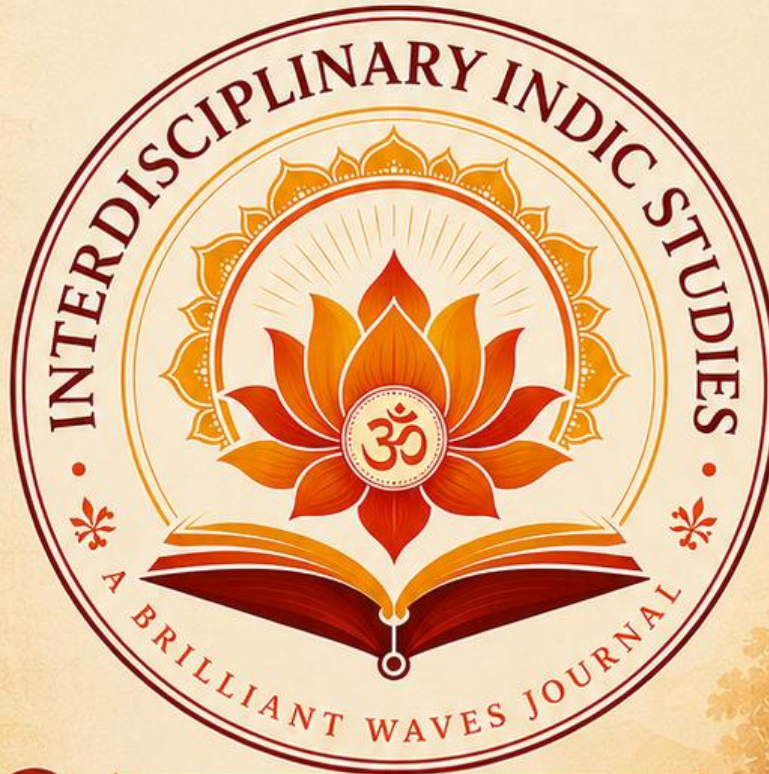


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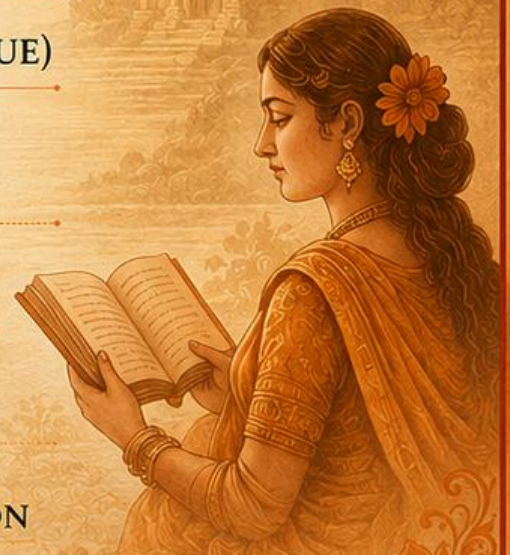
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Shakti and Stri-Shakti: Reclaiming Indigenous Narratives of Women Empowerment in Modern India

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Abstract

The discourse of women's empowerment in India presents a paradox: while the feminine divine is exalted in cultural and religious traditions, women continue to face entrenched inequalities in education, employment, political participation and social life. This paper critically re-engages with the indigenous concepts of Shakti and Stri-Shakti, examining their potential as philosophical, cultural and political resources for reimagining empowerment in twenty-first century India. Grounded in classical Indic texts such as the Rigveda, Devi Mahatmya and Tantric traditions, alongside feminist theory and cultural critiques, the study highlights the layered interpretations of feminine power as cosmic principle, goddess figure and socio-cultural symbol. Complementing this conceptual framework, empirical fieldwork conducted in Ahmedabad, Anand, Bharuch and Surat documents how women perceive and embody Stri-Shakti in their everyday lives. Participants associated Shakti variously with inner strength, collective solidarity, spiritual endurance, economic independence and leadership within families and communities. At the same time, findings reveal the persistent disjuncture between symbolic reverence for goddesses and the lived marginalisation of women, echoing the "mythic-social divide" noted in feminist scholarship. Intergenerational shifts further complicate these dynamics: older women often framed empowerment in terms of sacrifice and tolerance, whereas younger women emphasised financial autonomy, education and public participation. The study argues that Stri-Shakti, when critically reclaimed, offers an indigenous model of empowerment that privileges relational solidarity, cultural legitimacy and negotiated agency, while resonating with global feminist calls for equality and justice. However, the analysis cautions against essentialist and instrumentalist appropriations of goddess symbolism, which risk burdening women with mythic expectations or reducing them to metaphors. The paper concludes that a plural, inclusive and pragmatic engagement with Shakti and Stri-Shakti can bridge the gap between symbolism and structure, tradition and modernity, spirituality and materiality contributing to a holistic and indigenised vision of gender justice for contemporary India.

Keywords: *Shakti, Stri-Shakti, Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, Indigenous Narratives*



Introduction

Across Indian civilization, the idea of Shakti the creative feminine energy has served as one of the most enduring symbols of power and balance. From Vedic hymns and the Devi Mahatmya to village folklore and modern poetry, this concept has celebrated womanhood as both nurturing and transformative. In daily life, however, the symbolic reverence accorded to women as embodiments of the divine often stands in contrast to the persistent inequalities they face in education, employment and decision-making. Bridging this contradiction between the mythic ideal and the material reality lies at the heart of this study. Over the past few decades, India's policy discourse has adopted empowerment as a central goal, visible in schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mission Shakti. Yet, much of this vocabulary draws on international development frameworks that emphasize legal rights and economic independence but often overlook cultural idioms that shape women's everyday choices. As several scholars argue (Chakravarti 1993; Kishwar 1990; Omvedt 2005), imported gender models sometimes fail to resonate with communities where self-

realization is expressed through spiritual and relational ethics rather than through purely individualist notions of freedom. In such contexts, Shakti and Stri-Shakti provide alternative languages of empowerment rooted in faith, interdependence and moral duty (dharma).

