strength is directed by purpose and responsibility. For women facing harassment, discrimination or domestic hardship, this image affirms that defending oneself and others can be a legitimate and even dharmic act.

- **KALI: TRANSFORMING FEAR AND FACING THE SHADOW-** Kali, dark and fierce, is associated with time, death and the dissolution of illusion. Kakar (1978) discussed, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the ambivalent feelings attached to the powerful mother figure in the Indian imagination. A resilience-oriented reading is also possible. By appearing in a terrifying form and yet being worshipped as mother, Kali invites devotees to look directly at what they fear, whether loss, anger or mortality. This corresponds to the idea in contemporary psychology that acknowledging and processing difficult emotions, rather than suppressing them, is part of healthy adaptation.

- **LAKSHMI: RESOURCEFULNESS AND SUSTENANCE-** Lakshmi is associated with prosperity, abundance and wellbeing. Psychologically, she stands for the material and social resources that support a stable life, as well as the skill of managing them wisely. This resonates with Kabeer's (1999) emphasis on resources as a precondition of empowerment. Worship of Lakshmi in many households is led by women, although this role can also reinforce expectations of domestic duty.

- **SARASWATI: KNOWLEDGE AND MASTERY-** Saraswati, goddess of learning, music and speech, represents knowledge as a form of power. Education is among the strongest foundations of women's autonomy, and her image affirms that intellectual and creative pursuits are sacred and open to women. In Bandura's (1997) terms, learning and skill development produce mastery experiences, the most powerful source of self-efficacy.

KEY DISCUSSIONS-

The analysis indicates that Devi symbolism connects meaningfully with all three psychological constructs, while also raising important cautions.

- **DEVI AND RESILIENCE-** The Devi Mahatmya begins in defeat, with the gods driven from their realm. The turning point is not an external rescuer but the collective gathering of strength into a new form, a pattern resembling the mobilisation and reorganisation of protective resources described in resilience research (Masten, 2001). Broader Indian thought supports this reading. The Bhagavad Gita describes the steady person as one not shaken by pleasure or pain (Easwaran, 2007), and the Yoga Sutras identify sustained practice and detachment as the means of stilling the mind (Satchidananda, 1978). Both present psychological steadiness as cultivated through discipline, in line with Luthar et al.'s (2000) view of resilience as a process. Devi adds the idea that resilience need not look gentle or

passive. It can also appear as fierce protection and decisive action. Ritual observances such as the nine nights of Navaratri involve fasting, reflection and community gathering, and may provide structure, social support and meaning. This remains a hypothesis requiring empirical testing.

- **DEVI AND SELF-EFFICACY-** Bandura (1997) identified vicarious experience as an important source of self-efficacy: when people see others like themselves succeed, they come to believe that they can too. Devi is a culturally central model of female agency. She leads, solves problems others could not and acts decisively. Because she is encountered from childhood through stories, festivals and images, she may shape what girls and women regard as possible. Mantra and hymns that affirm her strength can function as repeated verbal persuasion, and the Gita's teaching of acting without anxious attachment to results can protect efficacy beliefs after failure. Importantly, self-efficacy must be distinguished from dependence. If the goddess is expected to solve every problem, personal agency may weaken. The more empowering reading, found in many Shakta teachings, holds that Shakti dwells within the practitioner, so that worship becomes a way of recognising and awakening one's own capacities. This internalised reading is consistent with Bandura's (2001) agentic perspective.

- **DEVI AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT-** Devi imagery supports each element of Zimmerman's (1995) model. It affirms personal control by presenting a woman as the wielder of power, encourages critical awareness by showing injustice, symbolised by the demon, as something that can be challenged, and supports participation by showing collective action, since Devi's power is formed from the combined energies of many beings. In Kabeer's (1999) terms, Devi represents agency, while Lakshmi and Saraswati correspond to resources of wealth and knowledge. Hiltebeitel and Erndl (2000) examined whether the goddess can be regarded as a feminist symbol and concluded that the answer varies with context: in some settings women have drawn on goddess imagery to claim authority and dignity, while in others it has been used to define idealised and restrictive roles.

STRENGTHS OF DEVI AS A SYMBOL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH

Devi symbolism demonstrates several strengths as a resource for understanding and promoting women's psychological strength.

- Firstly, it is culturally rooted. Because Devi is familiar from childhood, she offers a vocabulary of strength that feels authentic rather than imported.