In contemporary Gujarat, these ideas acquire a particularly vivid expression. The state's social fabric blends commerce, religion and cooperative enterprise: temples and women's self-help groups coexist with industrial zones and educational institutions. Festivals such as Navratri make the imagery of the goddess omnipresent, while women simultaneously occupy visible roles as entrepreneurs, teachers, professionals and civic leaders. This coexistence of devotion and modern aspiration makes Gujarat an ideal site to explore how ancient idioms of Shakti are interpreted in everyday empowerment practices.

The central research question guiding this paper is therefore:

How are the indigenous concepts of Shakti and Stri-Shakti re-interpreted and enacted by women in Gujarat's urban and semi-urban

districts and what can these interpretations contribute to broader discourses on empowerment and governance in India?

To answer this question, the study adopts a conceptual–empirical approach, combining textual review with field inquiry. It draws insights from classical sources such as the Devi Mahatmya, feminist interpretations of goddess traditions (Coburn 1991; Kinsley 1986; Hildebeitel & Erndl 2000) and field data collected from 120 women across four districts Ahmedabad, Surat, Anand and Bharuch. The goal is not to idealize the past but to understand how inherited cultural meanings of the divine feminine are re-imagined in the present to articulate agency, resilience and dignity. Conceptually, the paper situates itself within Indic feminist epistemology an emerging discourse that reclaims indigenous philosophies as legitimate knowledge systems for gender studies. This perspective does not reject Western feminist thought; rather, it seeks complementarity. Where liberal feminism emphasizes rights and autonomy, the Shakti framework highlights ethical responsibility, emotional intelligence and community well-being. Re-examining these principles can enrich current approaches to

governance, education and social policy by linking empowerment with ethical and ecological harmony.

The field narratives presented in later sections reveal that women interpret Shakti in multiple ways: as inner strength drawn from faith, as practical competence learned through cooperative work and as emotional balance maintained amidst household and professional responsibilities. For many, invoking the goddess is less about ritual obligation and more about affirming self-worth an act of quiet defiance within structures that often undervalue women's labour. These lived articulations demonstrate that Stri-Shakti is both spiritual and pragmatic, simultaneously personal and collective. This investigation also responds to a methodological gap. Most existing studies on women's empowerment in India remain either policy-centric focused on schemes and outcomes or theological, confined to textual symbolism. Few attempt to integrate scriptural, sociological and experiential dimensions within one analytical frame. By combining literature review, field interviews and thematic analysis, this research aims to fill that space and propose a holistic

model of empowerment that aligns moral, economic and emotional energies.

In sum, the introduction positions Shakti not merely as an object of worship but as a philosophy of becoming a living force that continues to inspire agency among women navigating modernity and tradition. The following sections trace this continuum

through an exploration of classical texts, scholarly interpretations, field experiences and policy implications. Ultimately, the paper argues that reclaiming Stri-Shakti as both a cultural narrative and a developmental principle can offer India a path toward empowerment that is at once indigenous, inclusive and enduring.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Shakti and Stri-Shakti

The concept of Shakti the creative and dynamic feminine principle lies at the core of Indic cosmology. Derived from the Sanskrit root śak, meaning “to be able” or “to have power,” it represents not only divine potency but also the existential energy that sustains the cosmos. Philosophically, Shakti is inseparable from Shiva; their union signifies balance and interdependence rather than hierarchy (Kinsley, 1986). Across the Devi Mahatmya, Upanishads and Tantric texts, the goddess is depicted as both immanent and transcendent, embodying strength, wisdom, compassion and the will to transform.

Altekar (1956) and Jayakar (1990) trace the reverence for female divinity back to prehistoric fertility cults, suggesting that worship of the feminine predates patriarchal codifications in Vedic and post-Vedic periods. In later centuries, however, as social structures became increasingly stratified, women’s status declined even as goddess worship flourished. This paradox venerating women in divine form while constraining them in human life remains a central contradiction within Hindu social history (Chakravarti, 1993; Leslie, 1992).

The term Stri-Shakti, more recent in usage, represents the application of Shakti’s philosophical essence to women’s lived empowerment. It has been invoked in modern India to emphasize both moral strength and

social agency. Bhattacharya (2014) and Shukla (2018) describe Stri-Shakti as a multidimensional idea encompassing physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual capacities, thereby aligning with holistic empowerment paradigms found in development studies. Importantly, it positions women not merely as beneficiaries but as carriers of ethical and transformative energy.

Classical Textual Traditions and the Feminine Divine

The Devi Mahatmya (c. 5th–6th century CE), central to the Markandeya Purana, is among the earliest texts to articulate the goddess as supreme reality. Coburn (1991) interprets its verses as both mythic narrative and theological argument, elevating Devi as the source from which all gods derive power. The text celebrates Durga's victory over Mahishasura, symbolizing the triumph of righteous energy over ego and ignorance. Its recurring refrain "By you this universe is supported" frames feminine power as sustaining, not subordinate.

Tantric and Shakta traditions later elaborated on this metaphysics. Kinsley (1998) and Dehejia (1990) examine the Mahavidyas, the ten wisdom goddesses who personify different

aspects of divinity from the terrifying Kali to the serene Saraswati. Each represents an archetype of consciousness, underscoring that divine femininity encompasses both creation and destruction. The Yogini cults of medieval India further reimagined female divinity in accessible forms, bridging esoteric practice with local ritual.

Scholars such as Narayanan (1999) and Eck (1998) highlight the Bhakti movements' democratizing influence on gender relations. In devotional poetry, saints like Andal, Mirabai and Lal Ded expressed spiritual union with the divine in language that transcended caste and gender hierarchies. These traditions enabled women to claim public voices in otherwise patriarchal milieus. The philosophical notion of bhakti devotion as surrender and strength became a subtle vehicle of resistance.

Despite these theological affirmations, gender historians such as Chakravarti (2006) and Kumar (1993) caution that divine models did not automatically translate into social freedom. The ideological construction of Stridharma (woman's duty) confined empowerment within domestic virtue. Yet, as Rajan and Park (2000)

observe, this containment also produced creative reinterpretations, where women negotiated autonomy within the moral frameworks available to them.

Feminist Reinterpretations and Indic Epistemology

From the late 20th century onward, feminist scholarship has attempted to reclaim Shakti from patriarchal and essentialist readings. Gross (1978) and Hildebrandt & Erndl (2000) note that goddess imagery, while empowering symbolically, can also reinforce restrictive ideals of purity and sacrifice. The challenge, therefore, lies in transforming symbolic reverence into structural equality.

Indian feminist thinkers such as Kishwar (1990), Omvedt (2005) and Mies (1980) have emphasized the need for locally grounded models of gender justice that do not simply replicate Western theories. Kishwar's essays in *Manushi* called for reinterpretations of Hindu traditions to highlight women's strengths rather than victimhood. Similarly, Omvedt (2005) integrated Dalit and subaltern perspectives, underscoring how liberation must engage caste and economic structures alongside gender.

More recent works (Shukla, 2018; Yakov, 2015) explore how goddess worship continues to shape female agency at the community level. Shukla (2018) argues that Shakti provides a symbolic grammar for empowerment that resonates across rural and urban India, while Yakov's ethnographic study in South Asia demonstrates that women appropriate goddess rituals to express leadership, solidarity and self-worth.

The emerging framework of Indic feminist epistemology articulated by scholars like Sharma (2002) and Narayanan (1999) posits that knowledge derived from indigenous philosophy can coexist with feminist ethics. It values intuition, relationality and spiritual consciousness as legitimate dimensions of empowerment. This theoretical orientation aligns with Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach, which identifies empowerment not only with choice and agency but also with inner flourishing and social recognition.

Socio-Anthropological and Policy Studies on Women's Empowerment

Empirical research across India reveals that women often reinterpret religious and cultural idioms to assert agency in subtle ways. Dube

(2001) and Das (1996) found that ritual participation, kinship networks and informal economies create micro-spaces of empowerment that formal policies may overlook. Eck's (1998) concept of Darshan seeing and being seen by the divine has anthropological resonance: for many women, participating in goddess worship reaffirms visibility and belonging in the public sphere. Field-based studies in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Bengal (Patel, 2010; Singh, 2010; Jha, 2015) reveal similar intersections. Women's participation in Navratri, Garba or Durga Puja festivities often evolves into leadership roles within local associations or self-help groups. These events blur the boundary between ritual and civic space, offering women opportunities to manage finances, negotiate logistics and mobilize communities. As Singh (2010) observes, such informal leadership experiences become stepping stones toward political participation.

At the policy level, India's constitutional framework and Five-Year Plans have long emphasized gender equality, yet progress remains uneven. Sen (1999) and Dreze & Sen (2002) demonstrate that social development depends not only on economic opportunities

but also on cultural legitimacy. Programs that integrate local values like Gujarat's Mission Mangalam or Sakhi Mandals tend to achieve higher sustainability because they build upon pre-existing trust networks. Contemporary development agencies have also begun acknowledging the importance of cultural context. UN Women's (2020) report Progress of the World's Women advocates for context-sensitive strategies that respect local traditions while advancing rights. Similarly, the World Bank's (2022) Women, Business and the Law underscores how cultural narratives can both enable and constrain economic inclusion. These perspectives reinforce the paper's argument that empowerment must be both structural and symbolic, rooted in shared ethical values.

Integrating Tradition and Modernity: Emerging Scholarship

A growing body of interdisciplinary literature explores how Shakti functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Ramaswamy's (2010) *The Goddess and the Nation* illustrates how the figure of Bharat Mata merged the sacred feminine with nationalist identity, producing both

empowerment and essentialism. Rajan and Park (2000) discuss how the circulation of ideas between East and West shaped hybrid feminist discourses, where cultural pride and critical reflection coexist.

In development and governance studies, Patel (2010) and Jha (2015) highlight that empowerment initiatives gain traction when they incorporate locally resonant metaphors of duty, care and collective welfare. Such initiatives contrast with donor-driven models that often measure success through financial metrics alone. By invoking Stri-Shakti, community leaders in Gujarat, Odisha and Maharashtra frame participation as moral responsibility rather than mere entitlement a discursive shift that fosters ownership and dignity.

Recent conferences and publications under the banner of “Indian Knowledge Systems” (IKS) have revived scholarly interest in integrating traditional wisdom with contemporary challenges. Researchers such as Shukla (2018) and Tripathi (2017) argue that revisiting goddess traditions can offer ethical insights for modern governance, environmental stewardship and education. The emphasis is on

revival without romanticism: reclaiming the emancipatory potential of Shakti while remaining critical of patriarchal reinterpretations that confine women to symbolic motherhood.

Gaps and Synthesis

Despite the breadth of this scholarship, notable gaps remain. Much of the literature either romanticizes goddess worship as inherently empowering or dismisses it as symbolic without practical effect. There is limited research that empirically investigates how women themselves reinterpret these symbols in contemporary life particularly in semi-urban and industrially dynamic contexts like Gujarat.