- Secondly, it presents a multidimensional picture of strength, combining courage, emotional depth, resourcefulness and knowledge rather than a single trait.
- Another significant strength is that it presents agency as sacred, legitimising women's power and leadership in religious as well as everyday terms.
- The symbol also encourages collective strength, as Devi's power arises from the combined energies of many, which supports social participation and solidarity.
- Finally, it connects well with established psychological theory, allowing dialogue with the work of Bandura, Masten and Zimmerman, and supporting the development of psychology grounded in Indian traditions (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

1. **Reverence–reality paradox-** India is a society where goddesses are widely worshipped, yet women continue to experience discrimination and violence. Reverence for the divine feminine has not automatically produced equality (Kinsley, 1986).
2. **Idealisation and burden-** When women are expected to embody the endurance and sacrifice of the goddess, the symbol may become a burden that demands unlimited strength and silent suffering.
3. **Ambivalent portrayals-** Fierce goddesses such as Kali are sometimes portrayed as dangerous when independent and pacified when brought under male control, as in the iconography of the married goddess.
4. **Risk of dependence-** Devotion that relies solely on divine intervention may reduce personal and collective action.
5. **Lack of empirical evidence-** The interpretations here are conceptual. Meanings of Devi vary across regions, castes, sects and individuals, and little empirical research examines how women themselves interpret her.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. **Agency as Sacred-** Indian philosophy presents Shakti as the creative and active power of reality, giving women's agency a spiritual foundation.

2. **Forms as Complementary Strengths-** Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati together model courage, emotional transformation, resourcefulness and knowledge.

3. **Link with Resilience-** Devi narratives portray resilience as the gathering and redirection of scattered resources, supported by Gita and Yoga teachings on steadiness.

4. **Link with Self-Efficacy-** Devi serves as a vicarious role model and a source of affirmation, and is most empowering when understood as Shakti within the individual.

5. **Link with Empowerment-** Devi imagery supports personal control, critical awareness and participation, but its effect depends on social conditions.

6. **Need for Critical Engagement-** Without attention to gender inequality and idealisation, the symbol can reinforce restrictive norms.

SUGGESTIONS

To ensure that Devi symbolism contributes meaningfully to psychological strength and empowerment, the following measures are suggested:

- **Culturally Grounded Counselling-** Counsellors may draw on Devi imagery where clients find it meaningful, without imposing religious content.

- **Education and Curriculum-** Stories of strong female figures, including Devi, may be used in value education and life-skills programmes to build self-efficacy among girls.

- **Empowerment Programmes-** Community and women's programmes may use goddess narratives to complement, not replace, economic, legal and educational support.

- **Promoting Internalised Interpretations-** Emphasis should be placed on Shakti within every woman, encouraging agency rather than dependence.

- **Challenging Idealisation-** Discussions should make clear that strength does not require women to endure injustice silently.

- **Empirical Research-** Quantitative and qualitative studies should examine how women's engagement with Devi relates to resilience and self-efficacy, controlling for education, income and social support, and should include comparison with goddess traditions in other cultures.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Devi can be understood as a rich symbol of psychological strength. Her narratives depict resilience as the gathering and redirection of scattered resources, her forms model courage, fearlessness, resourcefulness and knowledge, and her philosophical grounding in Shakti presents agency as sacred. Read alongside Bandura's work on self-efficacy and theories of empowerment, these images offer a culturally rooted vocabulary for discussing women's strength.

At the same time, the symbol is only as empowering as the social conditions surrounding it. Reverence for Devi becomes meaningful when accompanied by respect for women's education, choices and safety. The most constructive reading of the tradition is the one in which Shakti is understood as present within every woman, and the task of society is to remove the barriers that prevent that power from being exercised.

REFERENCES

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.*. W. H. Freeman.

Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1

Coburn, T. B. (1991). *Encountering the goddess: A translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a study of its interpretation*. State University of New York Press.

Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita* (2nd ed.). Nilgiri Press.

Hiltebeitel, A., & Erndl, K. M. (Eds.). (2000). *Is the goddess a feminist? The politics of South Asian goddesses*. New York University Press.

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change, 30*(3), 435–464. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125

Kakar, S. (1978). *The inner world: A psycho-analytic study of childhood and society in India*. Oxford University Press.

Kinsley, D. (1986). *Hindu goddesses: Visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. University of California Press.

Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development, 71*(3), 543–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00164

Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 227–238. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227

Pintchman, T. (1994). *The rise of the goddess in the Hindu tradition*. State University of New York Press.

Rao, K. R., & Paranjpe, A. C. (2016). *Psychology in the Indian tradition*. Springer.

Satchidananda, S. S. (1978). *The yoga sutras of Patanjali*. Integral Yoga Publications.

Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 581–599. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506983