Another gap concerns methodological integration. Theological, sociological and policy studies often operate in isolation, producing fragmented understandings of empowerment. Few works attempt to synthesize textual wisdom with lived experience. Furthermore, existing feminist frameworks, though insightful, often rely on imported epistemologies that inadequately address India’s pluralistic spiritual milieu.

This study, therefore, positions itself within a growing interdisciplinary conversation seeking to reclaim indigenous paradigms for gender analysis. By engaging both scripture and street-level realities, it contributes to what Sharma (2002) calls a “contextual theology of empowerment.” It neither sanctifies tradition nor rejects it but seeks balance acknowledging the potential of Shakti as a metaphor for ethical leadership and social harmony in a rapidly transforming India.

Summary of the Literature Review

In summary, the literature reveals that Shakti is a multifaceted idea philosophical, devotional and social whose meanings evolve across time and region. The convergence of feminist reinterpretations, anthropological findings and development studies suggests that empowerment, when grounded in culturally familiar idioms, acquires deeper legitimacy. Yet, the persistent gap between symbolic power and structural equality continues to challenge policymakers and scholars alike.

The present research seeks to bridge this gap by examining how women in Gujarat interpret Shakti not only as divine energy but as a lived ethic of resilience and cooperation. By doing

so, it proposes an integrative model that unites the spiritual with the social, the textual with the empirical and the individual with the collective. This synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for the subsequent sections on the study’s rationale, methodology and thematic findings.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study lies in the urgent need to re-examine the frameworks through which women’s empowerment is understood and practiced in India. Over the past three decades, the idea of empowerment has become central to both policy discourse and academic debate. Yet, its operational meaning often remains confined to measurable outcomes such as literacy, income or political representation while the cultural and ethical dimensions that shape women’s sense of agency receive less attention. This study responds to that imbalance by exploring Shakti and Stri-Shakti as indigenous frameworks that offer a more holistic, value-based understanding of empowerment.

Theoretical Justification

Mainstream feminist theories, largely influenced by Western liberal paradigms,



emphasize autonomy, rights and resistance as the hallmarks of women's liberation. While these are essential for justice and equality, they often assume a universal subject of feminism one that does not always reflect the complexities of Indian social life. Scholars such as Kishwar (1990), Narayanan (1999) and Shukla (2018) argue that empowerment in India is often negotiated through ethical relationships, spiritual beliefs and community interdependence rather than through individual assertion alone.

This study thus situates itself within an Indic feminist epistemology that recognizes indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate sources of theory. In this worldview, Shakti is not merely a religious symbol but an ontological principle an energy that animates all life and informs social conduct. Translating this metaphysical idea into the modern context of gender relations allows for a model of empowerment that integrates self-realization, social responsibility and moral coherence. By revisiting Shakti as both a spiritual metaphor and a socio-political concept, this research contributes to a decolonial understanding of gender justice. It seeks to move beyond the binary of tradition versus modernity by

demonstrating that indigenous philosophies can serve as foundations for contemporary governance and development practices. In doing so, it aligns with the broader national initiative on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) that emphasizes the relevance of cultural heritage in addressing present-day challenges.

Empirical and Contextual Relevance

The choice of Gujarat as the field site reflects the state's dynamic intersection of economic progress and cultural continuity. Known for its entrepreneurial spirit, cooperative movements and rich festival culture, Gujarat offers a living laboratory where ancient and modern forces coexist. Here, the imagery of Shakti is not confined to temples but appears in business names, local governance slogans and social initiatives such as Mission Mangalam and Sakhi Mandals.

Women's participation in cultural festivals like Navratri often extends beyond devotion into social organization and leadership. Observations from field interviews indicate that these ritual practices provide women with informal managerial experience budgeting, coordination, conflict resolution which later translate into entrepreneurial or civic roles.



Studying Stri-Shakti in this setting thus reveals how symbolic capital transforms into social capital. Furthermore, Gujarat's blend of urbanization and traditionalism mirrors broader national trends, making its insights transferable to other Indian contexts. Understanding how women reinterpret divine symbolism within an industrializing state helps bridge the gap between philosophical abstraction and policy application.

Addressing Research Gaps

The literature review demonstrated two key deficiencies:

1. **Conceptual Fragmentation:**

Existing research treats Shakti either as a theological abstraction or as a folkloric symbol, rarely linking it with tangible practices of empowerment.

2. **Empirical Neglect:** Few studies incorporate women's voices directly, especially in semi-urban regions where traditional and modern value systems intersect.

This study addresses these lacunae through a dual approach: by conducting textual analysis

of classical and modern writings on Shakti and by collecting field data from women who identify with these ideas in everyday life. The integration of these methods allows for a more nuanced understanding of how empowerment is felt, narrated and enacted.

Contribution and Significance

The significance of this study extends beyond academic discourse. By theorizing Stri-Shakti as a framework for ethical empowerment, it provides practical implications for education, governance and policy-making. The research suggests that empowerment programs can achieve greater legitimacy and sustainability when they resonate with local moral vocabularies. Rather than importing external models, grounding initiatives in indigenous philosophies fosters cultural ownership and emotional alignment.

In academic terms, this study contributes to the theorization of Indian feminist thought by bridging Indic philosophy, gender studies and development practice. It positions Shakti not as a static symbol but as a dynamic cultural narrative one that continues to evolve through women's lived experiences and interpretations. By doing so, the research reclaims the

intellectual autonomy of Indian traditions and highlights their potential to inform global discourses on gender and ethics.

In essence, the rationale of this study rests on the conviction that empowerment must engage both the material and the moral, the structural and the symbolic. By examining Shakti and Stri-Shakti through the lens of Gujarat's social reality, this paper seeks to demonstrate that India's spiritual heritage is not a relic of the past but a living repository of transformative ideas. Reclaiming these indigenous narratives allows for an inclusive model of empowerment that speaks to the Indian experience while contributing to global feminist thought.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This conceptual–empirical review adopted a mixed-method approach integrating field-based qualitative insights with limited quantitative data. The intention was not to generalize statistically but to interpret how Shakti and Stri-Shakti narratives manifest in

lived experiences of women from different socio-economic and cultural contexts in Gujarat's urban and semi-urban districts Ahmedabad, Surat, Anand and Bharuch.

Research Design

A qualitative interpretive framework guided the study, grounded in feminist epistemology and Indic hermeneutics. To complement narrative depth with measurable trends, a short quantitative component was embedded through a structured survey. The research thus combined semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions (FGDs) and a questionnaire containing both closed- and open-ended items.

Sampling and Participants

A total of 120 participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring representation of diverse age groups (18–60 years), occupations (students, professionals, homemakers and grassroots leaders) and religious or caste backgrounds. The distribution reflected realistic demographic accessibility:

Table 1: Sample Selection

District	Type	No. of Participants	Percentage
Ahmedabad	Urban	40	33.30
Surat	Urban-industrial	30	25.00

Anand	Semi-urban	25	20.80
Bharuch	Semi-urban	25	20.80
All	-	120	100.00

Ahmedabad was intentionally oversampled because of its higher concentration of women's self-help groups and academic institutions, providing access to educated respondents familiar with empowerment discourses. The remaining districts offered a balance of industrial and agrarian settings to capture varying interpretations of Stri-Shakti.

Data-Collection Tools

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews** – Conducted with 40 key participants, focusing on perceptions of Shakti, leadership roles and community participation.
2. **Focus-Group Discussions (FGDs)** – Eight FGDs (two per district) explored communal rituals, narratives of the Goddess and localized empowerment practices.
3. **Questionnaire Survey** – Contained ten closed-ended questions rated on a 5-point Likert

scale (e.g., agreement with statements such as “Cultural beliefs inspire my self-confidence”) and five open-ended prompts inviting reflective responses.

Quantitative responses were tabulated in frequency and percentage form to identify common patterns, while qualitative data were coded thematically.

Data-Analysis Procedure

A two-stage analytical process was employed:

1. **Stage 1: Quantitative Overview.** Closed-ended responses were entered into a simple Excel sheet and represented through a pie chart and a bar graph to illustrate levels of agreement regarding empowerment, spiritual agency and socio-economic autonomy.
2. **Stage 2: Qualitative Thematic Analysis.** Interview and FGD



transcripts were manually coded using inductive techniques. Recurring expressions were clustered under five emergent themes spiritual empowerment, ritual agency, political symbolism, economic autonomy and cultural reframing. Illustrative verbatim quotations were later summarized in a findings table.

Triangulation between numerical trends and narrative themes ensured credibility. Interpretations were continuously cross-checked with field notes and participant clarifications to maintain contextual accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard research-ethics principles:

1. Informed Consent: Each participant received a concise information sheet in Gujarati and English detailing the study's purpose and voluntary nature.
2. Confidentiality: Personal identifiers were removed during

transcription; pseudonyms replaced real names in quotations.

3. Cultural Sensitivity: Since the research engaged sacred concepts like Devi and Shakti, utmost respect was maintained during interviews and FGDs. Ritual sites were visited only after obtaining permission from local temple authorities.
4. Non-Harm Principle: No intrusive or psychologically distressing questions were included; participation could be discontinued at any time.
5. Data Integrity: Digital audio files and transcripts were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Ethical clearance was granted by the institutional Research and Development Cell of Anand Commerce College (Autonomous) in April 2025, prior to data collection.

Reliability and Limitations of Design



While the mixed-method framework enriched contextual understanding, the sample remained geographically limited to four districts. Hence, the findings should be read as illustrative rather than representative of all Indian women.

The emphasis was on depth of perception rather than statistical generalization a methodological stance consistent with conceptual and theoretical inquiries in cultural studies.

Findings

The mixed-method investigation generated both measurable patterns and interpretive insights into how women across Gujarat's urban and semi-urban settings perceive Shakti and Stri-Shakti as sources of empowerment. Data were analyzed in two tiers: a short quantitative overview (survey responses) and an in-depth thematic synthesis (interviews + FGDs).

Quantitative Overview

The ten closed-ended survey items measured participants' agreement with key empowerment indicators spiritual confidence, decision-making ability, community participation, financial independence and cultural pride.

Table 1: Respondents' Views on Spiritual, Cultural and Economic Dimensions of

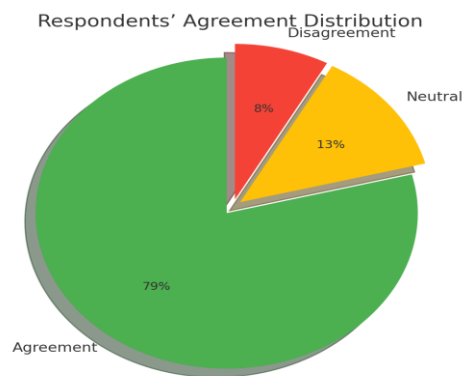
Empowerment

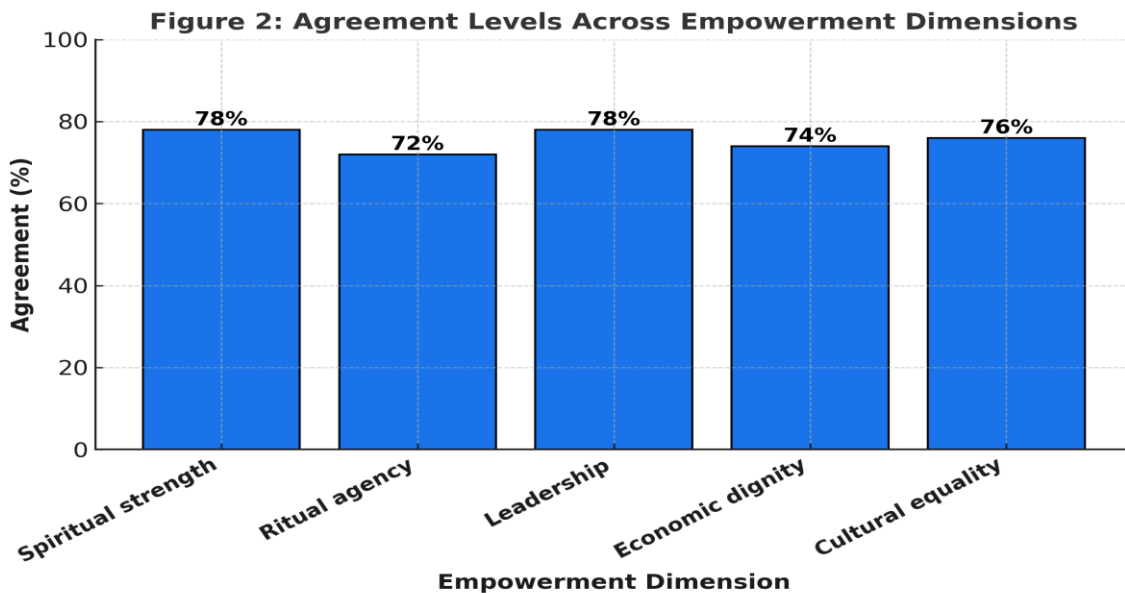
Dimension of Empowerment	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Spiritual strength influences self-confidence	58 (48%)	36 (30%)	14 (12%)	9 (8%)	3 (2%)
Ritual participation enhances agency	46 (38%)	41 (34%)	18 (15%)	10 (8%)	5 (4%)
Shakti ideals motivate leadership in community	44 (37%)	49 (41%)	14 (12%)	9 (8%)	4 (3%)

Economic roles are spiritually dignified	32 (27%)	56 (47%)	18 (15%)	9 (8%)	5 (4%)
Cultural heritage sustains gender equality	39 (33%)	51 (43%)	17 (14%)	10 (8%)	3 (2%)

Overall Mean Agreement Rate: 79 percent the majority perceived Shakti-based ideas as of respondents expressed either “agree” or personally empowering rather than “strongly agree” across items indicating that symbolically distant.

Figure 1: Distribution of Perceived Empowerment Dimensions





The quantitative trend demonstrates that most women, irrespective of occupation or locality, internalize the goddess archetype as a moral and emotional strength that informs daily resilience and decision-making.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

From 40 interviews and eight focus-group discussions, five major themes with related sub-themes emerged. The following table synthesizes the interpretive patterns supported by illustrative verbatim excerpts.

Table 2: Sub-Themes and Participant Quotes Highlighting Dimensions of Empowerment

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Verbatim (FGD/Interview)
Spiritual Empowerment	Inner devotion; meditation as confidence	“When I pray to Durga before starting work, I feel protected and capable.” (Ahmedabad, schoolteacher)
Ritual Agency	Participation in festivals; leading community prayer groups	“Earlier men handled Garba management; now our women committee plans it.” (Anand FGD)
Political Symbolism	Goddess imagery in social	“During local protests we carried Devi

	campaigns	banners she gives courage.” (Surat activist)
Economic Autonomy	Self-help groups, entrepreneurship	“My shop’s name ‘Maa Shakti Handloom’ reminds me daily to be strong.” (Bharuch artisan)
Cultural Reframing	Education, arts, transmission to youth	“We tell our daughters that Shakti means using knowledge wisely, not just rituals.” (Ahmedabad professor)

These patterns reveal that participants interpret Shakti as a continuum of emotional, moral and socio-economic power. Ritual and devotion coexist with practical assertions of leadership and livelihood illustrating an indigenous synthesis of spirituality and agency.

Comparative Insights by District

Ahmedabad respondents emphasized educational empowerment and public leadership, aligning Shakti with rational self-development. Surat’s industrial workforce connected Stri-Shakti to financial autonomy and collective bargaining. Anand women highlighted ritual agency and self-help cooperation within dairy cooperatives. Bharuch participants framed empowerment through ecological and devotional service in temple committees. Despite contextual differences, the unifying thread was the

interpretation of Shakti as a self-generated moral energy rather than external divine grace.

Summary of Findings

1. High Internalization: A majority of women perceive Shakti as integral to self-confidence and decision-making.
2. Plural Pathways: Empowerment manifests through worship, work and wisdom bridging domestic, spiritual and civic domains.
3. Cultural Continuity: Traditional symbols remain relevant when reinterpreted through modern education and economic participation.
4. Community Transmission: Inter-generational dialogue (mothers—



daughters) sustains indigenous
feminist sensibilities.

to articulate autonomy within familiar ethical
frames.

Together, these findings affirm that Stri-Shakti
is neither purely religious nor wholly secular
but a living cultural grammar enabling women

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that Shakti and Stri-Shakti are not abstract theological concepts but dynamic social grammars shaping women's everyday experiences in Gujarat's urban and semi-urban contexts. The women interviewed across Ahmedabad, Surat, Anand and Bharuch consistently interpreted Shakti as an inner moral energy a consciousness of self-worth expressed through devotion, work and community participation. This reinterpretation transforms Shakti from a metaphysical ideal into a functional idiom of empowerment, blending spirituality with social realism.

Reclaiming the Indigenous Feminist Framework

Mainstream feminist discourse in India has long grappled with the tension between Western-derived gender frameworks and

indigenous epistemologies. Scholars such as Chakravarti (1993) and Kishwar (1990) observed that Western feminism, while instrumental in articulating equality and rights, often remains disconnected from the cultural idioms through which Indian women negotiate power. In contrast, Indic feminism locates empowerment within relational ethics where autonomy is not antagonistic to community but nourished by it. The participants' narratives in this study reflect precisely this balance. The Shakti they invoke is neither submissive piety nor militant opposition; rather, it is a harmonious assertion of moral strength within social bonds. For instance, respondents from Anand and Bharuch described ritual participation not as ritualized servitude but as a means of visibility and leadership. Women who led Garba committees or temple activities perceived themselves as custodians of tradition



and agents of change a synthesis often overlooked in secular policy approaches.

This convergence of dharma (moral duty) and artha (practical well-being) embodies a contextual feminism rooted in dharmic ethics rather than in individualist liberation alone. Such a framework does not deny the validity of rights-based discourse but reframes empowerment in culturally resonant idioms, making it more accessible to rural and semi-urban women who live within traditional structures.

Shakti as Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps explain why symbolic resources like goddess imagery can generate tangible social influence. Women in this study consciously employed the figure of the Devi as a legitimizing metaphor in public spheres naming their enterprises after deities, invoking Maa Shakti in self-help group meetings or framing their activism in maternal idioms. By doing so, they translate sacred capital into social legitimacy. This transformation of the divine feminine into civic agency distinguishes Indic models of empowerment from purely economic or legalist approaches. Whereas

development policies such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao appeal to protectionist sentiments, Stri-Shakti discourses cultivated by communities emphasize agency through identification, not victimhood. Women thus reclaim sacred symbols as performative tools a phenomenon observed also in South Asian feminist movements in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu (Narayanan, 1999; Ramaswamy, 2010).

Spiritual Empowerment as Psychological Agency

A recurring theme across interviews was the sense of psychological resilience derived from devotional practice. In Ahmedabad and Surat, many women stated that daily prayer or meditation before work helped them "feel prepared to face the day." Such statements may appear mundane, yet they signify a deeper cognitive mechanism: spiritual anchoring as a source of self-efficacy. Psychological research (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) suggests that belief systems influence self-perceived capabilities the foundation of empowerment. The Shakta framework, emphasizing Devi as both protector and energy, offers women an internalized model of power rather than an external dependency. Hence, Shakti functions

as a cognitive metaphor for self-affirmation, bridging the emotional and ethical dimensions of empowerment.

Collective Empowerment and Social Cohesion

Another salient finding concerns collective empowerment. The focus-group discussions revealed that women's self-help collectives particularly in Anand and Bharuch derive cohesion from devotional practices that reinforce solidarity. Group prayers before meetings or annual community feasts act as rituals of inclusion, strengthening interpersonal trust. Unlike Western feminist notions centered on individual autonomy, the Indic perspective values synergy (sahakarya) cooperative work inspired by shared ethical vision. This resonates with ancient Indian governance treatises, where Shakti symbolized both personal vigor and social order. In this sense, Stri-Shakti aligns with Sarvodaya (welfare of all) rather than isolated self-assertion.

This collective modality has implications for governance and development policy: programs rooted in local cosmologies tend to enjoy greater legitimacy. Empowerment initiatives

that respect cultural idioms can mobilize community participation more effectively than those imposed from above.

Negotiating Modernity and Tradition

Critics sometimes argue that appealing to goddess traditions risks essentializing womanhood or reinforcing patriarchy (Rajan & Park, 2000). However, field data here show that women reinterpret these symbols pragmatically. For instance, younger participants in Ahmedabad consciously differentiated between "religious faith" and "feminine energy," asserting that Shakti is a universal force, not limited to ritual identity. This generational reinterpretation illustrates how Indic frameworks evolve: the sacred becomes metaphorical, the mythic becomes motivational. Women translate inherited symbols into modern developmental values education, employment, civic responsibility without discarding their cultural roots. Hence, Stri-Shakti is not a conservative regression but a recontextualization of heritage within modern aspirations.

Such reinterpretations parallel postcolonial feminist critiques by Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty, who advocate reading



indigenous practices not as superstition but as sites of cultural negotiation. The participants' voices echo this sentiment they inhabit modernity while speaking its language through familiar metaphors.

Integrating Shakti Paradigm into Governance and Policy

From a policy perspective, the Shakti paradigm offers a values-based model of empowerment that integrates ethics, spirituality and social responsibility. For instance, Ahmedabad's respondents suggested that local women's groups organizing Navratri festivals could collaborate with municipal bodies for environmental awareness drives or hygiene campaigns demonstrating how sacred events can double as civic platforms. If government agencies and NGOs incorporate Devi-centered community structures into their outreach programs, they can harness existing trust networks rather than constructing new bureaucratic hierarchies. Such integration also aligns with India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which emphasizes moral and

cultural education as foundational to holistic empowerment. In short, Stri-Shakti-based engagement does not replace institutional empowerment but complements it through culturally resonant motivation.

Theoretical Contribution

The conceptual novelty of this study lies in articulating a "Relational Model of Empowerment" derived from Shakti philosophy. Unlike linear Western paradigms that progress from dependence to independence, the Shakti model posits empowerment as interdependence a continuum balancing self-realization (atma-shakti) with collective harmony (samaaj-shakti). This framework situates empowerment within spiritual ecology: the individual, community and cosmos are viewed as co-evolving energies. The empirical narratives from Gujarat affirm that women experience agency not through rejection of tradition but through its reinterpretation. Hence, Stri-Shakti represents a decolonial feminist lens asserting autonomy without alienating identity.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how the Indic concepts of Shakti and Stri-Shakti can

illuminate new ways of understanding women's empowerment in modern India.





Drawing upon field insights from four districts of Gujarat Ahmedabad, Surat, Anand and Bharuch it became evident that these age-old ideas continue to inform women's sense of identity, confidence and community participation. The investigation confirmed that Shakti is not a distant metaphysical principle but a living cultural resource through which women articulate agency in everyday life. The findings show that most participants perceive Shakti as a moral and psychological energy that guides both personal and collective action. Whether expressed through temple service, entrepreneurship or educational leadership, Stri-Shakti appears as a continuum of empowerment bridging devotion and development, home and public sphere, faith and reason. Women reinterpret goddess symbols not as instruments of subordination but as ethical metaphors for strength, compassion and accountability.

By integrating textual interpretations with field narratives, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on Indic feminist epistemology. It argues that indigenous paradigms of empowerment, grounded in relational ethics, offer a more contextually authentic lens for gender studies in India.

Unlike linear Western models that privilege individual autonomy, the Shakti framework advances a relational model of empowerment, where personal growth is intertwined with communal well-being and spiritual balance. This culturally embedded approach complements existing policy mechanisms by rooting empowerment in locally understood moral worlds. At the same time, the discussion acknowledges certain tensions. The symbolic reverence of women does not automatically translate into social equality; the challenge lies in transforming reverence into recognition and participation. Hence, future interventions must consciously bridge this symbolic-structural gap through education, leadership training and inclusive policy design.

Methodologically, the mixed-methods approach combining quantitative patterns with qualitative narratives proved effective in capturing the complexity of empowerment as lived experience. The thematic findings emphasize that empowerment is not a uniform outcome but a multi-layered process that unfolds through belief, practice and dialogue. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that reclaiming Stri-Shakti is both a cultural and political act: it restores women's moral agency





within Indic traditions while re-signifying those traditions for a democratic, gender-just India. The concept of Shakti thus moves beyond the sacred altar into classrooms, cooperatives and policy spaces redefining empowerment as harmony rather than hierarchy. By foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, this research encourages educators, policymakers and activists to recognize India's own philosophical reservoirs

as sources of social transformation. In sum, the Shakti–Stri-Shakti paradigm offers a decolonial and integrative vision of women's empowerment one that celebrates diversity, nurtures community and aligns inner consciousness with outer action. It reminds us of that genuine empowerment in India will be sustainable only when it resonates with the cultural rhythms and ethical imaginations of its people.

Recommendations and Implications

The synthesis of textual, cultural and field-based insights in this study suggests that the Indic paradigm of Shakti and Stri-Shakti can inform multiple spheres education, governance, policy and community development if translated into actionable frameworks. The following recommendations emerge from the findings.

Educational Implications

1. Integrating Indic Feminist Thought into Curricula:

Universities and teacher-training institutes can include modules on Shakti-based ethics and leadership within gender-studies or value-education courses. Using regional case studies

and local goddess narratives encourages students to perceive empowerment through culturally intelligible idioms.

2. School-level Value Education:

The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes moral and holistic learning. Introducing illustrated stories and classroom dialogues on Devi archetypes can nurture self-respect, empathy and responsibility among both girls and boys, reframing empowerment as cooperation rather than competition.

Policy Recommendations

1. Culturally Anchored Development Programs:





Government and NGO initiatives could collaborate with women's collectives already rooted in temple committees or festival organizations. Embedding awareness drives on literacy, hygiene or digital skills within these cultural networks ensures higher trust and participation.

2. Leadership and Entrepreneurship Training:

State missions such as Mission Shakti may design workshops titled "From Ritual to Resource," linking devotional management skills (organization, finance, teamwork) to entrepreneurial capacity-building for rural and semi-urban women.

3. Participatory Governance:

Panchayats and municipal bodies can involve women's groups in planning community events, sanitation drives or environmental campaigns during festivals such as Navratri, thus transforming symbolic reverence into civic responsibility.

Community and Social Implications

1. Strengthening Self-Help Groups (SHGs):

Local SHGs can incorporate Stri-Shakti narratives into their mission statements to reinforce solidarity, accountability and ethical business practices.

2. Inter-generational Dialogues:

Community centers and NGOs could facilitate "Mothers and Daughters of Shakti" circles to preserve oral traditions while discussing contemporary issues like education, career or mental health.

3. Media and Cultural Representation:

Encouraging filmmakers, artists and digital creators to depict Shakti as competence and compassion rather than supernatural spectacle would shift public imagination toward everyday empowerment.

Research Implications

Future scholarship should explore comparative studies between Indic frameworks and global feminist theories to map convergences on ethics, sustainability and collective well-being. Longitudinal studies following women who participate in Shakti-based initiatives could reveal measurable social change over time.





In sum, reclaiming Stri-Shakti is not merely a cultural revival but a transformative development strategy. When education, policy and community programs draw from indigenous moral vocabularies, empowerment becomes sustainable and self-propelling. Embedding Shakti values dignity, cooperation and spiritual resilience within institutional structures can guide India toward gender equity that is both locally grounded and globally resonant.





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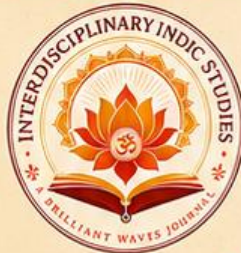
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